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Teacher Training and Learners with Special Needs in the U.S. and Poland – the COVID-19 Experience

Abstract

The 2021 transition to teaching online and to virtual environment due to COVID-19 was challenging for many educationalists, teachers, students and pupils all over the world. However, it was particularly difficult for teachers of learners with special educational needs, school therapists and counsellors. They had to provide highly individualized teaching and service without (or with limited) face-to-face contact. This article looks at teacher qualifications necessary to provide ICT based education for learners, particularly for learners with special needs (from the American and Polish viewpoint). The Authors analyze the context of preservice teacher training in the COVID-19 conditioned environment with the particular focus of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (who wish to obtain teacher qualifications to teach in Polish public schools).

Key words: teacher qualifications, preservice teacher education, special needs learners, e-learning, online learning

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted and transformed all spheres of life all over the world, including education at all levels in an unprecedented manner. University training programs, administrators, educators, students, parents, and school personnel were forced to adapt to virtual classrooms, new channels and forms of communication, new strategies and techniques of teaching and learning. School buildings, like many other institutions, closed for many months (including the USA and Poland) and physically separated millions of students who receive special services (in the U.S. and Poland) from their tutors, counsellors, peers, etc. The circumstances imposed working under pressure, dealing with everyday stress and the rising levels of anxiety, loneliness and doubts. It was particularly difficult for educators to:

[honor] students' Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) and [offer] therapies in a remote setting. Both general education and special education teachers, regardless of previous experience with online instruction, were expected to provide high-quality instruction to all students during the mandatory school closures that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Typical practices in special education and teacher preparation include strategies for direct instruction, inclusive practices, behavior management, and social emotional development that lead to increased inclusion for students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2005: p. 11).

While some educational institutions had been using e-learning based courses or course components and had well trained personnel, there had been many which still lacked skills, equipment and technical support. There had been institutions with ready to transfer content to Moodle, Google, Teams, Zoom, etc. based classrooms, but there had been institutions which had to develop whole programs, train teachers, learners, buy equipment, software, etc. All institutions had to adapt to governmental restrictions, meet the expectations of all participants of the educational process and not only to survive, but be flexible, open to new experience, creative and professional. Designing quality online content takes time, requires competences and experience. It also involves cooperation, investment in both hardware and software, adaptation and training. Years of teacher training programs in Poland/Europe (for example, such as: E-Academy of the Future, or e-Twinning), for example, certainly proved effective; however, the needs were immense and circumstances changing. In the U.S., for example, at the beginning of the pandemic "Instructors were not ready for this sudden change that required the use of a new platform and the design of alternate activities and delivery methods. Some users faced technical

and unforeseen difficulties while using the new platform including internet access issues and Zoom bombings” (Serhan, 2020: p. 340).

When the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread and education institutions in Poland shut down (March 2019), SWPS University transferred to the online mode within two weeks. It was possible due to the efforts of the authorities, educators and administration but also because the University had been using distant learning tools for many years before. The tutors had been trained in using and designing their own materials and were well prepared for the transition, knowing a lot about the medium. English Studies program in the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS University), both at graduate and postgraduate level offers preservice teacher of English as a Foreign Language Certification program. The curriculum contained ICT based competences long before the pandemic; therefore, it was a smooth transition to the online mode. What students mastered during the online classes, in many cases, had an immediate application in practice as many combine work with studies. In addition, students continued their obligatory internships in public institutions, which were also online at that time.

Problem of Research

This paper examines the responses to the crisis in the U.S. and in Poland from the perspective of academics and practitioners involved in teacher training programs. The objectives of this study were to: (1) examine students’ competences and teacher’s perspectives during a Pedagogical Diagnosis course and (2) examine the same students’ skills during a *Computer Assisted Language Teaching course*, addressed at fellow teacher trainees or teachers of EFL at SWPS University in Warsaw, and (3) investigate the impact of COVID-19 restriction on the use of technology in real-life teaching context- The British School in Warsaw Perspective.

Government decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the closure of many schools across the US as well as in Poland. This has made it necessary for teachers and teacher training programs to work online where they face the prospect of designing lessons, homework, assignments and assessment suitable for online learning. Such a change is usually done in small steps, testing what works and what does not, however the speed of response to the COVID-19 pandemic has not allowed many schools and teacher training programs for a slow and steady approach. In effect, almost overnight the nature of work shifted into uncharted territory where there are no guidelines and where much of what works in person may not work online.

Background of Research- the US perspective

In the U.S., teacher certification criteria are determined at the state level. Authorities of each state define the content and requirements of the certification programs. In most states, traditional ¹teacher certification requires: a bachelor's degree or higher, completing a state-approved teacher preparation program, completing teaching internships (at least one semester long), taking state-required exams for educators (Better Teachers, 2022).

