

Technology as a learning tool. Access of autistic children to e-learning

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ABSTRACT:

Pupils, while learning online, have difficulty using the Internet, understanding information through applications, and lacking direct contact with the teacher. The methodology used was questionnaires for the period January-July 2021. There were 47 completed questionnaires and they contained twenty eight questions. The results of the study indicate difficulty in accessing technology, limited time of online learning offered by the teacher, difficulty in concentrating by children with elements of autism as well as ascertainment by parents of lack of consideration when drafting the plan by the responsible educational institutions. The purpose of the study is to highlight the difficulties of autistic children in processing e-learning. A clear picture of the situation helps in designing the most appropriate educational policies, where you have to anticipate and be prepared for the exceptional situations where it is needed to use e-learning. The study is based mainly on the life experience of families who have autistic children and who are more open to seeking help and solutions, as they often feel alone and helpless.

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INTRODUCTION

Man as a social being, with the development of society and social relations, changes and tries to adapt to needs. History has shown that the need to survive and to adapt has led the individual to acquire and display new behaviors. As a new reality, COVID-19 and its extension to the European continent, brought the whole social life to be paralyzed, building new behaviors such as the use of protective masks, keeping the distance between people no closer than 1.5m, limited mobility, developing learning through online applications (Microsoft Team, Zoom or Google Classroom) or online registrations, thus scheduling an appointment with the family doctor. The effects of the pandemic were felt mainly in the learning process at all levels, from primary to university education. Various educational institutions, following the orders of the Technical Committees, took measures to prevent or reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic on the development of online learning.

We are now living in a time of digitalization thanks to the pandemic and providing alternative ways of learning for pupils/students was a necessity. The face-to-face process between teacher and pupil/student was replaced by e-learning, the process of learning through the internet. The pandemic changed society's approach by further developing technology and giving preference to the use of the internet.

In the Republic of Albania, the right to education of Albanian citizens, foreigners, and stateless persons is guaranteed, without being discriminated by gender, race, color, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, political or religious beliefs, status, economic or social, age, place of residence, disability or for other reasons defined in the Albanian legislation (Law no. 69, 2012, article 5). The right to distance education is provided in the Albanian legislation (Law no. 69, 2012, article 1), which states that distance education is a way of education, where most of the learning process is performed when the teacher and student are not usually in the same place and at the same time and is realized mainly with the help of communication and information by technology.

Also, local educational units provide psycho-social services to pupils and employees of educational institutions. The psycho-social service provides support through psychologists or social workers for the treatment of problems of various cases, the assessment of cases of children with special psycho-social needs, and the design of prevention programs, according to the needs of the school community (Law no. 69, 2012, Article

20). In addition to the above, educational institutions should take measures to ensure the child the exercise of rights, following the development of personality, based on his highest interest (Law no. 18, 2017, Article 2). This higher interest of the child was put into question when from the study in the classroom; we passed to the virtual classroom. Although learners may demonstrate success in conventional education and classroom, that is not enough to guarantee success in an online learning situation (Aboagye et al. 2020). Also, a learner unfamiliar with an online classroom platform might be overwhelmed if required to use group chat and discussion, all in the first learning activity. The first learning activities should make use of the simpler technical functions and then add the complex ones (Gulielmino & Gulielmino, 2003). The purpose of E-learning is for the teacher to build a functional system that suits the students and one of the main issues is the design of the curriculum. The curriculum provides quality and equal education for every member of society, regardless of ethnicity, sex, or social status (Law no. 69, 2012).

Important to succeed in an E-learning process for children with autistic elements who have more difficulty than others integrate into this new system of knowledge acquisition, is Self Direction Learning. This strategy is aimed at pupils with autistic elements and their parents. Likewise, it helps the child with elements of autism to explore different patterns, test them in groups or individually and choose the one that suits them best (Piskurich & Piskurich 2003). Learners must regulate their learning by monitoring and setting their own learning goals (Pintrich, 2004). This is complicated for the categories of children, and object of study, as they have difficulties in self-management of the learning process and goal setting. Monitoring in this case needs to be performed by the parent, teacher, and psychologist. Psychologists seek out and encourage the child's interaction with other people. E-learning must ensure the goals of the institution and the child.

