
Digital Environments to Enable High-Quality Education for Disadvantage and Disabled Learners in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation is one of the European Commission’s policy priorities in the last few years. High quality and inclusive education and training are a key part of reaching this object and ensuring that all people are prepared to live and be educated in the digital age. The paper presents a primary analysis of the results of a sociological qualitative survey conducted in the framework of the project “Inclusive digital environments to enable high-quality education and training for disadvantaged learners”. Methodology: The main method used was in-depth interview. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted among School Leaders and Teaching Staff in High Schools and Universities, Primary and Secondary Education Organizations in Bulgaria. The data was collected from October 2021 to January 2022.

Keywords: Digital education, Digital environments, Special education needs, Disadvantaged and disabled learners

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is one of the European Commission’s policy priorities in the last few years. High quality and inclusive education and training are a key part of reaching this object and ensuring that all people are prepared to live and be educated in the digital age. These priorities coincide with the crucial need to provide inclusive digital learning environments to all learners including these one with special educational needs – disadvantage and disabled learners. All EU Member States have adopted legislation promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities in education, at different levels. However, according to the analysis of the data¹ we observe that there are many variations among Member States when it comes to the education of persons with disabilities (ANED, 2020). The majority of students with disabilities in EU countries are educated in special classes or special schools, outside mainstream education. However, there are some EU countries that have made significant progress when it comes to inclusion and providing accessible learning environments in mainstream education (European Agency

¹<https://www.european-agency.org/data/cross-country-reports>

Statistics, 2018). In Bulgaria an inclusive approach has been implemented by the NGOs and Agency for Social Development.

This study was provoked by inequalities in inclusive education and therefore by variations in the way of remote learning that has been delivered across EU Member States and Bulgaria, in particular. The aim of the study was provoked not only by the exceptional significance and reflection of the digital education on basic human needs. It seeks to provide insights into the national special education traditions in the country and aims to establish how these have influenced current developments in inclusive education together with digital environments for disadvantage and disabled learners.

The sociological methods used include the implementation of 30 in-depth interviews among School Leaders and Teaching Staff in High Schools and Universities, Primary and Secondary Education Organizations in Bulgaria. The data was collected from October 2021 to January 2022.

DIGITAL EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGE STUDENTS

According to the educational support policy of Bulgarian schools, they can refuse the attendance of students with disabilities when the school outlines its inability to meet the special educational needs of the student (HRW, 2018). There are some different forms of pressure such as guiding the students towards other schools, making the students repeat their academic year, providing educational support that is not of required quality and inadequate support for staff. Most of respondents interviewed by SWU project team stated that the educational support provided has not been focused on the individual needs of the students, depending instead on the willingness of the staff or the school in question.

When we talk about inclusive education, the three important points are the family, professionals and mainstream teachers. The child with disabilities has individual support according to needs, which is provided by specialists - speech therapist, psychologist, special pedagogue, support teacher. Depending on his individual needs, the student with disabilities is enrolled in a public school, but attends the centers for special educational support. Again, depending on his individual needs, he can attend a public school 100%, or divide his time between the school and the support center. As the special educational needs are very wide, children can be on an individual curriculum, individual assessment - qualitative, instead of quantitative assessments - "Cope", "Difficulty" and "Fail", can be on individual assessment only for some of the subjects, and for the others to be with quantitative assessments. These individual needs of the child are determined by specialists and are valid until the end of the stage of his education, then a new assessment of his needs. The idea of integrated education is an equal chance for all children to be educated. It includes visits to a mass kindergarten and school. This means that they spend part of their time with non-specialists for their needs. Teachers' training implies working with student with disabilities, but they are teachers of Bulgarian language, mathematics, computer science or primary school teacher, they do not have an additional certificate to work with student

with disabilities, which can lead to a conflict of interest between parents and professionals.