The cost of teacher certification varies from state to state but typically costs between \$40 and \$200. In addition to receiving a passing score on the required assessments for your state, you will also need to pass a fingerprint and background check proving that you have no criminal history. The first certificate earned is usually valid for between one and five years and will need to be renewed every few years. Renewal usually requires continuing education coursework and/or the completion of graduate-level courses. Some states require specific courses to be taken for renewal, while others require general education or subject area coursework (Better Teachers, 2022).

Teacher preparation programs are designed to prepare teachers for everything they should encounter during their first years as a teacher. Requirements for teacher preparation programs to become accredited became stricter when the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) implemented new standards (2022). These standards included categories such as: ensuring to prepare teachers with content knowledge and appropriate pedagogical tools, requirements to partner with districts to ensure quality feedback and practice during student-teacher partnerships and demonstrating that teacher graduates are successful in improving academic achievement in students, preschool-12th grade (Sawchuk, 2013). Holding teacher-candidates to higher standards would potentially lead to better teachers and better outcomes for students (Boyd et al., 2008).

Teacher preparation programs for special education teacher candidates often incorporate the seven standards for initial special education teachers established by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) into their program (CEC, 2022, Grempe et al., 2020). However, despite these efforts, nothing could have prepared future teachers and current educators for the new demands they faced during the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, a majority of teachers, for example, in Arizona began using

¹ Each state also provides guidelines and requirements how to obtain alternative or volunteer teacher qualifications.

Zoom, an online video-conferencing platform, Microsoft classrooms, to meet with and provide e-lessons and other learning management systems (i.e. blackboard, Microsoft Team Suite, Desire2Learn, Moodle and Pearson Learning Solutions) if not all, for their students (Young & Donovan, 2020; Turner et al., 2020), and some used paper packets or worksheets for students who had difficulties accessing online lessons (Tremmel et al., 2020). Special education teachers especially, had unique challenges as they were still required to maintain their students' individual education plans (IEPs) and monitor the progress on their students' IEPs virtually, now with the help of individualized packets and feedback from students' parents or caregivers (Expect More Arizona, 2020).

Remote learning experience has brought significant changes in the way we understand, plan and conduct teacher training programs, virtual classroom based strategies and techniques. It has also revealed the benefits and drawbacks of both traditional and online learning. In the U.S “[s]ome [special education] personnel appeared to adjust their thinking about how special education services could be delivered and modified their approach to a family-centered coaching process; others struggled to change from a child-focused special education service delivery model” (Steed et al; 2022, p. 128). Research both in America and Poland provides valuable findings with regard to the quality of educational services trained and delivered, findings that will help improve teacher qualification programs in the future.

The reality resulting from the COVID-19 thus raises questions about the nature of teaching and ways of supporting the learning of student teachers and educators servicing individuals with special needs. It further challenges teacher education and educators to (re)think ways for scenarios that are unpredictable and unknown and more collaborative in nature, but which raises questions related to equity and social justice.

Linda Darling Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University and Maria E. Hyler, the Deputy Director of the Learning Policy Institute's (LPI) Washington, D.C. claimed in 2019:

With the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, even greater efforts are needed to address students' academic and social emotional needs, all the while making up for learning loss and preparing for the unpredictable combinations of distance learning, blended learning, and in-classroom learning. These expectations, along with the need for greater emphasis on equity-focused teaching and learning have raised the bar for educators and for educator preparation (Darling Hammond et al., 2019).

The following case studies prove that both teachers and teacher trainees took up the gauntlet.

Background of Research- the Polish perspective

Qualifications to teach foreign languages in the Polish public education system can be obtained at the tertiary level of education (M.A. required) and are governed by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science and described in terms of the program content, ECTS, number of hours, internships, etc. in the “Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 July 2019 on the Standard of Initial Teacher Education” (*Journal of Laws* of 2012, item 1450). The document specifies concrete learning objectives in four areas: Pedagogy (B2)², Psychology (B1), Subject Didactics (D 1) Basics of Didactics, and Voice Emission (C).

If we take a closer look at the IT based competencies described in the three spheres of the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and social competences), their role is mentioned directly in the following fragments:

In the area of knowledge: the graduate knows and understands

D.1/W4. Substantive, didactic and educational competences, including the need for professional development, also with the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the need to adjust/adapt means of communication to the learners’ level of development and stimulate the cognitive activity of learners, including the creation of didactic situations

D.1/W8. Ways of organizing the classroom, including rules of universal planning: didactic means (coursebooks and educational packages), didactic aids- choice and selection of educational resources, including electronic, foreign, educational application of media and Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

D.1/W9. Didactic methods used in the taught subject or course and the importance of shaping the competence of responsible and critical used of digital media and respect for copyrights.