Factors that help or hinder online learning may differ between subgroups of students, with previous studies exploring the specific experiences of mature-age students (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Despite their "invisibility" on campus these students want and need to feel that they are included in, and belong to the institution as equal members of the student community. They value highly any efforts by staff to reach out to them, communicate with them, and encourage interaction, and collaboration; hence the significance of the next finding (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). The methods and strategies used by the

teacher have the effect of adapting to the environment (environment without harassment) where the rules are understandable and visible. This adaptation to the environment increases the independence and desire of the child to learn. Remaining with the hope that every child has equal rights, an autistic child can become capable of life and live a happy life with us, always with us and between us (Palaj, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

For this study are used unstructured questionnaires with mixed questions. The questionnaires are distributed by the authors themselves, once a week during the months of January-July 2021, in the development center "Sol", Durres, Albania, where children with autistic elements aged 6 years to 12 years old, are treated with relevant programs. In total, the parents of 47 children answered the questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaires, information was obtained from the life experiences of parents who have autistic children and who attended online school in the Municipality of Durres, Durres Region. They, also, were asked to write their comments if they have any. The focus group of parents mainly belongs to the city center. The qualitative data are focused on the thoughts and attitudes of parents towards the teaching service. Its purpose is to provide information about people's views and opinions. For the collection of qualitative data, interviews are more suitable.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section contained general questions which aimed to collect basic data on respondents (such as age, gender, and level of education) as well as some general assessments by the respondents on the standard of schools, investments, and services provided by educational institutions. The second section focused on parents' perception of the online learning process during Covid-19 through three sub-sections: the level of knowledge of e-learning platforms, the level of learning by the child, and the perception of parents on the child's relationship with the teacher and classmates. Through specific questions, the respondents had the opportunity to reflect on how much they were familiar with the platforms used for e-learning. The third section focused on finding other more effective methods and on recovering the gaps that the children had. The fourth section has one open question where it was possible to make comments.

The questionnaire contains 28 mixed questions (with yes/no, closed and open answers.)

THE ACCESS TO SCHOOL AND TECHNOLOGY

A child with special needs has the right to special care, education, and training, to help them enjoy a comfortable life, with full dignity, self-confidence, and opportunities for social integration (Zabeli, 2001). Article 28 of the UN Convention provides that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to education and, in order to achieve this right, step by step and based on equal opportunities" (UN Convention, 1989). Virtual learning has become a reality for most pupils due to the pandemic. Many pupils with autism have been able to benefit from this virtual learning adjustment. They may face obstacles in other areas of life as well, including nonverbal communication, social and emotional reciprocity, and high anxiety with special activities and a skilled professional to meet their daily needs, but without that in-person setting, many have been able to perform better educationally (Abbot, 2021). Further, students with autism have considerable difficulties in social situations which, according to the research, can be aided by computer-based learning (Biju et al., 2013).

In our schools, we face the presence of this disorder which dictates that teachers need to be more informed to approach these children more objectively. This problem today is followed by the Ministry of Education and Sports through the integration of these children in normal classes where the class teacher together with the assistant (supportive) teacher must work with autistic students with the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) (Barolli, 2020).

The curriculum itself educates students in a positive spirit by addressing learning topics for inclusion, and respect for human rights and freedoms. Whether children have attended kindergarten, some of them have become familiar with their autistic friend since kindergarten and have socialized with him (from experience). The class teacher should build a positive relationship with the child's parents and other parents, presenting in the meetings with the parents, both the legal part for these children and the human part for raising public awareness in support of parents with autistic children. The teacher should work with the assistant teacher to improve in the best possible way the treatment and integration of the autistic child in the classroom (Barolli, 2020).

The current situation is not the best possible if we look at the reported cases related to the lack of providing children with autistic elements, and assistant teachers, their number for 2018 is 18 (AFRPD, 2020). It shows those denounced by the parents and for which the Commissioner for Protection against Discrimination for Disability has made a decision. The head of the educa-

tional institution is responsible for taking measures of a positive character in the relevant institution, to combat discrimination concerning the right to education (Law 10221/2010, Article 19).

Albanian Institute of Statistics and responsible structures collect appropriate statistical and research data, following data protection provisions, to enable accessible and inclusive policies and planning (Law no. 93, 2014) Another issue is how much statistical data is taken into account by policymakers.

THE DATA FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES

Regarding the first question of whether their child attended online school, 88.1% of parents of children aged 6 to 8 years, responded positively, 2% negatively because of economic difficulties, so they did not have a computer or internet connection, while 9.9% partially. While in the age group of children 9 to 12 years old, the participation in online learning was higher, 98.8%, 0.1% did not participate, and 1.1% partially (Table 1).

