Case Study of a Student with Disabilities in a Vocational School during the Period of Online Virtual Classes due to Covid-19

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Abstract

In this research we will get an insight into the achievements in mastering foreign languages for one specific student with difficulties. The student with disabilities, the foreign language teacher, the student's mother and the educational rehabilitator participated in the research. The teacher states the support of the inclusive secondary vocational school that the student attends and copes with all challenges. One of the methods used in teaching was mobile learning during the three-month online teaching period of pandemic situation caused by Covid-19. During this period Croatia was forced for the first time in history to implement online teaching. For the purpose of this study all of the students besides this student attended classes in the virtual classroom called Edmodo. Edmodo is the mobile application which is considered as a tool for mobile learning. Mobile learning means that students use their portable devices in order to learn. The interview, used as a method of data collection, was written by participants via email due to the required physical distancing. The materials were then transcribed and a quantitative data analysis was performed. Difficulties in the work of foreign language teachers have been identified, such as lack of experience, lack of teaching assistants as well as lack of additional teaching aids and specific materials and the specific teachers' training for teaching in the contemporary inclusive school. At the end, the authors suggest guidelines for teachers in vocational schools in adopting new skills and competences in their teaching process in an inclusive school.

Keyword: foreign language teacher, inclusive school, mobile learning, training

1. Introduction

On 16 March 2020, due to the coronavirus epidemic situation in Croatia, regular classes were interrupted and online classes were launched. Virtual classrooms were first opened in the County of Istria, and afterwards in the rest of Croatia. However, students are supposed to attend the virtual classrooms, which are supposed to be modified by the teachers themselves depending on the subject they teach. For the purpose of this study the mobile application Edmodo was chosen because of its simplicity of usage and availability because some of the students do not have their own laptops or share them with the rest of their families. Furthermore, the application itself has the same "appearance" like the famous social networking site Facebook, so it was close to all the students. The teachers were faced for the first time to implement the Online virtual classes instead of regular classes for the students with disabilities as well but this time those students did not have their personal assistants to encourage and help them. The teachers had to cope with many challenges during the whole period of pandemic Covid-19. According to the guidelines sent by the Ministry on 12 March 2020, online classes were organized.

According to Karamatić-Brčić (2011) the countries of Europe and the world emphasize the importance of inclusion in education at all levels of the educational system through national curricula and other educational policy documents. Educational inclusion is a requirement that expands and deepens the educational model of integration of children with disabilities into regular schooling.

Karamatić-Brčić & Viljac (2018) claim that a key prerequisite for a successful inclusion process at the level of school practice is a positive attitude of teachers towards the implementation and enforcement of inclusion. The same authors

state that the inclusion of children with disabilities in the educational system is called educational integration. The concept of educational inclusion expands and deepens the model of educational integration in theoretical considerations and practical solutions. Inclusion refers to the process of addressing and respecting the needs of all students, including students with disabilities and students with talents, but also children belonging to national minorities. Inclusion is should be looked upon through educational dimension trying to provide maximum involvement of all children in the educational process and the wider community. Škrobo (2015) states that children are born with the fundamental rights and freedoms as all human beings. Thus, children with disabilities have all the aforementioned rights, and require even more attention of the society as they need more help and support. Therefore, they are supposed to get the equal educational opportunities. Today, many equate the phrases "children with special needs" and "children with disabilities." However, these are not synonyms. The author claims that the society has the interest in the wider educational inclusion, because some factors of protection against the occurrence of risky behaviours are togetherness and cooperation. Romstein's (2010a) review paper shows that there is no single point of view of what inclusion really means, but there are many perspectives that are often considered as vague or contradictory. The two dominant perspectives among them are the individual and the social ones. Individual perspective interprets it as the inclusion of children with special needs / difficulties in everyday life, which implies their normalization and assimilation. The social perspective, although being explicitly focused on the well-being of the individual, also supports the subordination of special needs / difficulties.

