CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
IN THE CONTEXT OF BLENDED LEARNING

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Abstract. Blended learning becomes an approach that helps teachers to build up positive and inclusive learning environments. SEN students must get individualized support and blended learning is known as a flexible approach, that allows personalized learning and offers a great possibility of resource selection. In addition, SEN students will have the possibility to try different learning patterns (traditional classroom/online learning) that definitely will facilitate learning. However, blended learning is a new approach, so teachers will have the opportunity to experiment and reflect on the effectiveness of the learning process and develop strategies that will meet the real learning needs of SEN students and not only. Creating a positive learning environment, positive relationships, adapted learning strategies, adjusted curriculum, are elements that can lead to a successful outcome.

Key words: blended learning, positive environment, digital tools, SEN students, online, face-to-face learning, strategies, curriculum, learning needs.

PROVOCĂRI ALE EDUCAȚIEI INCLUSIVE
ÎN CONTEXTUL ÎNVĂȚĂRII MIXTE

Rezumat. Învățarea mixtă este abordarea inovativă care facilitează activitatea profesorului în contextul stringentelor sociale curente. Stilul combinat este cunoscut pentru flexibilitatea sa, iată de ce, permite profesorului să construiască medii de învățare pozitive și inclusive. Numeroasele principii ale stilului de predare mixt precum învățarea personalizată, centrată pe elev sau activități în bază de sarcini, abundența și posibilitatea de selectare și utilizare a resurselor educaționale facilitează procesul de învățare a elevilor cu necesități educaționale speciale. De asemenea, studenții CES vor avea posibilitatea de a practica diferite modele de învățare (clasă tradițională/online) cea ce va spori învățarea. Așa cum, învățarea mixtă, este o abordare nouă, profesorii vor beneficia de oportunitatea de a experimenta și reflecta asupra eficacității procesului de învățare, iar apoi, să dezvolte strategii de predare care vor satisface nevoile reale de învățare ale elevilor CES și nu numai. Crearea unui mediu pozitiv și inclusiv de învățare, strategii de învățare adaptate, curriculum ajustat, sunt elemente care pot rezulta succese.

Cuvinte cheie: învățare mixtă, mediu pozitiv, mediu inclusiv, instrumente digitale, elevi CES, învățare online, strategii, curriculum.

The pandemic situation caused some challenges that in time were transformed into difficulties for families with SEN children (children with physical or intellectual disorders). Many studies have intended to examine the impact of Covid-19 on SEN students. They showed that besides the loss of essential educational services and social engagement opportunities, the problem created by online learning was a real challenge for SEN children and their families. The studies show that SEN children isolation and online learning was a challenge that made all parts remodel and experience with learning content that has been

leading to new approaches. In this context, more parents were more likely to report changes in their child`s behavior, such as distractibility, inability to concentrate, irritability, and general discomfort. It has been concluded that the pandemic and quarantine place increased stress on SEN children and parents as online learning is a new style of learning and require high parents' support. SEN children often require more attention and support than children with typical development, that is why a new approach to teaching is needed [7].

Blended learning seems to be a proper approach as it supposes a combination between a traditional classroom and online learning. It enhances the meaningful interaction of learners and high potential in the use of resources [Garrison]. Discussing SEN children`s learning needs the blended learning approach offers both advantages and disadvantages. A great advantage is the students can work independently, at their own pace, have personalized content, but still are monitored by the teacher that can provide all the assistance, knowledge, and resources, such an educator provides. At the same time, the teacher can adjust the curriculum and deliver instruction more flexibly or creatively than in a usual classroom context. In many studies, blended learning is seen as hybrid learning that combines the best features of the traditional learning process with the advantages of online learning to deliver personalized teaching. One advantage can be the teacher`s opportunity to spend less time giving a lesson to the whole class and more time to spend with SEN children.

