

Special Needs Education from Classroom to Online- Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Millions of pupils worldwide have spent more than a year out of the classroom due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Educational systems in almost all countries found a solution for maintaining the continuity of the educational process in the transition to online learning. The spontaneous transformation from classroom to online has become an unprecedented challenge for schools. Students with special educational needs (SEN), their parents, and teachers found themselves in a most challenging situation; however, the learning experience gained in responding to these challenges also presented new opportunities.

Keywords: Online learning, Schools, Special education needs.

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I. INTRODUCTION

At the initial stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, the education systems of all countries faced the challenge of reorganizing school education on a distance learning format. Although the distance learning format is not new and already 8-10 years ago, “the field of elementary and secondary (K 12) online education has witnessed unprecedented growth” (Watson *et al.*, 2014), schools in many developed European countries did not regularly practice online teaching format. Before the pandemic, the German school system had not yet developed procedures for homeschooling or distance learning, thus “Not only schools but also parents and students had to adapt to a quite unfamiliar situation that posed new demands on families” (Lena Nusser, 2021). The transition to online learning in schools was also an abrupt innovation in Italy, where “the school closure imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic forced teachers to create and use online learning environments. This had consequences for students and families because the online activities required both adequate technical skills and new visions of teaching/learning strategies.” (Parmigiani *et al.*, 2021). “In Norway, teachers were not prepared for such an extraordinary situation, even though Norway has been a front-runner when it comes to equipping schools with information and communication technology” (Ellen Nessel Mælan *et al.*, 2021). “Findings from a study conducted in April 2020 indicated that a great majority of teachers in Norway, as well as in the US, did not have any experience with online teaching prior to the crisis and were unsure of how to follow up with the students” (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). The educational systems of developed countries with advanced technologies had more opportunities for adoption to the extraordinary

emerging situation relatively, quickly, and smoothly. However, in Georgia, where uninterrupted internet and gadgets in every family are still a problem, to make this adaptation promptly and appropriately was much more demanding.

From the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, when Georgian schools immediately, without prior preparation, completely switched to the online teaching format, pupils of different social statuses and abilities faced the situation of unequal educational conditions. The transition to online learning caused significant losses for the Georgian education system. During the interruption of face-to-face learning and the transition to distance learning, pupils had a significant learning lag at all levels and subject groups (Kadagidze, 2021). Pupils with SEN, their schools, and teachers have faced more acute problems. One thing is to address a student's special educational needs in the classroom, and another is to address those in a distance learning mode. In the case of SEN students, it is vital and challenging for the teacher to select the right combination from the seven learning styles: auditory, verbal, physical, visual, logical individual, and social. The combination, successfully selected for the format of school education, may be utterly irrelevant in the case of a completely different online education format. School communities urgently started looking for new variations of learning styles, introducing new teaching methods and strategies, acquiring new technical skills, and using new technologies. However, an extraordinary situation and an unprecedented challenge created an unprecedented experience. The study and analysis of this experience are necessary and helpful for the right future decisions. Such a study, funded by the “Open Society Georgia Foundation”, was conducted under the guidance of the article's author in 2021, i.e., one year after the pandemic's start.

II. STUDY DESIGN AND DESCRIPTION

Before starting the research, it was determined that the “one-size-fits-all” approach is not suitable for studying the challenges of online learning for pupils with SEN. It is essential to take into account the diversity and individuality of special educational needs according to at least four groups of pupils:

- 1) With behavioral and mental problems.
- 2) With hearing difficulties.
- 3) With severe vision problems.
- 4) With motor problems.

Pupils with more than one of the abovementioned problems were also included in these groups.

The research questions were:

- 1) What are the problems that the transition of the educational process to the online format cause for pupils with SEN?
- 2) How did the schools and teachers of these pupils and their parents respond to these problems?
- 3) What support has the schools, teachers and parents received in response to the challenges of online learning?
- 4) How do schools, teachers, and parents of SEN pupils evaluate the results of online learning?

Six target groups were selected for the survey to receive more comprehensive information: school administrations, teachers, and parents of pupils with the four abovementioned types of SEN. The survey was anonymous through pre-designed questionnaires for each target group. Each questionnaire included 40-41 questions, some of which were similar for different target groups. Most of the questions were close-ended, and some were open-ended, allowing the respondents to describe their own attitudes and experiences more precisely and to provide a more in-depth understanding of any individual case. The questionnaires were uploaded to SurveyMonkey's platform, and the corresponding link was sent by email to the administrations of the schools selected for participation in the study.

It should be noted that according to the data for 2020-2021, 10,545 pupils with SEN status were officially registered in Georgian schools, and only 549 of them studied in special schools. In total, 46 public schools from Tbilisi and nine regions of Georgia, including special schools, participated in the survey. Questionnaires were filled out by the administration of 46 schools, 171 teachers, and 83 parents. The age of the pupils was from 6 to 22 years. In total, more than 300 fully completed questionnaires were received.