Regarding the second question about what the child used to attend online lessons, about 95.2% of autistic children used a computer, 2.6% used a mobile phone and 0.1% did not use anything. This is because 2.2% out of 2.6% had difficulties not only for the children but also for the parents in the use and utilization of E-learning and as a result, they asked the teacher to simply send them the explanation and the assignments with a photo.

From Table 2, we can perform two analyzes. It is noticed that in both age groups, we have a decrease in online learning time from the first to the second quarter. It is thought that the control by the institution to which the 9-year schools are dependent, was more present in the first and second quarters. In the third quarter, we have a decrease in minutes, since the end of the school year is coming, and teachers have been exhausted by conducting online teaching.

To the question, if the teachers were available to respond to the requests or difficulties that the pupils had, 61.5% answered positively and 25.4% said that it was the parents' insistence for the teacher to react, as teachers were often justified in having classes and other students and could not be dedicated only to children with autistic elements. The parents believe that this negligence of teachers has come as a result of difficulties in recognizing technology and family obligations, mainly those with children since they have explained the lesson from home.

When asked if the child with autistic elements was concentrated during the online learning, the parents in 98% of them said that no matter what the lesson time was, their child wanted to break away and relax a bit. This, perhaps because of the lack of interaction between pupils and the lack of a booster for the autistic child, causes a lack of attention. After this finding, the surveyed parents, in 54% of them, had decided to hire a teacher privately, who could explain the lessons and help them with their homework.

Do you think there is another more effective method for your child with autism to be able to develop online learning and acquire knowledge to a considerable extent? To this question, about 59% of parents answered negatively and 41% said that a better way would have been to develop online learning into two parts, dividing the class. A smaller number of pupils during the online study hour would increase the teacher's contact with the pupil/student, especially necessary for a pupil/student with autistic elements.

One of the issues under discussion, in the questionnaire, was how to find or not a method to compensate the child for the lack of learning during the online study. Parents, 71% of them, said that an effective solution is to conduct lessons privately with a teacher, while 29% of them think that they will make up for the shortcomings in lessons, by studying on their own with the child.

Table 1. Participation in online learning.

Children of age	Yes	No	Partly
6-8 years	88.1%	2%	9.9%
9-12years	98.8%	0.1%	1.1

Table 2. Duration (in minutes) of the online lesson during the day.

Children of age	The first 3 months	The second 3 months	The third 3 months
6-8 years	~120 min	~90 min	~60 min
9-12 years	~100 min	~60 min	~60 min

Some studies mention that the advantage of e-learning is that the teacher can focus his attention on the student's individual needs. For example, Rosenberg and Foshay (2002) noted that one crucial advantage of e-learning is focusing on students' needs rather than on the needs of teachers or institutions.

The issues listed, are data received from over 50% of parents surveyed, so it does not indicate that 100% of them agree on all the following issues, such as:

1. Speed and being suddenly found by school benches in virtual classrooms. In Albania, one of the platforms that were quickly set up to respond to the situation was Akademi.al, a platform designed to provide video tutorials for the entire pre-university system, which was found ready and available to all students offering the opportunity to learn at home. All students have the opportunity to attend classes online at no cost. Teachers use virtual classrooms to explain lessons with all the necessary tools at their disposal. Each video tutorial is explained in Albanian by Albanian teachers. Akademi.al in cooperation with UNICEF has also stayed close to students with disabilities. All instructional videos have subtitles attached. Students will find about 2,000 instructional videos on the akademi.al platform. Over 1,100 videos are with solved exercises.
2. Use of technology, about 57% of them. They have found it necessary to turn to a relative or an IT expert to learn about using a computer, or cell phone when it comes to online learning platforms like Zoom, Moodle, and Google Classroom. These platforms allow not only to conduct live lessons but also to find lectures even after closing the line. Also, the Moodle platform allows communication between course members. In practice, this has not happened, as the teacher has focused mainly on explaining the lesson and giving homework. The disadvantage of Moodle is the slower service with the increase in the number of students. The disadvantages of the Zoom platform are related to the limited number of participants up to 100 and the time limit of up to 40 minutes when we have a basic package. Of the above platforms, Google Classroom is the most used and liked by parents as it has simplicity in use.
3. Lack of availability of the teacher to respond to the special needs of children with autistic elements. The parents claimed that they had asked the teachers to pay more attention to their children. The reasons for this behavior of the teacher are mainly related to their family commitments and the fact that there are a large

number of pupils in the classroom and it would be difficult to carry out additional teaching hours for autistic children.

