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“Improvement of digital and peer mentoring support skills of marginalised students to prevent their drop-out from school”

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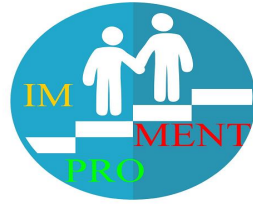


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1. COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on distance learning and distance peer mentoring realisation

In the age of COVID-19, with physical distancing and social exclusion, online tools are used to conduct training to ensure high quality inclusive education and to strengthen tolerance and equity in education. This can be beneficial also for the process of conducting partially or permanently the peer mentoring programme in distance learning context (e-mentoring). The basic questions for interpretation of distance education and peer mentoring support are related not only to the specifics of distance learning, but also to the search for evidence that distance education in all forms provides conditions for effective implementation of the process of inclusive education, that distance education can function as inclusive education and derivation of concept of inclusive distance education.

For those who are biased and sceptical of the concepts of inclusive education and peer mentoring support, the issue will immediately provoke some claims of scepticism:

- inclusive education and peer mentoring support realized from distance is not possible and very difficult to achieve in normal conditions and without physical distance imposed by the COVID - 19 pandemic.
- there is a semantic contradiction in the terms "social isolation" and "inclusion in education".
- the popular and incorrect term 'social isolation' most clearly rejects inclusive education, which has dichotomous principles: for 'social acceptance', for the presence and synergistic participation of all students, the school and other communities, and so on.

However, for all those who accept the theoretical, philosophical and practically applied conceptions and paradigms of inclusive education, its realization as distance education, is another global opportunity, which has not been developed on a large enough scale so far.

Social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic is only in terms of:

- the body-kinaesthetic scheme, as the handshake, hugging, touching even of one's own face are recommended to be eliminated.
- physical contacts are limited, with guidelines and restrictions for physically present models of distance communication.
- non-verbal aspects of communication have changed, especially in the field of proxemics / distance and place /, social distance is the new norm and prohibits intimate and close distance communication outside the close family circle.
- the pragmatics of communication has changed with the requirements, which are also self-requirements to master new virtual tools for communication, etc.

However, the conditions for effective communication are present in distance communication as part of the distance education and distance peer mentoring (e-mentoring).

A new model of education has emerged for the pedagogical, student and family community - education and support in an electronic environment. Digital mediation is realized through information technology or other means that provide interactive communication in the pedagogical interaction of teacher and students.

Distance learning via peer mentoring can overcome the shortage of teachers, provide access to education for all students and can be implemented in models suitable for all students in the focus groups of inclusive education:

- with special educational needs (including those from ethnic minorities)
- with chronic or severe diseases.
- at risk of school drop-out.

Challenges related to the peer mentoring realisation during distance learning can be related to:

- ignorance of the typological and individual features of students with special needs.
- ignorance or non-acceptance of students' strengths.
- conservative curriculum or rigidity in the implementation of the curriculum by the teacher (if a distance learning is implemented at the same time).
- ignorance of students' learning style.
- insufficient or inappropriate communication.
- insufficient provision of accessible, safe and comfortable environment in the virtual world.
- ignorance of the individual aspects of resource support at a distance level - for example, adaptation of learning content in the virtual classroom.
- transfer of responsibility for the achievements of students with special educational achievements to resource teachers.
- non-admission or non-acceptance of the participation of the parents as partners in the educational process.
- insufficient training of peer mentors to support vulnerable students.
- ignorance of the possibilities of students with special educational needs or of students at risk for inclusion in distance learning, etc.

For example, in most cases, for students with special educational needs, inclusion in a virtual classroom is difficult to achieve. Each student with special educational needs has specific manifestations of cognitive, emotional, and social development and unpredictable behaviour in

the visual and auditory perception of the teacher and peer mentors on the monitor, unpredictable emotional reactions, etc. The rules of conduct in the virtual classroom are not clearly defined and characterized, and often students with special educational needs cannot understand them, both in classroom or during peer mentoring support.