According to Luckasson et al. (2002) intellectual disabilities represent a significant limitation in intellectual functioning, including adaptive skills, which also means coping with problems in different situations (in Soudil-Prokopec, 2015). Soudil-Prokopec (2015) claims that the assessment of intellectual functioning requires clinical assessment and individual intelligence testing conducted by psychologists. Intellectual difficulties are manifested in difficult judgment, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, decision making, academic learning, but also learning from experience. Students with intellectual disabilities experience problems in the cognitive development, socio-emotional development, moral development, motor development, speech, perception and attention. The intellectual disabilities reflect on all life situations. World Health Organization (WHO, 2008) states four levels of intellectual disabilities: 1. mild intellectual disabilities, 2. moderate intellectual disabilities, 3. severe intellectual disabilities, 4. profound intellectual disabilities. Soudil-Prokopec (2015) in addition notes one more category of intellectual disabilities that is so-called borderline intelligence, which is most often the result of brain damage during intrauterine development or during childbirth, but also occurs as a result of neglect.

The psychosocial characteristics of a child with motor impairment also depend on many factors, but usually include the feelings of depression, helplessness and dependence, inferiority and low tolerance for frustration. These emotions are caused partially by the physical state of the person, but they are also the consequences of the external (social) factors such as overprotection in the family, isolation, numerous hospitalizations, barriers in the environment in the form of negative attitudes and architectural barriers (Soudil-Prokopec, 2015).

According to Kukulshka-Hulme (2009) the use of mobile phones and other portable devices is beginning to have an impact on how learning occurs in many different contexts like language learning. The advantage is that the learners are not dependent on access to fixed computers. Although it sometimes crosses the border between formal and informal learning, it creates the potential for significant change in teaching and learning practices. Alongside formal education, everyday opportunities to access learning resources on mobile devices have multiplied. It is possible to download resources and many websites that can be accessed on the go. In practice, there are issues of cost and usability that often stand in the way of such self-initiated mobile learning.

Prensky (2001) states that today's students, due to the new technological environment and the quantity of interactions, think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors, but most educators are not aware of the depth of these differences. Contrary to Prensky (2001) the author Bartelsen (2011) claims that mobile learning is nothing new, for him reading a book in the train and learning something on the way was also mobile learning. Furthermore, the different perspectives show that mobile learning means all portable devices (like Smart Phones, Tablets and Laptops) which are used for learning informally and formally by students.

2. Theoretical Background

Frederickson and Cline (2002) list the main impacts on inclusive education: (1) human rights movements in the 1960s, (2) changing the way people look at people with disabilities; (3) non-existent scientific evidence on the advantages of schools for students with disabilities; (4) focus on similarities between children with disabilities and other children, rather than on differences. UNESCO statement in the year 1994 goes that inclusion and participation

are the key to human dignity and the implementation of human rights. In education, this is reflected in the development of strategies that equalize opportunities. The upbringing of children is not only the task of the parents, but also the institution that the child attends, which would mean that the function of upbringing with the parents is performed by kindergartens, preschools and schools. The main aim of education is not always the same and it usually depends on the social context it is situated in.

Therefore, the family has retained some of its core functions such as: reproduction, economic security, socialization, emotional support, and maintaining orderly relationships among its members (Valjan-Vukić, 2009). According to the author, given the structure, there are some visible differences between traditional and modern families, which include single parents, extramarital affairs and new families after divorce. The changes taking place in modern society leave the school less and less space and opportunities to become or remain a humane and social community. A sense of trust and support between students, teachers and parents is the foundation of establishing partnerships, while their lack results in risky behaviour. The path to the overall development of children requires quality communication between families and schools, deepening their cooperation, developing the social competencies of teachers and parents through various forms of training.

