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The Specific Characteristics of Remote Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a sudden transition to remote learning, revealing numerous concerns about its accessibility and effectiveness for students with intellectual disabilities. Although these experiences are now retrospective, they remain an important source of knowledge about organising education in crisis situations, such as armed conflicts, environmental threats, public health emergencies, or other sudden disruptions to school functioning. The aim of the study was to examine teachers' opinions on remote education for this group of pupils in Poland and to compare them with the views of teachers working with other pupils with special educational needs. In 2021, a quantitative survey was conducted among 276 teachers from mainstream, inclusive and special schools, and the data were statistically analysed. The results indicate that remote education was perceived as more burdensome and less effective, highlighting difficulties in individualising instruction and insufficient systemic preparation. These findings may inform the development of inclusive educational solutions that ensure continuity and prevent exclusion in future crises.

Keywords: remote education, intellectual disability, teachers.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, although now seen as a past event, has revealed numerous limitations in the functioning of education systems around the world. These limitations became particularly apparent during the sudden transition from face-to-face teaching – carried out in familiar and relatively safe conditions for pupils, teachers and parents – to remote education, which was new, unfamiliar, raised many questions and doubts, and required much greater involvement from all participants in the education process. This change took place rapidly, often without adequate organisational, technological and methodological support, and without preparation on how to organise the teaching process in such

a way that every student – regardless of their specific needs – could maintain educational continuity, including therapeutic continuity (Goldman et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2022; Philip & Bali, 2022).

The conclusions from the research conducted during this period are both retrospective and prognostic. In the face of contemporary crises and dynamic changes – such as armed conflicts, environmental disasters and epidemics – these analyses enable the planning of actions and the development of the competences of those responsible for education so that, if necessary, it is possible to smoothly transition to remote learning and ensure the continuity of education in emergency conditions for every child, regardless of the degree and type of disability and the environment in which they function.

Analyses conducted during the pandemic indicate that persons with disabilities were a group particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the restrictions imposed. They experienced difficulties in accessing both healthcare and education, and the forms of remote support implemented, including telehealth and online teaching, were often not adequately tailored to their diverse functional needs (Stambekova et al., 2022; Al-Zboon & Al-Dababneh, 2022). For students with intellectual disabilities, these difficulties were particularly complex, as their learning process is based on direct relationships, a high degree of individualisation, a fixed daily structure, repetition and practical experience, which the digital environment was not always able to fully replicate (Stambekova et al., 2022).

According to ICD-11, intellectual disability is a disorder that varies in terms of cognitive, adaptive, emotional and behavioural functioning. This leads to limitations in daily functioning, social roles and various activities, and above all requires an individual approach to education through individualised adaptations to the needs and abilities of each student. It is also necessary to provide adequate social support in developing the independence of children and young people with this form of disability. The complexity of this disorder indicates that the education of people with intellectual disabilities should combine personalised content with appropriate modifications to curricula and family and community support (Stambekova et al., 2022; Cumming & Gilanyi, 2023).

In practice, this means the need for personalised educational and therapeutic activities, including the adaptation of materials, working methods, teaching aids, and the organisation and pace of classes. In the context of remote education, this required not only the technical establishment of contact between the teacher and the pupils, but also careful consideration of how to conduct classes and organise support in the home environment. The implementation of these tasks involved greater involvement of parents or guardians and the creation of a social and environmental support system conducive to learning (Philip & Bali, 2022; Jameson & McDonnell, 2007; Plichta, 2021).

At the same time, teachers, especially special educators, had to quickly adapt digital tools to work with students requiring intensive educational and therapeutic support. Research indicates that their work in the field of remote education has become more complex, and that the systemic preparation for inclusive online teaching has proved insufficient. Key problems include the insufficient adaptation of teaching tools to the individual needs of students, gaps in teachers' digital competences, and the lack of developed methodological models for special distance education. As a result, remote education has limited the effectiveness of educational and therapeutic activities and contributed to the deepening of existing educational inequalities (Jameson & McDonnell, 2007; Plichta, 2021).

The theoretical rationale for this comparison can be situated within Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, which emphasises that human development and functioning should be understood in relation to the interactions between the individual and the multiple environments in which they participate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, remote education can be viewed not merely as a change in the mode of instruction, but as a reorganisation of the educational environment and of the interactions between the student, teacher, family, and school. The implications of such a reorganisation may differ depending on students' educational and support needs.