For students with special educational needs, the transition from one type of education to another type of education is as difficult as the transition from one activity to another activity in everyday life. It is extremely difficult to create a new routine and move from one routine to another.

Often, students with special educational needs do not take the distance peer mentoring seriously enough because they have a routine of using computers, tablets, and phones for entertainment purposes only. In the interest of correctness, after a certain period / two - three weeks /, students with special educational needs stop expressing desires for games when they meet the teachers or peer mentors on Skype, Viber, or in the virtual classrooms (Microsoft Teams, ZOOM, Google Meet, WebEx) and manage to accept training and support in the new remote format. The adoption of distance learning and support is especially effective when the support from parents and the family is strong and when peer mentors also participate.

Often, students with special educational needs have a comorbidity of possessive impairment with anxiety disorders or rapidly increased anxiety, aggression, and self-aggression. On the other hand, for each of the students with special educational needs there is a structured individual curriculum or personal curriculum, and teachers cannot always adapt a virtual curriculum for a short time - sometimes in one night or in a day, so that the respective lesson corresponds both to the educational goals and the student with special educational needs.

For some students with special educational needs, as well as for many students at risk, barriers can be removed in terms of lack of distance learning devices, internet connectivity or lack of motivation to learn, even if there are opportunities for distance peer mentoring. A significant part of the target groups and their family context do not accept learning and additional support as a valuable resource and reject even the available opportunities for distance support via Viber, WhatsApp or by using a mobile phone to enter conferences.

Therefore, we suggest to the project team, who supports the peer mentoring implementation clearly to formulate rules and to trust in the ability of peer mentors to increase the motivation for learning of students with special educational needs and students at risk and increase the synergy of traditional and distance learning in unrestricted conditions due to a pandemic.

Distance inclusive education as well as distance peer support can be realized in a digital model or in the traditional paper model, in three options:

- **synchronously**, presented as digital education, which follows the use of electronic environment: computer, laptop, mobile phone, tablet, smartphone, etc. electronic devices, as well as on various virtual platforms for training and communication, mobile applications, educational games, social networks, etc.;
- **asynchronously**, which follows the use in paper format of textbooks, teacher's or mentor's instructions, materials / most often worksheets, flash cards /, received by students solving the tasks of the worksheets and returning them to the teachers. It relies on the independent work of students, their responsibility, their motivation to learn and
- **hybrid** - combined between the first two options.

In the three options, inclusive education is realized effectively by distance only if it follows the characteristics for accessibility and quality of inclusive education and support for each student.

Many criticisms have emerged regarding asynchronous learning, almost as unfulfilled distance education, especially regarding students with special educational needs and students at risk. But asynchronous learning is not the opposite of synchronous learning, nor is asynchronous learning less effective. On the contrary, asynchronous learning requires more resources and more time to prepare the lesson, resources, materials such as worksheets and flashcards, etc., as well as a more complex organization to ensure students have access to them in the COVID - 19 pandemic. As noted by (Birnbaum, 2001), asynchronous distance learning “provides a multimodal instruction based on a web page that can be viewed by the student at any time. This type of distance learning allows students to have access to materials, lectures, instructions, etc. from anywhere and at any time, unlike synchronous distance learning. “

E-learning has become ubiquitous since Google and Microsoft allowed free access to their education platforms. In Bulgaria, the Ministry of Education has established an official partnership with Microsoft Office 365 Teams with a free ProPlus license (Office 365 Education E1 plan) for use by pupils, students, teachers and university professors and has created accounts for all pupils and teachers. Moreover, it created sites for registration in the platform and for training with special instructions for using the platform. New videos are constantly appearing on the digital backpack, YouTube and social networks, which freely provide instructions and directions on how to work on different platforms.

2. Guidance and strategies for distance inclusive peer mentoring

The general understanding of inclusive education and supportive methods as the peer mentoring between advanced and vulnerable students is related to ensuring access to quality education for all students, to structuring an inclusive educational environment, to the presence and participation of all students in school, extracurricular activities, to meet the diverse needs of the students respectfully and supportively.