In the area of skills: the graduate can

D.1/U7. select the methods and didactic means, including ICT based techniques and activities, engaging learners and taking into consideration their different educational needs

In the area of social competences: the graduate is ready to

D.1/K4. promote a responsible and critical application of digital media and respect copyrights

² The symbol refers to the concrete section of the document.

D1/K8 build the habit of systematic studying and using different sources of knowledge, including the Internet (“Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 July 2019 on the Standard of Initial Teacher Education” p. 20)³

However, indirectly IT based competencies are not only applicable but rather inevitable in many other learning outcomes, just to give a few more examples from the section on social competences:

The graduate is ready to D.1/K5. shape the ability to cooperate among students, including group problem solving; D.1/K6. build the system of values and to develop ethical and shape communication competences and cultural habits; D.1/K7. develop learners’ curiosity, activity and independence in cognition and logical and critical thinking skills; D.1/K9. stimulate/encourage learners’ life-long learning skills and autonomy. (“Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 July 2019 on the Standard of Initial Teacher Education” p. 20).

One cannot imagine developing not only the above mentioned skills but also others in terms of knowledge and skills nowadays without the use of ICT; therefore, it is very important that the process of program/course development should incorporate practical application of ICT in education with the focus on “learning by doing” approach.

Research Focus

The research focused on examining the effectiveness of the online teaching process during COVID-19 at the tertiary level of education with the learning aims addressed at the qualifications to teach and support learners (of EFL) with special needs, and at the primary level of education where the virtual environment teaching was confronted with real life challenges.

³ The Authors’ own translation; W stands for Knowledge, U stands for Skills.

Methodology of Research

The research aimed at collecting data from three case studies conducted in Poland: two at the SWPS University and one in the primary school in Warsaw. It was based mainly on lesson observations and follow-up discussions and evaluation. The research involved both theoretical and practical stages with the in-between mock teaching (students' micro-teaching sessions). The research shows how the context of preservice teacher training in the COVID-19 conditioned environment was shaped by not only technological challenges but also by the needs and expectations of learners.

IT Based EFL Teaching and Teacher Training at SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland- Case Study 1

The case study concerns a semester long course run at SWPS University in Warsaw in the academic year 2020–2021 as a part of the graduate program for students / EFL teacher trainees, aiming at obtaining qualifications to teach in the Polish system of education. The course was titled *Computer Assisted Language Teaching* and was conducted on the Moodle platform and Google Classroom/Meet. Originally planned for the blended mode, because of the pandemic, it was managed via Google meet option 100% online. The seven participants of the course were 2nd year M.A. day studies students.

The students' aim was to design on the Moodle platform a module addressed to EFL teachers on the chosen aspect of TEFL: i. e. different challenges and problems of a modern digital teacher of English (technical problems, special needs learners, language anxiety, individual needs, mixed ability groups, lack of motivation/creativity, etc.) The course operated on two levels: individual and global as students worked individually on the modules (topics/ "chapters") and cooperated (forming a community of practice) to produce a coherent and interactive online course content for teachers and teacher trainees (on the e-learning platform), content that included a variety of practical solutions for a modern teacher of EFL (working in different modalities of the language classroom) ("Course description").

The course syllabus included, among others, the following learning objectives and assessment tasks (Table 1):

Table 1

Computer Assisted Language Teaching course learning objectives and assessment tasks

Symbols of learning outcomes for subject domain ⁴	Program learning outcomes	Assessment task
W1, W2	Students have up-to-date knowledge of relevant tools and methodology for TEFL with IT, on-going research in using IT in TEFL, and limitations in using IT in TEFL.	Microteaching
U3	Students can design activities, search, incorporate, and document information and arguments from different sources, including reliable online sources. They can also use Internet technologies, including the e-learning platform, digital coursebooks, libraries, databases and dictionaries, and IWBs.	Preparing and conducting micro/peer-teaching activities/lesson sequences, Google Classroom/ Moodle design, class/home assignments
U4	Students can independently plan and carry out projects typical of the profession of a teacher, such as collaboration, field-study, and observation.	Moodle based module/ syllabus/activity design and implementation, home assignment
U6	Students possess basic knowledge in the area of assessment of services associated with educational activity, including the ability to evaluate the efficiency of teaching aids and technology in ELT.	Class/home assignment, discussion

Source: *Computer Assisted Language Teaching* SWPS University course syllabus.

The course organization was based on four main stages: 1. Lead in to the course (with reference to students' previous knowledge and skills obtained during: *IT in Education 1,2 and 3* courses, *Psychological Aspects of Language Teaching, Pedagogical Diagnosis, Success and Failure of Language Learning*), *Language Teaching Methods and Techniques, Language Education in Europe*), 2. Online workshops: designing own modules on the e-learning platform, 3. Preparation to micro/peer teaching sessions (including reflection on and anticipation of possible problems), 4. Micro/peer teaching sessions, 5. Course summary and evaluation.

