Distance Teaching of Primary Students with Disabilities during COVID-19: Teachers' Perspectives

Edvina Bešić, *University College of Teacher Education Styria, Graz, Austria*
Andrea Holzinger, *University College of Teacher Education Styria, Graz, Austria*

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the exclusion of students with disabilities from education, showing thatthey are least likely to benefit from distance learning (UN, 2020; Bellacicco & Ianes, 2020). Although teachers have a critical role in making their teaching accessible, they often do not know how to do so (Kent, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this has been even more the case, leading to the decrease of students with disabilities' participation in digital education, exclusion from learning, and increased risk of dropping out of school (OECD, 2020).

This study investigates how teachers included students, enrolled in mainstream primary schools, in their distance teaching during COVID-19, focusing specifically on teachers' experiences and practices. An online survey—mainly open-ended questions, including a case description—was utilized to investigate what challenges teachers encountered during distance teaching for students with disabilities and what opportunities derived from that. The survey link was sent to 142 primary school teachers from Styria, whoare members of an inclusive education network. The survey lasted from mid-June until mid-July 2020. 47 teachers, between the ages 27 and 62, completed the survey. The qualitative data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis.

The teachers described their experience distance teaching of students with disabilities as mainly positive, but this depended on different aspects, such as: disability type, teachers' and parents' commitment and/orIT skills, and their cooperation with each other. The implications of these results are the need to improve not only teachers' digital competences but also their knowledge about how to use technology in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, teachers need to learn how to cooperate with different stakeholders (e.g., parents, teaching assistants, special educators, etc.), specifically in the case of digital education of studentswith disabilities.

Literature:

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