As Tsokov (2017) notes: “Making the most optimal decisions in the development of educational policy is supported by a specific expert activity called” analysis of educational policy. This analysis is aimed at measuring, by determining the methods of success or failure of the educational changes undertaken. The analysis of education policy is closely related to measuring the impact of public policies in individual schools (organizational features, form and content of education, teacher qualification, etc.).

Distance peer mentoring sets out relatively **specific strategies for peer mentors**, which needs to be explained by teachers as following:

- recognition of the value of each student.
- providing opportunities for each vulnerable student to participate in distance mentoring activities together with advanced students as peer mentors.
- creating a positive virtual environment for each student.
- structuring clear rules for attendance and participation.
- providing the possible components of the resource support in a digital environment.
- ensuring the active participation of all students, including different students in videoconferencing discussions and online chats.

- encouraging the interactions and the effective communication.
- creating and maintaining web-based learning and information resources.
- seeking support from project team if necessary.
- structuring clear rules for attendance and participation.
- stimulating the creation and maintenance of friendships.
- bringing peer mentors into a leadership role.
- discussion of the learning tasks for the day and reporting on the performance.
- monitoring the participation and success.
- fair assessment of the efforts.
- increasing the motivation for learning in distance inclusive education.
- inclusion of virtual programs and applications.
- rejection of inappropriate or unsuccessful design, which is too abstract or has too conventional and even boring images or is age inappropriate.
- prevention of overdue performances by students with special educational needs and addiction to computer and / or mobile technologies.
- considering the fact that students with special educational needs may be hypersensitive to certain stimuli, movements of characters, individual virtual applications.
- creating an opportunity for realization of creative approaches by students with special educational needs.
- compliance with the spontaneity and situationally of the use of individual digital technologies and applications.

3. Tips for organizational practices

We would like to suggest a number of organisational practices, which will guide you on the training and support for the peer mentoring programme implementation.

1. Creating a comfortable environment for communication and creativity:

1.1. Time organization:

- providing a routine in the sequence of performing certain activities as the time may vary.
- giving to both mentors and mentees enough time to process the taught information.
- calm waiting for answers.
- showing patterns of behaviour in which, it is shown that the rules apply.
- asking questions that do not involve an unambiguous answer.
- using a positive approach in teaching and feedback.
- compliance with the psycho-physical and emotional state.
- providing time for proper response.

1.2. Rules and communication:

- organizing communication and activities during physical and distance peer mentoring with agreed rules in the mentoring couple.
- explanation of each rule and its consequences.
- asking questions that do not involve an unambiguous answer.
- using a positive approach in support and feedback.
- preventing or eliminating heated disputes and discussions.
- ensuring communication with respect and tolerance, fairness in evaluation and empathy.

1.3. Planning:

- the teacher's plans to include co-teaching during peer mentoring, especially in activities related to opportunities for creative achievement.
- planning to include specific instructions related to opportunities for developing original ideas of students, for exercises and for assessing the mastery of knowledge and skills, and the individual progress of the mentee student.
- the teacher's plans include long-term goals and the student's small goals.
- planning to include the use of computer and mobile technologies, educational software, educational games, assistive technologies and aids for mentees according to the capabilities of the educational organization and the capabilities of the mentees.
- planning most of the time for repetition and practice exercises.
- planning with predetermined student success to increase motivation to learn.

1.4. Implementation of the peer mentoring programme

- the action plan to be visualized pictorially / if possible and if necessary and audibly / through diagrams, tables, maps, etc .
- the action plan to be observed, taking into account the progress for each day and for each week.
- flexible use of learning and creative tasks and activities.
- all the time to give the mentee the opportunity to engage in an activity or perform a task that gives him pleasure to achieve a balance between compulsory and voluntary part of mastering learning content or mastering individual knowledge, skills or even competence.
- to monitor and self-monitor the implementation.

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