According to Lindsay (2013) the International legislation in many European countries promotes inclusive education for students with special needs by educating them together with their peers in regular schools, instead of sending them to special schools or special classes, but each state defines their own implementation of inclusive education. Still the support for inclusion lies generally on two basic presuppositions: the right of children to inclusion in regular schools, and the fact that inclusive education is more effective than segregated education (Schmidt & Vrhovnik, 2005).

Inclusion empowers the change of school culture, policies and practices, and responds to student diversity in the local community by reducing barriers for learning and participation of all students to provide the well-being on a wider scale through the acceptance of diversity among students (Livazović, Alispahić, Terović, 2015).

According to Ivančić and Stančić (2013) an inclusive school culture ensures that every child has the same right no matter of their national, cultural, language, social or any other difference, as well as the students' abilities. Although student functioning depends on various factors such as personality traits, family socioeconomic conditions, duration of involvement in rehabilitation, etc., there are some special features for each student with disabilities that may affect knowledge acquisition and involvement in the teaching process. Knowing the peculiarities of functioning makes an impact on the selection of appropriate teaching strategies and the support that students need during the teaching process (Romstein and Soudil-Prokopec, 2018).

Inclusive schools include pedagogical practises that enable each student to feel "respected, confident and safe so he or she can learn and develop to his or her full potential" (Das, Sarkar, 2015:383).

Goodley et al. (2018:213) state that "a body's capacities – the things it can and cannot do – are always contextual and relational (think technology, material resources, communities of support)". The same authors claim that embodied affects (e.g. joy) and visceral sensations (e.g. pain) can affect the discursive thoughts a body has and the words it speaks.

2.1 Edmodo

In order to enhance students' motivation mobile application Edmodo is used because of its simplicity. "Edmodo is an online learning environment" because it is an interactive process where the student is assisted by others (teachers or peers) to acquire knowledge or skills which they cannot acquire without any assistance (Inayati, (2019:111). Furthermore, Evenddy, S., & Hamer, W. (2016) state that that Edmodo is one of social media which can be operated by students, teachers or lecturers, and parents. It can be used to post various assignments and students can trace their learning achievements easily which are related to teaching learning process. One such way of student learning in the new era is with the help of the formation of virtual learning communities which are greatly facilitated by numerous social learning networking sites. These sites are a common feature of the practice of online learning (Marimuthu, R., Chone, L. S., Heng, L. T., & Terng, H. F. (2017).

3. Research

The major aim of this research was to develop a mainstreaming model feasible within the Croatian educational system. It was conducted in a public secondary school in Croatia, the city situated in the eastern part of Croatia, involving the foreign language teacher, who teaches English as foreign language 1 and German as foreign language 2, the educational rehabilitator the student with special needs and student's mother.

3.1 Methodology

Research aim

The aim of this research is to analyse the support that a student with disabilities receives in high school in English and German courses and whether there are any differences in support with regard to personal characteristics of the student, teacher, mother, and educational rehabilitator.

Research Questions

1 How does the online teaching/learning affect student's achievements?

2 Is his mother more satisfied with his own participation in the class during the pandemic situation of Covid-19 than before?

Instrument: A semi-structured interview was used in this study.

Procedure

The research was conducted in a vocational high school in the period of three years of student's education. Participants could choose whether to complete the interview in a paper form or online version. The situation was exceptional due to the Covid-19 crisis during the second semester of the school year 2019/2020. All participants were informed about the method of fulfilment and the willingness to participate is emphasised. They also fulfilled the agreement on voluntary participation. Both the student's mother and the educational rehabilitator were contacted via phone call and were also interviewed.

3.2 The Mother's Interview

English language teaching in high school is much better in terms of communication between the teacher and the entire professional team. In elementary school, my son had a problem with communication between the teacher and the class. He fits in online classes great and doesn't ask for any extra help. He has problems with fine motor skills and communication with students and teachers. He suffered the lack of oxygen at birth. He is quite withdrawn and silent. The reason for this is ridicule in elementary school.