The questions to the support teacher, were focused on their work, the process of integration that they actually observe, and not the legal one, and their vision of the problems faced by parents of students with disabilities. All of the interviewed respondents agreed that school staff lacked sufficient training and knowledge about disability. According to children with disabilities who have been excluded from the schools, they have faced further difficulties to adapt to new school settings. When a learner is excluded, parents often have to take the difficult decision to send the child in private schools. From data collected it is observed that the fundamental principles to inclusive education in Bulgaria are not applied, such as the individualized support and the reasonable accommodation of the school setting in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities. It is worth mentioning that variation between schools in the country is large and cannot be easily explained by selection effects or other. One of the respondents (a woman with 30 years of experience) works at the Center for Special Educational Support in a small town in the province of the country. In the past, the center was a functioning auxiliary school, which by order №RD-14-266 / 20.07.2017. / SG, issue 61 of 28.07.2017 / of the Minister of Education and Science Auxiliary boarding school has been transformed into a Center for special educational support / CSOP /. Before 2017, mainly orphans and semi-orphans were trained. The center now provides support for a total of 69 students - 52 from the region and 17 from other neighbouring regions. Although the center has a psychologist, speech therapist, special pedagogues, rehabilitator, educator, according to her, there are still not enough trained teachers, which hinders the study of individual difficulties of students and it cannot be directed to a specific specialist, but this slows down its integration... “ (a woman with 30 years of experience). The practical implementation of the duties of support teacher is relegated to the background due to a number of activities and obligations with documents. The correct implementation of the legal and regulatory side of things in most cases take precedence over the practical implementation of different types of specialists. Working with children with special educational needs is defined as “difficult, but interesting and humane. It requires a lot of patience, attention and love for children with different needs and abilities “(woman, 30 years of experience), it is really a job that you have to have a lot of patience and believe in what you do to be able to help.”

Excessive use of telephones, lack of communication from an early age “The advent of a number of technologies, lack of communication with children”(woman, 8 years of work experience), often among children with learning disabilities are those who are” raised “in large part of the time in their early childhood on TV and screens... “woman, 18 years of experience, profession school psychologist,”... Many parents do not talk to their children while they are young and children have no vocabulary... “, (a man, 35 years of experience), a teacher, “connected with parents who do not devote time to their children in their development.

Regarding the tools and approaches that would contribute to improving the communication and social interaction of students with special needs most of the respondents answer that they need information about students with disabilities and an explanation of the problems, expectations of children. It is not only important that they put themselves in mainstream schools, there must be a specific plan for what happens to them after they finish their education. “They should be involved in the extracurricular life of the school so that they do not feel isolated - excursions, projects, celebrations” – (a woman teacher with 3 years of experience).

Digital games and gamification have a place in education according to the almost all interviewed respondents. They see the future of digital classroom games “when new knowledge is presented as a game, learning becomes easier, when children participate in the teaching they learn faster” – (a man, teacher with 5 years of experience). When students participate in the teaching of new material through games, they learn more easily, when students with disabilities see a positive example from their classmates, they make more progress. Although the gamification is applicable and preferred by Bulgarian teachers, parents have a slightly different point of view. They think that their children sit in front of the screens a lot. It’s true, but at the moment most of their time is spent with tik- tok, Facebook and other social networks. “These students are sitting in front of the screen anyway” (a man, teacher with 5 years of experience).

CONCLUSION

The main conclusion approached by the study is that there is a major need to raise awareness about unequal access to inclusive education for students with disabilities in Bulgarian society, as well as a need of providing a detailed information on how to implement more inclusive educational practices and at sharing promising examples of inclusive methods in education for learners with special educational needs. The adequate and complete change is needed, however depending on the individual needs of the students, not all of them can adapt to the generally accepted understandings. Based on the data from the in-depth interviews, there was a need not only for adequate resources and support for mass teachers, but also for the search for mechanisms to increase public awareness and empathy in creating an inclusive environment.

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