Being online, SEN students are supposed to use digital tools different platforms in a word online technologies and obviously, they will acquire more digital competencies and greater confidence using them. This again is an advantage as it is known technological literacy is the most need in 21-century life. Usually, remote video lessons can become an efficient way to meet SEN students learning needs. A good relationship with parents will be a need to facilitate qualitative learning. New challenges determine teachers to find new approaches in teaching, to reshape their way of teaching. It was admitted by many researchers that the blended learning approach could be a good answer for current challenges as it supposes personalized learning, flexible curriculum, collaboration, communication, and the blend between face-to-face and online learning. The CEN children would have the possibility to focus and work at their own pace, then come and interact physically, practice in the classroom, these are very important aspects that facilitate their well-being.

The teachers` main task is to identify strategies that will allow them to build an inclusive blended learning environment. It is a great challenge as it supposes a whole process of management and planning of resources and content that finally will have to correspond to the SEN children's` real needs. Creating a positive learning environment, positive relationships, adapted learning strategies, adjusted curriculum, are elements that

can lead to a successful outcome. These elements suppose a collaborative process that involves anticipation and planning plus collaborative partnership working.

The teacher must have a multidimensional view of learning situation and plan teaching learning activities taking into account these key features:

-effective management;

-different styles of learning;

-learner engagement and participation;

-family engagement and participation;
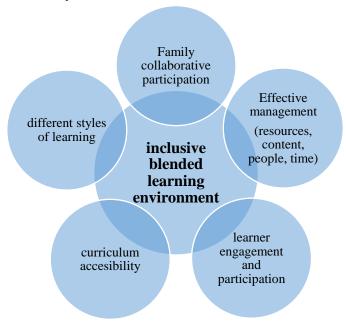
-curriculum accessibility.

Figure 1. The key factors in planning inclusive blended learning environment

Applying a new approach, usually, teachers are experimenting. In the context of blended learning, the teacher has to experience the content and resources trying to meet the SEN students` needs. Such activities are appreciated as they allow teachers` face the situation and, on the other hand, become a good opportunity to improve the learning approach. Researchers from the field encourage this experiential behavior and suggest the stages that a teacher should follow to get the best result: situation assessment, planning, action, and check the outcome.

Reflection is a valuable stage. It allows teachers to look at what they do in the classroom and think about why they do it and if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. Finlay says that reflective practice is "learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and practice". It is often presented as a personal tool that teachers use to observe and assess the way they are teaching but it becomes effective when it is a systematic process and followed by some actions that lead to changes.
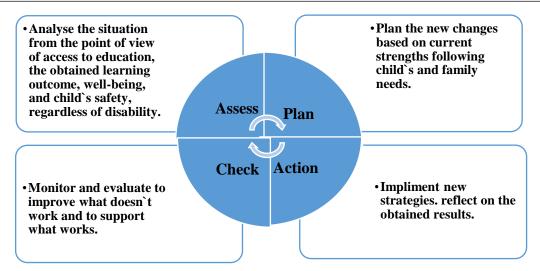
Assess
- Analyse the situation from the point of view of access to education, the obtained learning outcome, well-being, and child`s safety, regardless of disability.

Plan
- Plan the new changes based on current strengths following child`s and family needs.

Check
- Monitor and evaluate to improve what doesn`t work and to support what works.

Action
- Impliment new strategies. reflect on the obtained results.

Figure 2. The main steps of teachers` experiential behavior

Teachers have to reflect on the level of the blended learning environment is it enough inclusive? Here are couples of reflections for improvement [2]:
- How well is the curriculum designed to develop and promote equality and diversity?
- Do really the applied approaches improve student`s learning or curriculum?
- Do we have a good classroom organization that facilitates all children`s learning needs?
- Is enough applied collaborative work in my blended learning environment?
- Do my students have good family support?

An essential aspect of the blended learning environment is the demand for parental involvement, which further supports the goals of the special needs student. Parents also become an important part of student success, as they aid the teacher in developing the blended curriculum and completion of online assignments at home [1]. The fostering of a working relationship between the parent and educator assists the special needs student in achieving their learning goals. Educational theorists believe blended education will become the primary scaffolding for special needs classrooms in the near future [6].