The specific educational needs of students with intellectual disabilities may create a particular degree of mismatch between the requirements of remote learning environments and the forms of support needed for effective participation in education. Their greater need for individualisation, structured routines, repetition, direct interaction and practical support means that transferring education to a digital environment may require teachers to make more extensive adaptations to teaching meth-

ods, materials and forms of communication. From an ecological perspective, teachers' perceptions of remote education may therefore be shaped not only by their digital competencies or access to technology, but also by the extent to which the reorganised educational environment enables them to respond to the specific educational and functional needs of their students. This provides a theoretical rationale for comparing the perceptions of teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities with those of teachers working with students with other special educational needs.

The aim of the presented study was to learn the opinions of teachers on remote education for students with intellectual disabilities in Poland, with particular emphasis on identifying differences in the assessment of this form of education between teachers working with this group of students and teachers working with students with other special educational needs. Although the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, its results are interpreted in the broader perspective of preparing education systems for future crisis situations requiring the provision of accessible, continuous and appropriately adapted education to all students, regardless of the type and degree of disability.

This issue is of significant importance in the context of shaping educational policies both in Poland and internationally. Knowledge of the characteristics of people with intellectual disabilities is not sufficient to systematically plan remote education for this group in crisis situations. Practical experience is essential, particularly that of teachers who have provided education during the pandemic and have knowledge of work planning and the necessary competences. The digital competences of teachers, investing in their education and adapting vocational training programmes to the changing reality are of particular importance. It is also crucial to provide accessible educational platforms that take into account the needs and capabilities of all students, including those with disabilities.

Comparing the experiences of teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities with those of teachers of other groups of students with diverse educational needs provides important insights into the direction of training support and systemic solutions that promote inclusion in crisis situations. Formulating practical recommendations for the design of accessible, flexible and inclusive educational solutions in emergency situations can contribute to building the resilience of education systems to future crises and ensuring high-quality education for all students, regardless of the type and degree of disability.

Methodology of the own research

The study was conducted in accordance with quantitative research methodology. The data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.

Research problems

The main aim of the study was to examine teachers' opinions on remote education for students with intellectual disabilities. In line with this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

- How did teachers evaluate distance learning in the context of working with students with special educational needs?
- Are there differences in the evaluation of distance education between teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities and those working with students with other special educational needs, and if so, what are these differences?

Research method

Persons investigated

The study involved 276 teachers, of whom 127 (45%) worked on a daily basis with students with intellectual disabilities (I.D.), while 149 (55%) worked with students with other special educational needs

(e.g., specific learning difficulties, autism spectrum disorders, academic underachievement). The vast majority of participants ($n = 233$, 85%) were women, which reflects the gender distribution in the population of teachers in Poland, where women clearly predominate (Eurostat, 2020). The teachers included in the study worked in various types of schools and held different positions, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution by type of school and job position

	Working with ID		No-working with ID		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
School type						
<i>Total</i>	127	100	149	100	276	100
Mainstream school	25	19,7	90	60,4	115	42
Integrated school	18	14,2	40	26,8	58	21
Special school	84	66,1	19	12,8	103	37
Job position						
<i>Total*</i>	166	100	173	100	339	100
Early childhood teacher	48	28,9	85	49,1	133	39,2
Subject teacher	44	26,5	37	21,4	81	23,9
Teacher co-organising education	30	18,1	25	14,5	55	16,2
Pedagogical therapist	12	7,2	7	4,0	19	5,6
School counsellor	6	3,6	5	2,9	11	3,2
School psychologist	2	1,2	1	0,6	3	0,9
Revalidation classes teacher	16	9,6	4	2,3	20	5,9
Others	8	4,8	9	5,2	17	5,0

* Note. N may exceed the total number of participants due to multiple responses.

In the Polish education system, students may attend mainstream schools, integrative (inclusive) schools, or special schools. In Poland, parents have the legal right to decide on the type of school their child attends. In order for a child to be classified as a student with special educational needs, an official decision issued by a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre is required. Students with mild intellectual disabilities most commonly attend mainstream or integrative schools, whereas students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities are generally educated in special schools. This pattern is reflected in Table 1, which shows that the majority of teachers working on a daily basis with students with intellectual disabilities (66%) are employed in special schools. The teachers who participated in the study were predominantly early childhood education teachers and subject-specific teachers.

Research instrument

The study utilized a self-designed questionnaire composed of two sections. The first section collected sociodemographic and professional data, including employment status and teaching experience. The second section focused on the distance education of students with special educational needs and consisted of items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Prior to the main study, the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed in a preliminary study. Items demonstrating the highest discriminatory power were retained in the final version of the instrument, which achieved a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.83.