If there are any problems, the mother is informed, the same goes for praise. The mother is very pleased with the communication with the foreign language teacher as well as the educational rehabilitator and is becoming more independent and does not need any additional help with performing tasks. What is very important that he has no difficulty in learning both English and German while he has some difficulties with the school subject computer typing. He likes doing tasks in Edmodo classroom during the period Online classed due to Covid-19. He prefers working on his own without anyone's help. The family situation has changed since his parents divorced but it did not affect his achievements at school. The mother thinks that he is not influenced by the peers and that he is very happy when the teachers praise him and not criticise him.

"I am very satisfied with the teaching in the school and the communication with the teachers and the whole school team, compared to the primary school where we repeatedly appealed to the problems that my son encountered and which were neglected. As I have a younger son at the age of 10, who attends the same primary school, the situation in that school has not changed. Teaching online is quite difficult for my younger son, who has no difficulties. Unfortunately, my younger son needs daily help in solving tasks. The communication between teachers is non-existent, so I don't think anyone approached me during the whole online class. In the inclusive secondary school, on the other hand, maintains constant communication by teachers, educational rehabilitator, pedagogue and his class teacher. Regardless of the fact that there is a big difference in schools, i.e. secondary and primary school, classes at inclusive secondary school are much better organized and adapted to students than the school of the younger son who still goes to primary school, which I expected that classes are much easier. Therefore, my younger son constantly needs my help, while my older son in an inclusive secondary school does not need my help. When I come home from work he even helps me with the household chores".

3.3 The Student's Interview

The student finds the communication between the language teacher and him much better during the past three years than it had been in the primary school. He thinks that he does well in online classes and does not need any help. He is satisfied with the work of the teacher and I would not change anything. Now is much more independent than he was three years ago. He loves leaning online on his smart phone because he has a lot more time to complete tasks and loves quizzes. It makes him happy when he doesn't have to go to school, and unhappy when he has to go to school.

"In elementary school I didn't like the behaviour of others towards me, and in high school I don't have such

problems. In elementary school, they made fun of me for my difficulties".

In his free time, he loves going out and playing games on his smart phone, especially while these games and movies in English help him understand. His favourites are Clash royal, Brawl stars.

"Today's English teacher is better than elementary school teacher. Classes are much more relaxed and communication with the teacher is much better. In elementary school, the teacher was much stricter and there was no communication. There were problems before if the primary school teacher shouted a lot and was loud and I don't like shouting. Today's teacher solves this by talking with me".

3.4 The Educational Rehabilitator's Interview

A student from the lower grades of primary school has identified specific learning difficulties (difficulties in reading, writing and computing) and functions at the level of mild intellectual disabilities. The student also has difficulty paying attention concentration. Due to the mentioned difficulties, it is necessary for the student to reduce the scope and depth of teaching content, and apply a variety of individualized pedagogical and methodological procedures to maintain at least the minimum outcomes of the profession are directed by the administrative officer.

Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia), mild intellectual disabilities and difficulties attention and concentration. "I communicate with the student at least twice a week, and with the mother on average once a month, or more often intervals if necessary. In the second grade of high school, the student showed great progress in independence in learning and motivation for better school success, while in the third grade the focus of students was more on family problems, and the motivation to achieve educational success was somewhat lower. The student has developed significantly communication and social skills, and has a significantly higher level of self-confidence and trust in the environment".

With appropriate content and methodological adaptations of teaching contents from the English and German language, the student has no difficulties so it can be said that the student showed no significant difficulties in teaching a foreign language compared to others teaching subjects. The student has significant difficulties in the subject Computer Typing and Mathematics. Does he like to work alone or in pairs or in a group? The student prefers pair work according to my opinion, because he has a greater sense of security, and not because of difficulties in social communication suits him work in a group and group.