4. Lack of interaction of the child with others. Lack of active communication makes children shyer in expressing themselves freely and giving their opinion on various discussion issues (Mayers et al. 2002). The child with autism has difficulty concentrating and therefore during their psychologist sessions, parents claim that their child develops the IEP program best when it is stimulated with what is called a booster (e.g. a toy or food that the child prefers). As above, 54% of parents thought they could improve their child's concentration on lessons by hiring a private tutor.
5. Drafting an online learning development plan without taking into account the special needs of autistic children. Parents at the rate of 59% believe that dividing the class into groups would increase the possibility of their child's contact with the teacher or even classmates. The emergency caused by the pandemic hampered the activity of the states in drafting a more effective policy.
6. Gaps in knowledge. According to the study, there are two ways that parents support: hiring a private teacher who will conduct lessons as much as necessary for the parents, equalizing the position of the autistic child with classmates, and secondly, the engagement of at least one of the parents with his/her child. The difficulties we have in the case when it is the parent, who will study with his child, are related to the fact that most parents work, and secondly, having a second child makes it difficult for them to concentrate and care more for autistic children.

LIMITATIONS

Since the study focuses on a single center for the treatment of children with autistic elements and the number of parents who responded to the questionnaires, was limited, it may provide a limited overview of their child's access to technology. Also, it must be admitted that most of the children in this focus group are from 6 to 12 years old and live in the center of the city. So it is difficult to have accurate data about what happens in the surroundings of the city of Durrës and students over the age of 12. While the results achieved are important to consider as they are based on the life experiences and research of many authors who have studied this issue. The study calls for intervention in legal improvements, human capacity training, and evaluation of the results in the short term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to undertake reforms that originate from the data collected in the field from at least two educational institutions for each district in Albania. Curricula should be able to be easily applied in exceptional situations. Curricula should be developed in consultation with teachers and psychologists who are attached to the schools, taking into account any special needs of autistic children, as their experience easily shows what has worked and what needs to be improved in the used learning methods.

More important is the encouragement of various non-profit organizations to support parents who for various reasons want to offer their children homeschooling. A large number of parents surveyed said that to fill the gaps in the lessons, they had or would hire teachers privately. Difficult economic conditions or even lack of time, make it difficult for parents to manage the situation caused by the pandemic. Encouraging educational institutions to cooperate with non-profit organizations and to apply for projects with national or foreign funding, which will be used to increase support capacities for autistic children. Human and logistic capacities must be strengthened.

There is a need for teachers to be trained continuously. Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides that no one may be denied the right to education. The state, in exercising the functions it assumes in the field of education, respects the right of parents to provide this education on their religious and philosophical beliefs. In the interpretation of this article, all teachers are required to take the necessary measures to provide support and individual programs when necessary, for children to be educated, to be creative and social, and to maintain a respectful attitude toward their rights. The general teacher must adapt in every case, even when the need for E-learning arises, together with the specialized teacher, the teaching methods.

It would also be appropriate for Albania to absorb the successful practices of other countries, which through the improvement of infrastructure and the addition of specialized teams in schools, have managed to be effective.

The results of the study should be evaluated based on the sample used and the district where the questionnaires were made, but it can still serve as a basis for further studies to be conducted on this issue.

CONCLUSIONS

E-learning, although from the research of different researchers, results as a method that causes gaps in knowl-

edge and difficulty in studying. For children with autistic elements has some advantages, such as the flexibility of their weekly program, as they have rankings in studies when they are given the necessary space and do things at the moment they are convinced it is right. Flexibility, in this case, allows a child with autistic elements to realize his daily life. They have the opportunity to return to the topic of learning whenever they want and whenever they want. It reduces the stress, as a result of avoiding the often unfriendly confrontation that these children encounter in normal schools. Children are familiar with technology, as even during physical attendance at school, they have been asked to use technology at least several times during the school year. Better knowledge, because by studying online at home, autistic children do not need to manage human relationships and focus more on their studies. Most teaching methods require individual attention for each student since students with autism are more prone to distraction, lack of motivation, and other behavioral difficulties than students who do not have autism (Biju et al, 2013).

Online learning was a trend and a solution for education in 2020. Virtually we have many opportunities to communicate with other students and read the materials uploaded to the system. The most used platforms are Moodle, Zoom, and Google Classroom. One of the benefits of the pandemic was that an educational institution decided which of the platforms to use, leaving this decision in the hands of the teacher (Perez, 2021). This is because it would be much more difficult for the same student to apply to two or more platforms during a single school year. Familiarity with a platform facilitates its use in the following. Moodle allows communication between teachers and students, and students can communicate with each other. Communication is realized through forums, blogs, chats, and messages between students enrolled in a course/subject. This is an advantage because in distance learning communication is a key factor ensuring that online learning has been effective and if there have been any problems, the lectures are consistently valuable to the student. The above does not mean that E-learning is the best method of research, as it is said that online interaction may reinforce stigmas (Perez, 2021), but in a pandemic situation like that of Covid 19, E-learning is indispensable for autistic children.

