


Editorial

Special Educational Needs, Distance Learning, Inclusion and COVID-19

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In the last two months, school closure has been one of the more used worldwide “not-pharmacological mitigation strategies” to prevent and limit infection from COVID-19, and to delay the outbreak’s peak [1]. Over 80% of children worldwide stayed at home from school, and 188 countries have chosen this measure during the breakdown [1–5]. For instance, Italy established a complete national lockdown since the first days of March, including school closure. Therefore, until 4 May, children have been staying at home. As of today, schools are still closed but, since March, the Minister of Education, Directors of Schools, and teachers organized “distance learning” to support children’s learning during the outbreak. This type of learning is not only conducted by distance, but is also home-based, due to home confinement and social distancing during the acute phase of outbreak, and, consequently, some issues emerge, which we would like to propose for analysis. Firstly, such “home-based distance learning” is based on the availability of technological devices and internet connection. Not every child has a device and/or an internet connection, due increasing economic disparities and to the “digital divide” [2]. Secondly, “distance learning” necessitates a huge family support, both for learning and for the use of devices and learning platforms. The younger the child, the higher the need of support from other family members (mainly the mothers).

Thirdly, children with special educational needs, which are about 10% of the school-aged population, may need an extra-help during all learning phases. They need the so-called “reasonable accommodations”, and they need the support from other school professionals (like specialized teachers, educators and psychologists) but home confinement limits this kind of professional social contact. They also need other kinds of accommodations also during assessment and other learning tasks. They also have the right to benefit from “accessible” learning materials and learning platforms, in agreement with the Convention of the United Nations of the Rights of People with Disabilities and other specific national laws on inclusion.

Even if teacher pay a huge amount of attention to children needs within the “Distance learning” modality, it is not very simple for them to have a clear awareness of their students’ needs in every moment, and all the burden is, again, placed on family members (parents, grandparents, older siblings). Moreover, it is also necessary to take into account all the features of the neuropsychological, cognitive and emotional profile of the child when planning and delivering a lesson, and this is not very simple during “distance learning”.

The use of a “Universal Design for Learning” approach could be a way to address these situations, to develop learning materials and lessons and to increase inclusiveness of “distance learning”, but we are aware that this approach is still in its early phases and it is almost unused.

We believe that, in all phases of this epidemic crisis, COVID-19 mitigation strategies must be inclusive for children with special educational needs and for all children, aiming to promote learning, development and wellbeing, and to prevent the worsening of learning difficulties and the risks of increasing of disparities and negative psychological consequences [2,6,7].

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