Before starting the design process, students were asked to brainstorm to come up with the selection of topics and identify the relations between the chosen topics. Because the course was 100% online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the activity was conducted with the use of Jamboard tool (Figure 1):

⁴ Learning outcomes for the subject domain are specified in the Polish Qualifications Framework.

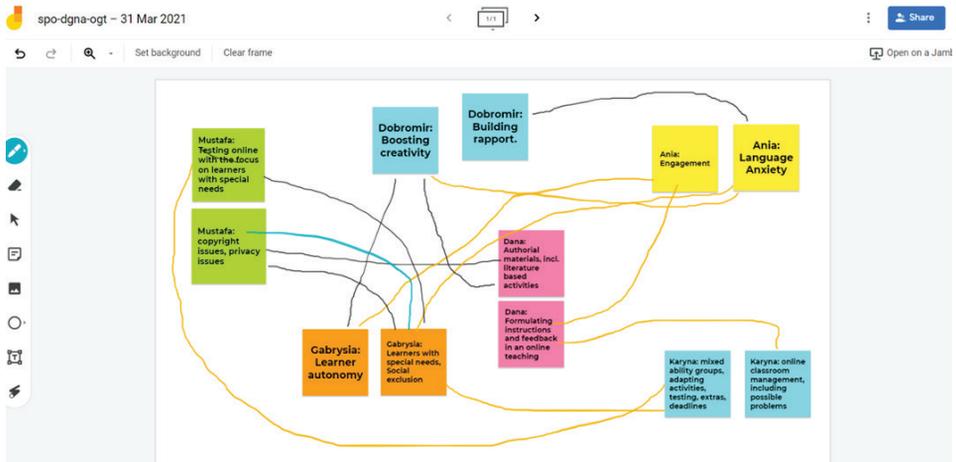


Figure 1. Stage 1 activity: Brainstorming for the selection of topics.

Source: Class materials <https://classroom.google.com/> (access date 31 March 2021).

The main focus/aim of course was to organize and supervise students' time, space, content and interaction in the process of designing modules (ca. 60 minute long lessons on the Moodle platform) devoted to the selected problems and challenges and addressed at fellow teacher trainees and teachers of EFL. Teacher trainees were given the status of "Teachers" for the course duration, so they could edit the content. The distribution of content was governed by students' own preferences, experience and needs to foster engagement in Dornyei's (2017: min. 7:41) understanding of the term, meaning motivation plus implementation) and creativity. As a result, the course consisted of 12 topics (modules), providing interactive content adjusted to both teacher and pupil perspective (source: Learn Online at <https://learnonline.swps.edu.pl/course/view.php?id=2097>)

1. Building rapport, closeness, emotional contact, communication online, feedback from learners to teachers
2. Boosting creativity of learners
3. How to deal with language anxiety factor?
4. Engagement in online teaching
5. Authorial materials, including literature based activities
6. Formulating instructions and feedback in online teaching
7. Usefulness of traditional materials in the online classroom, copyrights issues & privacy issues
8. Testing online with the focus on learners with special needs
9. Online classroom management
10. Mixed abilities groups
11. Learners with special needs, e.g. dyslexia, low self-esteem, social exclusion
12. Building learners autonomy and self-study skills

For the purpose of this study, we will take a closer look at Module 11 designed by the student Gabriela (Figure 2):

PART I: LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Let's take a closer look at some of the learning difficulties that you may encounter while working with students.

DYSLEXIA

WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

- What is Dyslexia and How Does it Affect the Reading Process
- Signs of dyslexia in the classroom
- General teaching tips
- Online learning advantages for students with dyslexia

APHASIA

HOW APHASIA AFFECTS THE BRAIN

- Some tips on how to work with students with aphasia

Read the article below and summarise what you learned about aphasia in a form of a Jamboard.

- APHASIA – OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES**
- Link to the Jamboard

Watch two videos below to find out about different tools, websites etc. that you can use while teaching online. This may be useful later on in the module.

BEST WEBSITES FOR Distance Learning

TOP 7 APPS & WEBSITES FOR TEACHERS

Figure 2. Module 11Topic: Learners with Special Needs

S o u r c e: Course materials, <https://learnonline.swps.edu.pl/course/view.php?id=2097>.