In the second grade I was present at one German lesson and the student was faced with the challenge of making a poster and an independent presentation of the same, on the topic "Clothing" and he showed high self-confidence, did not feel insecure or anxious (which was often self-inflicted and exposes aloud to peers and the teacher), which means that the task was completely appropriate, expected and harmonized with the possibilities of the student, the communication between the teacher and the students was pleasant, relaxed and reassuring. The class climate was pleasant and empowering for the student, and the student felt satisfied and competent enough to successfully complete the task. It is necessary to set realistic and predictable, but encouraging expectations in front of the student, which we challenge students to progress and show their real possibilities. The student prefers warm and pleasant communication, and accepts criticism well if it is aimed at better work and more successful learning strategies. This, with appropriately set learning outcomes and carefully individualized methods of work, can result in educational success, but also educational, in terms of greater self-confidence, trust in support people and peers, better social and communication skills.

3.5 The Foreign Language Teacher's Interview

Faced with working with a student with difficulty for the first time, I met a frightened boy. I was also a class teacher for the first-grade student and got to know him better. I have had no experience working with students with disabilities and now I had to organize classes in two foreign languages, English as a first foreign language and German as a second foreign language. I read a lot of literature, and I consulted with an educational rehabilitator and tried to adapt teaching methods and materials to the student's needs. The second grade was a little harder because the student was going through a difficult period, the divorce of his parents but now during the third grade of high school the student is exemplary, hardworking and excellent. Especially fascinating is that from March to the end of May in the virtual classroom Edmodo showed exceptional results and interest in all teaching content. In the beginning, I adapted the materials and sent them by email, but then I noticed that the student did not need it because in consultation with the educational rehabilitator, as long as he can follow the work with others, he does not need adjustment. The student is the first to complete all tasks on time, accurately and completely. While other students in the class are late or don't do it at all. Accordingly, I find that working in the virtual world as an Edmodo classroom is very interesting for a student and that he likes messaging communication. From the beginning I was faced to use

meta language to explain and also translate some of the difficult parts. The point is that the teacher needs to adapt to the student's needs and sometimes use metalanguage so that the student would not feel uncomfortable.

4. Discussion

The researchers state that he online teaching/learning positively affects student's achievements. Livazović (2017) states that the positive parent–teen relationship can be a protective factor in order to avoid risk behaviour and to help the parent to teach acceptable behaviours, which can be directly (through communication) or indirectly (through modelling). The same author claims that positive or negative experiences may change children's lives and impact motivation in a variety of positive and negative ways. The student was not influenced by his peers but by his parents' divorce during the second grade of vocational school, which was stated also by his educational rehabilitator and his foreign language teacher. While the authors Bratković, Bilić-Meštrović (2003) state that there is a connection between the possibility of choice (e.g. participation of persons in the desired activities) and the prevention of behavioural problems. It is pointed out in all of the interviews that the student did not have any negative experiences but on the contrary only positive ones. He is accustomed to do all the tasks and assignments alone without anyone's help. Valjan-Vukić (2009) claims that the employed woman (mother) has changed significantly the dynamics of relationships in the family, but also their own functions. Because the family is a changing social community, its structure, function, and size are constantly varied, and members of the family have to learn to cope with it, trying to avoid changes for worse in the other aspects of their lives, not letting it influence their success in some other fields. Therefore, the student's behaviour changed during the Online virtual classes because he had no problems with these online classes and he even changed his behaviour at home and became more self-confident, reliable and hard-working according to his mother's opinion. It was also stated by his mother and himself that the student likes spending his free time playing computer games in English, which helps him learn. According to Romstein (2010b) present knowledge about the way children with intellectual disabilities learn proves that the social conditions in which the child lives significantly affect his development, therefore the pedagogical and rehabilitation work have to be adapted to the programme. For example, introducing games in the teaching process makes a difference because the attitude of today's children toward their video and computer games is the very opposite of the attitude that most of them have toward school. We want interested, competitive, cooperative, results-oriented learners, actively seeking information and solutions (Prensky, 2003).