III. ONE OF THE INTERESTING FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

A large amount of information obtained from the questionnaires was processed and analyzed in detail through SurveyMonkey's platform. Along with the identification of online education problems of pupils with SEN, the analysis revealed an interesting finding that deserves special attention: According to the accountable quantity, 15-25% of the respondents, online education improved the quality of learning of the pupils with SEN. More than half of the parents of pupils with visual impairments and motor

problems and more than half of schoolteachers indicate that the quality of their children's and pupils' learning has not changed or has improved after switching to online education. 15-25% of parents prefer to continue online or blended learning when the pandemic is over. This finding is conspicuously presented in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

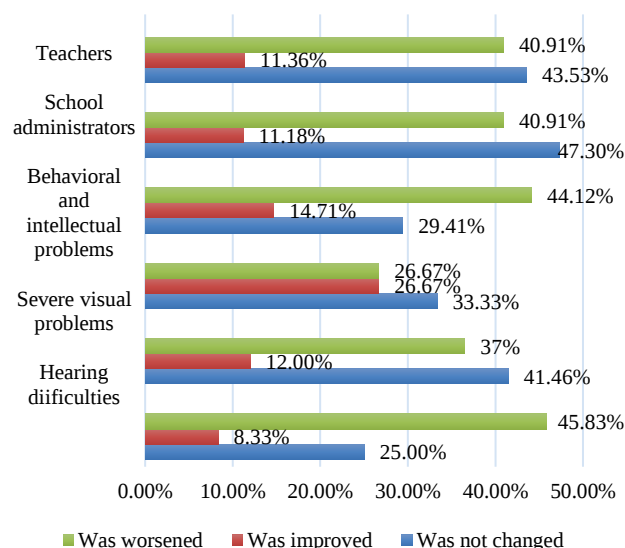


Fig. 1. Opinions about the quality of learning of pupils with different SEN after the transition to online education.

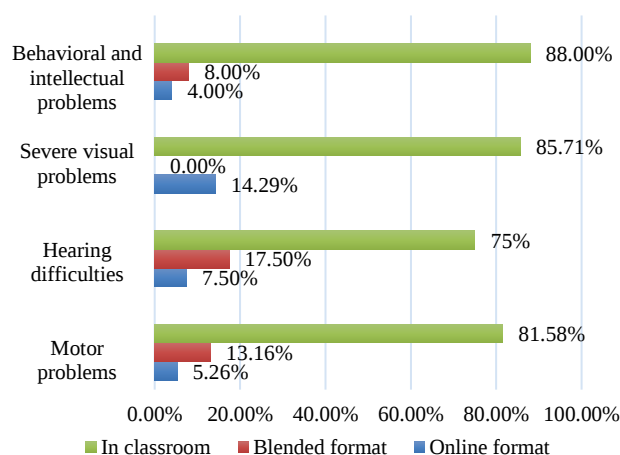


Fig. 2. A learning format that parents of pupils with different SEN would prefer after the pandemic is over.

Moreover, in the open-ended questions, some parents stated that learning at home, in a familiar setting, was more effective for their children than in the classroom. It is also worth noting the opinion of a number of teachers that sometimes the pupils' results are better in the classroom, sometimes in an online learning format. The pupils need socialization, of course, they have mentioned, but working in a quiet, usual environment at times gives better results.

Based on the analysis of the questionnaires, several other important results were obtained. Some of them, considered especially noteworthy in correlation with the above finding, are given below.

The situation at schools with the transition to online learning significantly depended on the proper management of the situation by schools' administrations. Some schools

managed this transition better, others worse. Similarly, it is with teachers. There are especially eager, caring, and professional teachers. Parents express gratitude to them in the questionnaires. However, parents more often express discontent that teachers lack the motivation and professionalism to deal with the challenges of online teaching. One more problem often mentioned by parents is their concern about a deficiency of experience in supporting their children while online learning. 27% of parents of pupils with behavioral and intellectual problems, 32% of those with hearing difficulties, 57% with severe vision problems, and 41% with motor problems express this concern. About the same percentage of parents report the difficulty in helping their children concentrate while studying as a primary problem. This problem was mentioned by 50% of parents of pupils with behavioral and intellectual problems, 38% of those with deaf and hard of hearing, 14% with severe vision problems, and 50% – with motor problems. Parents also emphasized various technical problems during online learning and the necessity of individual meetings between teachers and students in parallel with online learning. As for teachers, 39% consider technical interruptions as the main obstacles during online learning. Shortage of access to special assistive technology was indicated by 24% of teachers, and lack of teaching experience in this format by 10%. 62% of teachers indicate the transfer of classroom activities to the online format as the most challenging while transitioning to online lessons. The survey also demonstrated the need for relevant professional development training courses for all target groups.

The study demonstrated some other online education problems for pupils with SEN. The shortage of socialization is one of them. At the same time, turning homes into classrooms increased the involvement of parents in the educational process and required much more of their time and emotional effort. Almost all parents emphasize the expediency of a psychologist's involvement in the educational process.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study results are noteworthy for determining the education policy for pupils with Special Education Needs. Despite the undoubted advantages of learning in the school environment, the online learning format should not be completely excluded from their educational process. For some pupils with SEN, learning in a blended format following an appropriate individualized curriculum could be beneficial. However, for the successful implementation of blended education, it is necessary to provide the following conditions:

- 1) Advanced online teaching platforms.
- 2) Special assistive technological means.
- 3) Special training courses for teachers, school administrations, and parents.
- 4) Individual blended study plans for pupils with SEN, including individual face-to-face lessons.
- 5) Intensive psychological support in the learning process for pupils with disabilities and their parents.

Further in-depth study of blended learning for pupils with SEN is necessary, considering the development of relevant policy, specific teaching strategies, and methodologies.

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