In her module, the teacher trainee focuses on designing authorial materials for techniques of individualizing teaching of learners of English with special needs, such as: dyslexia, aphasia, low self-esteem or suffering from social exclusion. Methods and techniques of working with special needs learners, pedagogical diagnosis- these topics are obviously present in the ministerial recommendations and requirements (compare section: B.2.W6.). The novelty is to train teachers of English to design their own and use available IT based materials for teaching so that they match the individual aims of their courses, needs of the pupils. Moreover, it is necessary to provide guidance in the application of these materials. The author of the module provides a variety of IT based resources (online files, handouts, links to webinars, videos, articles) and stimulates critical thinking (discussions in the form of forums, comparing and note taking, brainstorming with the Google tool Jamboard, reflection based written and oral activities) to provide general teaching tips and recommendations when teaching online. In this section, she particularly focuses on practicing and improving reading skills of learners with special needs.

The second section of the module deals with social exclusion, in particular with reference to the EFL classroom, school achievement, and the role of ICT (Figure 3):

PART II: SOCIAL EXCLUSION

An illustration showing a person with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a blue shirt, standing in a circle. Three hands from the left are reaching towards the person, with one hand pointing away from them, symbolizing social exclusion.

Social exclusion also known as social marginalization is the process in which individuals or people are systematically blocked from (or denied full access to) various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to **members** of a different **group**, and which are fundamental to social integration and observance of human rights within that within that particular **group**.

Social exclusion can be connected to a person's social class, race, skin colour, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, educational status, childhood relationships, living standards or appearance. Such exclusionary forms of discrimination may also apply to people with a disability, minorities, transgender people etc.

- 📄 Social exclusion and ELT classroom
- 📄 Social exclusion and school achievement
- 📄 The role of ICT in social exclusion
- How to deal with social exclusion in the ELT classroom?**
 - 1. Cooperative learning**
 - 📄 Online Collaborative Learning Strategies
 - 📄 Why Collaborative Online Learning Activities Are Effective?
 - 📄 Cooperative Learning In Inclusive Classrooms
 - Take a look at the file with different cooperative learning activities and try to design a short activity yourself (you can use materials you already have but adapt them to the online environment by using ICT tools).
 - Good luck! :)
 - 📄 Example activities
 - 📄 Exercise

Figure 3. Module 11 Part 2

Source: Course materials, <https://learnonline.swps.edu.pl/course/view.php?id=2097>.

It is important to notice at this point that the whole course can be delivered in the following modes, depending on the current teaching context: 100% self-study, 100% online (Moodle plus Meet with the teacher present), blended (traditional classroom + Moodle obligatory or optional). The course can be recycled each semester or year after necessary updates. The three scenarios of the module delivery were practiced by students in the last but one stage of the course *Computer Assisted Language Teaching* in the task peer/micro-teaching. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, since teaching at SWPS University was 100% online at that time; students performed via Google meet and screen sharing option with all participants being logged into the Moodle platform. Additionally, the class was observed by another teacher who provided valuable feedback in the last part, i.e. course, module evaluation (Figure 4):

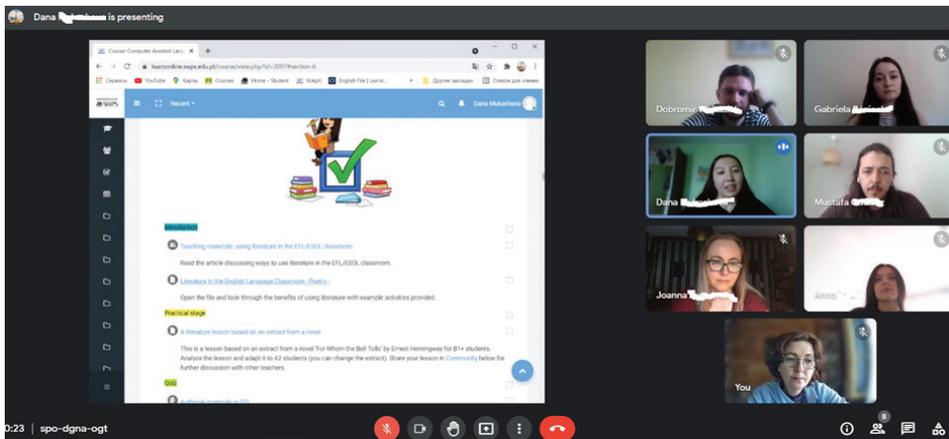


Figure 4. Screenshot of Google classroom based meet: Peer teaching sessions

S o u r c e : <https://classroom.google.com/>.

Basic Knowledge on Specific Learning Difficulties and Co-Occurring Neurodevelopmental Disorders: *Pedagogical Diagnosis* Course- Case Study 2

To become a fully equipped professional who has the necessary knowledge and the tools to teach foreign languages, teacher trainees must be aware of the specific learning difficulties they may encounter when working with the young learners. Therefore, the 20 hours long course on *Pedagogical Diagnosis* has been incorporated into the study program for the SWPS University students. The main

aim of the course was to introduce students with various issues related to diagnosing, supporting and educating children with different kinds of learning difficulties.