Another significant factor that was mentioned above is adjusting curriculum, undoubtedly it is a designed process as well achieved, first of all, for the training of the learning competencies of students with special needs. However, some adaptations are proving to be appropriate educational technologies for all children in the class. Educational practice demonstrates that teaching materials, developed for SEN children can be also applied to children who do not have learning difficulties or other specific requirements. When analyzing and selecting adapted materials for one or another educational/formative intervention, the teacher will consider the needs of all students. However, personalized planning is very important for SEN students. They are a kind of working documents that are updated when necessary and help teachers to focus on children`s achievements and further needs.

Blended learning differentiation is a key- management technique when working with SEN pupils. Learning online or face to face activities can be differentiated to support all learners and allow them to be fully included in the class, keeping to the topic of the lessons being taught.

Examples of differentiation could be: individual learning outcomes; shorter tasks; different wording of tasks; pictorial support; expected outcomes and marking; parent support; peer group support; collaborative activities.

Each SEN child must be assessed and get individual support and what works for one student may not be suitable for the next, even they present with similar disabilities.

Equally important are resources of the two types (traditional classroom and online learning), teachers are alternating them consecutively.

Online activities will benefit from a series of digital tools that will facilitate the SEN students' interest and an increase in skills. The most commonly used are quizzes that can be made up using various platforms. IXL Worldwide is a dynamic website adapted for the learning process of students with disabilities, G-suite writing activities, as well as, the use of digital tools such as Story Online or Story-jumper can be used being excellent sources. The children have the opportunity to create interactive text as well as read already created interactive stories that often have an audio presentation.

Teaching in the physical classroom process will involve more face-to-face elements like YouTube Kids-YouTube education provides educational videos on parts of speech, writing, properly formatting sentence, and paragraph structure. Students will watch Schoolhouse Rock, take notes during the video, and complete their graphic organizers on a particular part of speech, for example, to complete 2-4 sentences using a capital letter, an action verb, underlining the action verb, and using proper punctuation.

Different worksheets will demand students to work with different content in different subjects. At language art or foreign language children can work with easy and interesting texts then accomplish different tasks to demonstrate comprehension.

In addition, teachers have to be prepared and take right at the moment decisions. In the traditional classroom, the teacher sees when SEN student is moving gets confusing, fidgety, and in need of a quick refocus prompt, but in online activity, the teacher has to be equipped with attention and skills to anticipate his/her behavior and be prepared to refocus on the fundamentals of smart online teaching. Strategies like: brain and body breaks, chunking lessons into shorter units, and connecting with and soliciting feedback from their students as often as possible [7].

It is very important to find out how your students learn best and support it in many ways. SEN children usually get bored and distracted easily. The teacher can incorporate an element of choice that will engage SEN students and make them be more focused. For example, the teacher can ask children to stand up for a few minutes during an online lesson

or listening to white noise or soft background music when another activity is introduced while working with more difficult tasks as a result it can help students to focus better. When students are reading a text online usually teachers have to use specific active reading strategies that work for each individual child. The teacher can ask the student to slow down and summarize each paragraph or write down the main idea for each, they definitely will get focused for a while.

Finally, it is important to match activities and expectations to each learner's needs. Teachers will try to avoid students` distressed behaviors making learning more meaningful. Factors like a developmental stage, communication, sensory profile, and motivation will help the teacher to make their learning activities more meaningful [3].

In **conclusion**, the development of a positive environment in the context of blended learning becomes a basic condition for reflecting the level of inclusiveness. An inclusive learning environment facilitates the formation of skills if it is an environment of diversity and equity. To encounter this, teachers, have to plan good management on how to create a positive learning environment, positive relationships, adapted learning strategies, adjusted curriculum, altogether will contribute to a successful outcome. These elements suppose a collaborative process that involves anticipation and planning plus collaborative partnership working.

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