The child with autistic elements to be able to exercise their right to education both in the classroom and when it comes to E-learning, the Albanian public education system must undergo reforms. We should not ignore the problems that some children have, to have elec-

tronic devices and access the online classroom. The study shows that family members and children know the basics of technology, but they did not know about e-learning platforms. Similarly, the curriculum must provide multi-disciplinary services. So it should be possible to include in the curricula of supplementary classes and individual curricula. Educational institutions must be active in the creation of funds to enable the application of scientific projects on the reformation of the educational system. In this direction, we have to demand continuous, periodic training of teachers by foreign and local trainers, bringing the experiences of countries that have more developed and inclusive educational policies.

The analysis of the data resulted that the methods of the study were virtually used by a large number of pupils/students and that it was necessary for them. During the time of the pandemic and the development of learning, they often had dissatisfaction but failed to find what would have been a better way than E-learning. It was observed that the applications used during the Covid-19 pandemic had problems such as limited access time or the limited number of students who could access them. Parents believe that dividing the class into two groups would have been more effective since more time would be dedicated to one student.

It is also accepted that learning in the classroom, unlike E-learning, gives the child the opportunity with autistic elements to create stable relationships with peers and learn from them, to take as a model the behaviors of peers with normal development and be able to work in groups. Lack of active communication makes children shyer in expressing themselves freely and giving their opinion. The teachers dedicated the same amount of time to each child, regardless of their particularities. This was due to the personal commitments of the teachers or the high number of students in the groups.

Parents who are in a working relationship and who may have another child have more clothes. The lack of time and tiredness at work caused the lack of availability of parents to autistic children. Some of them agreed to take teachers for individual studies, but the economic impossibility did not allow them.

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Annex 1

QUESTIONNAIRES
(In “Sol” Development Center, Durres, Albania)

Clarification for completing the questionnaire: Hello! You have been selected to give your opinion by completing this questionnaire, which takes 10 minutes. The purpose of the questionnaire is to collect your individual opinions regarding the following questions. Answer by circling or placing an x in the following statements and writing your comments where required. We assure you that your answers are confidential.

First session

1. How old are you?
 - a. 21-29 years old
 - b. 30-39 years old
 - c. Over 40 years old

2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female

3. What is your level of education?
 - a. Bachelor
 - b. Master
 - c. PhD
 - d. Other

Second session

4. Did your children attend school during the Covid-19 pandemic?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Partly

5. What device did your child use to follow the online lesson?

6. How much time (in minutes) did your child spend on average in online learning, during a day?
 - a. First 3 months _____
 - b. Second 3 months _____
 - c. Third 3 months _____

7. Were teachers available to respond to student requests/difficulties?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Partly

8. Did your child concentrate during online learning?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Partly

Third session

9. Do you think there is another more effective way to absorb knowledge during online learning?

10. What is the method to recover knowledge?

11. Do you think that Albania responded in time to the extraordinary situation of Covid-19?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

12. Do you think that MAS took the measures in time to implement online learning?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

13. As a parent, can you find the information you need on the Akademi.al platform?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

14. Do you know Zoom, Moodle and Google Classroom platforms?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

15. How to get information on Zoom, Moodle and Google Classroom?

16. Which platform was used by the teacher?

17. Was the teacher clear when explaining the E-learning platforms?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

18. How long did it take your child to understand the use of platforms?

19. Was the chosen platform successful?

- a. Yes
- b. No

20. What were the advantages of the platform used by your child?

21. What were the disadvantages of the platform used by your child?

22. Have you turned to the teacher to ask for more time to dedicate to the child?

- a. Yes
- b. No

23. Was the teacher available to your request?

- a. Yes
- b. No

24. Do you think that the plan drawn up by MAS took into consideration the needs of autistic children?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

25. Did you, as a parent, have the time to follow your child during online learning?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

26. What was the solution you found to recover your child's lack of knowledge?

27. Has the solution you found to help your child turn out to be productive?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

28. Think that if we will find ourselves in the same situation, are you more prepared as a parent?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Partly

Thank you for your time!