The major learning outcomes of the course have been included in the course syllabus and described in detail with regard to the three areas: knowledge, skills and social competences.

In the area of knowledge, the graduate should:

W6. have structured knowledge of different types of learning difficulties in primary and secondary school children
W5. gain elementary knowledge of individual emotional and social difficulties exhibited by children with learning difficulties

W6. have basic knowledge of various diagnostic methods applied in special education in the Polish and British educational system.

In terms of skills, the graduate should:

U6. be able to apply and integrate theoretical knowledge from the realm of special education and related sciences in order to analyze complex problems of SEN children and to diagnose their developmental problems

U6/U7. know how to read and use psychological opinions in order to design adequate educational interventions

U6. be able to prepare an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) for a child with learning difficulties based on their knowledge of elementary theories, terminology and resources in the field of special education.

In the area of social competences, the graduate should:

K4. be capable of communicating via various channels and techniques with other specialists (teachers, methodologists, school psychologists) both in Polish and in the foreign language.

K1. understand the need for life-long learning and constant self-development as a Learning Support teacher (*Pedagogical Diagnosis* course syllabus SWPS University).

At the end of the course, students were asked to prepare an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) based on a profile of a student with specific learning difficulties and on their knowledge of different types of learning difficulties. They had to present it during a short oral test at the end of the course justifying their choice of targets in the IEP.

The course was primarily intended to be conducted in-person in order to provide the EFL teacher trainees with some strategies and possible resources that they could personally experiment with. However, due to the COVID-related restrictions, it was shifted to the virtual reality and it was run via Google Classroom/Meet.

Evaluation of the course was required at the end of it. It showed that the course had been highly perceived by the students. As they all had already had some experience with working with the special needs students, they found the course informative and useful. Selected materials presented during the classes were used by some of the students in their modules addressed to EFL teachers. During oral evaluation, students reported that they had learnt a lot during the classes and that such a course is not only interesting and practical but the necessary part of the study program. However, they believed that it should be extended as 20 hours does not seem sufficient to cover all the areas of special needs.

The areas covered within the course were as follows: specific learning difficulties and co-occurring neurodevelopmental disorders such as: dyslexia, dyscalculia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), developmental co-ordination disorder (dyspraxia), different forms of speech impairment (e.g. aphasia, apraxia, stuttering), Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), and social and emotional difficulties.

Prevalence of SLD and Co-Morbid Neurodevelopmental Disorders

The aforementioned specific learning difficulties and co-occurring neurodevelopmental disorders seem very common nowadays when the awareness of their existence has increased significantly in society (Zingoni et al. 2021). According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, DSM-V), the prevalence of Specific Learning Disorders is around 5–15% among the school-age children across different languages and cultures (Khodeir et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines them as “a neurodevelopmental learning disorder characterized by significant and persistent difficulties in learning academic skills, which may include reading, writing, or arithmetic” (ICD-11, 6A03). Those difficulties do not stem from a disorder in intellectual development, sensory impairment, neurological or motor impairments, socio-cultural opportunity or limited access to education, and they may affect child’s overall performance in a negative way (ICD-11, 6A03) .

The most common form of SLDs is dyslexia and it constitutes around 80% of all the cases of SLDs (Kohli et al., 2018). Data obtained from the Connecticut Longitudinal Study have shown that dyslexia affects around 17.5% of the population (Shaywitz et al., 1998, Shaywitz et al., 1999). The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as a

specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (IDA).

Among the psychiatric co-morbidity with Specific Learning Difficulties, ADHD came to the first position (Khodeir et al., 2020). According to WHO, “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is characterized by a persistent pattern (at least 6 months) of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that has a direct negative impact on academic, occupational, or social functioning” (ICD-11, 6A05). Regular reviews prepared by the researchers show that the ADHD “prevalence globally is between 2% and 7%, with an average of around 5%.” However, it is estimated that at least a further 5% of the school-aged children display significant difficulties with physical hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity that are very close to meeting the full diagnostic criteria for ADHD (Sayal et al., 2018).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is also a very common neurodevelopmental disorder. Jinan Zeidan claims that approximately 1/100 children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder around the world (Zeidan, et al., 2022). ASD is defined as a disorder “characterized by persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of [behavior], interests or activities that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual’s age and sociocultural context” (ICD-11, 6A02).

To conclude, all the data mentioned above show that Specific Learning Difficulties and co-occurring neurodevelopmental disorders are very common worldwide among the school-aged children. Therefore, the teachers working in the mainstream education are very likely to encounter such problems during their professional journey and they should be well-prepared to deal with them in a professional and efficient manner. Consequently, the program of study should be designed in a way to equip graduates with the necessary knowledge and tools.

The Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching Pupils with Special Needs-The British School in Warsaw Perspective- Case Study 3

Chaos that followed the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic particularly affected special needs / learning support teachers who, in those exceptional circumstances, were still required to provide high-quality services; remotely monitor the progress of their pupils, and ensure the implementation of the targets contained in the IEP. If the authorities required school buildings to close down, it was not possible to provide the SEN student with in-person learning and a one-on-one aide, even if their Individual Educational Program (IEP) recommended it. It also revealed the necessity of the close and regular cooperation with the parents who were often expected to support pupils in their lessons and give regular feedback to the teachers, in this way becoming more responsible for their child's educational process.

One of the greatest challenges of pandemic times was cooperation with 1:1 assistants (shadow teachers) who could not stay in close contact with pupils under their care. The lack of physical contact very often prevented those students from fully participating in the lessons. As a result, many pupils with special needs were unable to meet the requirements of the curriculum and the gap between them and their peers was getting wider. One of the authors of the article is a practitioner working in The British School, Warsaw. As an active Learning Support teacher and the Head of the Learning Support department, she had a chance to witness the struggle of her pupils with special needs. The British School (TBS) in Warsaw is a very specific example of an educational establishment in Poland. It provides education in English following the British National Curriculum. It also provides support for students with various learning difficulties making sure that they can participate in the mainstream education. Pupils with diagnosed special needs receive additional learning support either individually, in a small group setting or in-class.

The majority of students with dyslexia experienced significant problems when working online. They reported difficulties with following the pace of the lessons; however, they felt uncomfortable asking for help publicly. They also felt embarrassed to post any writing tasks in a chat box for fear of being ridiculed by their peers who would notice their spelling mistakes. Consequently, they tried their best to conceal that they were underachieving. As a result, many of them decided to either miss the lessons they were finding challenging or to switch the cameras off and do not participate actively in them. Many of them struggled also with using technology, e.g. joining break-out rooms on a Teams Platform or adding homework to the system.

One of the groups that was most affected by the pandemic was that of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Some research conducted after the first lockdowns show that school closures and other COVID-19 related restrictions resulted in worsening of symptoms among children with ADHD and they also affected interaction patterns within family in a negative way (Shah et al., 2021). Various difficulties were expressed by TBS students with diagnosed ADHD. They reported they had found it challenging to sit still in a lesson and focus on given tasks. They were often unable to complete the tasks and upload them on a system. They felt tempted to switch to doing other things during the lessons such as playing computer games, visiting different websites (not always appropriate), and watching YouTube videos. They tended to join the lessons with their cameras switched off; they often missed important information and were unable to work individually or in a group.

The greatest challenge reported by the learning support teachers in TBS was working with pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Problems with verbal communication significantly disturbed their learning process as well as the limited ability to follow the rules of working in a virtual reality. Disruptive behaviors prevented those pupils from participating in many group activities. Moreover, the lack of physical contact with the class teacher or a shadow teacher had a great and negative impact on their concentration and ability to complete given tasks. As the COVID-19 situation and moving to virtual learning was sudden and unexpected, there were no procedures regarding virtual lessons that teachers could follow. TBS teachers were expected to ensure that the lessons were led in as much professional manner as possible. Those exceptional circumstances required unique solutions: the IEP meetings were held online, parents had to be more involved and additional lessons were offered to the students with greatest difficulties. Nevertheless, due to the increasing difficulties of students with special needs, after several months of the lockdown, many of them were allowed to return to school whilst adhering to the safety protocols put in place in the school due to COVID-19.

All the above-mentioned observations from the virtual learning experience were presented to the SWPS University students to during the course on *Pedagogical Diagnosis* in order to raise their awareness of various difficulties and challenges associated with working virtually with the SEN pupils. The main aim was to prepare teacher trainees for the reality of working in a living classroom environment in which pupils' needs would be recognized and addressed adequately. The major idea is that graduates become more sensitive to potential problems and more creative in terms of developing a plan of action tailored to the needs of theirs pupils. Teacher competence encompasses the ability to see each student in a wider perspective, understand their struggle and the need for individualized approach.

Conclusions

COVID-19 teaching context (years: 2020-2021) has convinced the unconvinced that technology in the hands of pupils/students/teachers/teacher trainees is a must that, in fact, can bring many beneficial changes also in the post-pandemic context, such as: “from teaching push, to [learning pull], [f]rom [t]eacher [a]uthority to [learner autonomy], [f]rom [c]ontent creation, to [content curation] (O’Driscoll, 2020: min. 41:55).