The student's mother is more satisfied with her child's participation in the class during the pandemic situation of Covid-19 than before. And she is even more satisfied with the online classes were organized by the foreign language teacher in an inclusive school for her child with disabilities than the other child in the regular program in the primary school. Moreover, she did not spend any time helping her older son in an inclusive school but unfortunately had to spend every afternoon after work working with her younger son. Kranjčec Mlinarić, Žic Ralić and Lisak (2016) showed that foreign language teacher has a positive attitude towards inclusion, but it is clear that teachers are burdened by the implementation of inclusion and do not have sufficient and systematic support and are critical of their willingness and education to work with students with difficulty. This may in part also explain the differences among teachers in providing appropriate support to students in their classes. By providing appropriate support in learning through teaching aligned with opportunities and abilities ensure the progress and development of each student. The didactic-methodical approach implies the selection of strategies and their appropriate adjustment at the level of perception, speech, cognition, and demands. Soudil-Prokopec (2015) Disorders can vary in severity, intensity, and the presence of additional symptoms. Students diagnosed with some of the learning difficulties are often of average or even above-average intelligence. What accompanies them during education is the disproportion between their intellectual potential and academic achievement, which can develop in a child a sense of frustration, low self-esteem and lead to giving up work and learning, not only during school but throughout life. Learning difficulties cannot be cured, but symptoms can be alleviated, and the key to it is support and understanding of the environment.

The students with learning difficulties often have a good collection of vocabulary and grammatical structures, but they cannot comprehend oral or written language. They can hardly express themselves orally and in writing because they lack strategies for planning, setting priorities, monitoring, predicting and self-assessment (El-Koumy & Salam, 2016). They are usually encouraged to use social networking sites which are easy and user-friendly.

Katavić & Batarelo Kokić (2017) The educational role of the school includes encouraging and monitoring the overall development of students, which includes the development of characteristics that are not measured in school, but might be crucial for a successful life. An inclusive educational environment places additional emphasis on the role of class teachers in the educational system. Kudek Mirošević (2016) emphasizes the importance of educational

inclusion, encouraging the teachers to support the development of students by using the method of experiential learning. The teacher's professional competencies are pivotal for the successful inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms (Katavić & Batarelo Kokić, 2017). As Ivančić & Stančić (2013) claim the process of implementation of inclusive school to be a long-term process. The contemporary school culture tends to be a school for all "different" children but at the same time the "same" children. Therefore, all students are supposed to have the same opportunities for equal education.

5. Conclusion

If there is an assumption of the existence of "the disproportionality studies concerning school psychology: At the aggregate level, there must be subjectivity and imprecision in the validity and reliability in disability identification and diagnosis to render results meaningless. Some failures are worse than others". The author points out at least three concerns: normal distribution assumptions, individual-level research, and lack of objective diagnostic procedures (Coker, 2020:6). Batarelo Kokić & Rukavina (2011) state that support for a different approach to learning such as a collaborative distance learning, regardless of time and place, has a significant impact on moderating critical thinking and achieving higher-level learning outcomes. The primary mode of communication in computer discussions is textual, and the difference between spoken and written communication is a key to the effective use of computer-aided communication. The student in the case study likes playing computer games and states that they helped him learn English as a foreign language. Prensky (2006) states that children want to be engaged, and their games not only engage them, but teach them valuable lessons. They teach them lessons that we want them to learn, while video and computer games are an inevitable way that children are learning to prepare themselves for their lives to come. Students with learning disabilities (LD) have significant problems in reading (Gardill, M. C., & Jitendra, A. K. (1999). Teachers in the 21st century are expected to have multiple roles: from being the role models for their students, through reflecting the educational practice, to acting in accordance with the contemporary curriculum (Blažević, 2017). Moreover, the teachers who want to stay modern and up-to-date need to have a lot of competences and they are supposed to participate in life-long learning and be ready to improve constantly. It is the only way for successful contemporary inclusive school for "all" children.

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