Teachers at SWPS University had been trained and used Moodle platform and other IT based tools for many years before 2019, and had worked out the best methods and techniques to provide effective teaching and equip students with the necessary and up to date competences. In fact, nowadays we cannot imagine effective communication whether inside or outside classroom without these tools and only with pen and paper based options. However, we must realize that our students, digital natives (Prensky) can also teach us teachers a lot, so giving them the authority of teachers in such courses as the one described above, can result in long-lasting community of practice with a platform of vast and useful resources and networks.

The paper emerged from the comparison of the Polish and American academic perspectives on the educational inclusion strategies developed and put into practice during COVID-19 and based on the data collected during transitioning of the content to online environments. Teaching students with learning difficulties has been a challenge for many educators as it requires not only adequate qualifications but also creativity in preparing entertaining lessons adjusted to their individual needs. COVID-19 pandemic presented the teachers with new and even greater challenges that they had to face virtually and overcome using technology. Online teaching turned out to be the only available solution; therefore, it had to develop to include every student in the education system and cater for their needs.

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Agnieszka Gadomska, Iris Drower, Dorota Pietrzyk

Kształcenie nauczycieli a sytuacja uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi – doświadczenia z okresu pandemii COVID-19 w USA i Polsce

Streszczenie

W 2021 roku z powodu COVID-19 wielu pedagogów, nauczycieli, studentów i uczniów na całym świecie zmierzyło się z wyzwaniem nauczania/uczenia się online i wymaganiami a także ograniczeniami środowiska wirtualnego. Było to jednak szczególnie trudne dla nauczycieli uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, terapeutów i pedagogów szkolnych. Musieli oni zapewnić wysoce zindywidualizowane nauczanie i wsparcie bez kontaktu bezpośredniego (lub z jego ograniczoną formą) kontaktem bezpośrednim. Artykuł dotyczy podnoszenia umiejętności oraz zdobywania kwalifikacji przez nauczycieli, niezbędnych do prowadzenia edukacji opartej na TiK skierowanej w szczególności do uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi. Autorzy analizują (z perspektywy polskiej i amerykańskiej) kontekst edukacyjny, przygotowanie nauczycieli do pracy w środowisku uwarunkowanym COVID-19, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem nauczycieli języka angielskiego jako języka obcego (którzy chcą zdobyć kwalifikacje nauczycielskie do nauczania w polskich szkołach publicznych).

Słowa kluczowe: kwalifikacje nauczycielskie, przygotowanie do zawodu nauczyciela, uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, e-learning, nauka online

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Подготовка педагогов и положение учащихся с особыми образовательными потребностями: опыт пандемии COVID-19 в США и Польше

Аннотация

Переход в 2021 году к преподаванию онлайн и к виртуальной среде в связи с COVID-19 был сложным для многих работников образования, учителей, студентов и учеников во всем мире. Однако особенно трудно пришлось учителям учающихся с особыми образовательными потребностями, школьным терапевтам и консультантам. Им приходилось обеспечивать высоко-индивидуализированное обучение, обслуживание с ограниченным контактом или же вовсе бесконтактное. В данной статье рассматривается квалификация преподавателей необходимая для обеспечения образования обучающихся на основе ИКТ, особенно учащихся с особыми

потребностями (с американской и польской точек зрения). Авторы анализируют контекст предварительной подготовке преподавателей в условиях COVID-19, уделяя особое внимание учителям английского языка как иностранного, которые хотят получить специализированную квалификацию для преподавания в польских государственных школах.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: педагогическая квалификация, подготовка к профессии учителя, учащиеся с особыми образовательными потребностями, электронное обучение, онлайн-обучение

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Capacitación de docentes y estudiantes con necesidades especiales en los Estados Unidos y Polonia: la experiencia de COVID-19

R e s u m e n

En 2021, la transición a la enseñanza en línea y el entorno virtual debido a la pandemia del COVID-19 fue un desafío para muchos educadores, maestros, estudiantes y alumnos por todo el mundo. No obstante, tal fenómeno fue especialmente difícil para los profesores de alumnos con necesidades educativas especiales y los terapeutas y consejeros escolares, quienes tenían que proporcionar una enseñanza y un servicio altamente individualizados sin contacto cara a cara, o con un contacto muy limitado. Desde la perspectiva de los Estados Unidos y Polonia, este artículo analiza las cualificaciones docentes necesarias para proporcionar una educación basada en las TIC, en particular a los alumnos con necesidades. Los autores analizan el contexto de la formación inicial de docentes en un entorno condicionado por la COVID-19, con especial atención a docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera que desean obtener calificaciones docentes para enseñar en las escuelas públicas polacas.

P a l a b r a s c l a v e: calificación docente, formación inicial de docentes, estudiantes con necesidades especiales, e-learning, aprendizaje en línea