Procedure

Data were collected in 2021, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, a period in which teachers had already gained experience with distance education due to the temporary closure of schools. The survey was administered online via the Google Forms platform. The study employed a non-probability sampling procedure, with schools contacted through the researchers’ professional

networks. Following approval from school principals, the survey link was distributed to teaching staff. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and school administrators did not have access to individual responses. As the survey link was distributed to teachers through the participating schools rather than through individual invitations sent directly by the researchers, the total number of teachers who received the invitation was not recorded. Consequently, a response rate could not be calculated. The geographical location of respondents' schools was not collected as a variable in the survey; therefore, a detailed territorial distribution of the sample cannot be reported.

Results

The primary objective of the study was to explore teachers' perceptions of distance education for students with intellectual disabilities. Table 2 presents teachers' responses to individual statements concerning distance education. The results are reported separately for teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities and those not working with this group, together with chi-square test values.

Table 2

Teachers' Opinion on Distance Education for Students with Intellectual Disability

		Total	Working with ID	No-working with ID	Statistics
		%	%	%	Chi-square
1. Online classes is stressful for me.	Strongly disagree	8,3	6,3	10,1	12,97*
	I rather disagree	12,3	15,0	10,1	
	Difficult to say	18,1	15,7	20,1	
	Rather I agree	34,4	27,6	40,3	
	Strongly agree	26,8	35,4	19,5	
2. There is a lack of technical support (computers, tablets, Internet access) for teachers who cannot afford such a purchase.	Strongly disagree	4,0	5,5	2,7	9,94*
	I rather disagree	14,1	13,4	14,8	
	Difficult to say	11,6	9,4	13,4	
	Rather I agree	30,4	23,6	36,2	
	Strongly agree	39,9	48,0	32,9	
3. Teachers should be trained in computer programs used for distance learning.	Strongly disagree	0,4	0,0	0,7	2,96
	I rather disagree	2,6	3,2	2,0	
	Difficult to say	3,6	2,4	4,7	
	Rather I agree	25,9	28,6	23,6	
	Strongly agree	67,5	65,9	68,9	
4. I am afraid that students will record my lessons and post them on the Internet without my knowledge.	Strongly disagree	17,1	20,8	14,1	4,34
	I rather disagree	23,4	22,5	24,2	
	Difficult to say	22,7	24,2	21,5	
	Rather I agree	22,3	17,5	26,2	
	Strongly agree	14,5	15,0	14,1	
5. During distance learning, I adapt the methods, forms, work tools and materials to the needs and capabilities of my students.	Strongly disagree	1,1	0,8	1,3	3,71
	I rather disagree	1,5	2,4	0,7	
	Difficult to say	12,4	10,4	14,1	
	Rather I agree	36,5	33,6	38,9	
	Strongly agree	48,5	52,8	45,0	
6. Distance learning benefits teachers and students.	Strongly disagree	40,4	48,4	33,6	11,80*
	I rather disagree	37,1	31,0	42,3	
	Difficult to say	13,1	11,9	14,1	
	Rather I agree	5,1	2,4	7,4	
	Strongly agree	4,4	6,3	2,7	

Table 2

Teachers' Opinion on Distance Education... (cont.)

7. Distance learning has enabled the transmission of knowledge in a more interesting way.	Strongly disagree	18,3	25,8	12,1	8,91
	I rather disagree	33,3	29,8	36,2	
	Difficult to say	22,0	20,2	23,5	
	Rather I agree	20,1	19,4	20,8	
	Strongly agree	6,2	4,8	7,4	
8. I think I am well prepared for conducting distance education.	Strongly disagree	2,9	4,0	2,0	2,74
	I rather disagree	12,5	9,5	15,0	
	Difficult to say	37,7	39,7	36,1	
	Rather I agree	33,7	33,3	34,0	
	Strongly agree	13,2	13,5	12,9	
9. Distance learning has a positive impact on the school absence of students with ASD.	Strongly disagree	22,2	31,7	14,1	18,93***
	I rather disagree	11,3	13,5	9,4	
	Difficult to say	29,8	25,4	33,6	
	Rather I agree	25,1	16,7	32,2	
	Strongly agree	11,6	12,7	10,7	
10. Distance learning deepens the differences in knowledge levels between students with I.D. and students without difficulty.	Strongly disagree	3,6	4,8	2,7	1,11
	I rather disagree	4,7	4,8	4,7	
	Difficult to say	7,3	6,3	8,1	
	Rather I agree	29,9	29,4	30,4	
	Strongly agree	54,4	54,8	54,1	
11. The educational achievements of a student with I.D. during distance learning depend on the individual work effort of the parents.	Strongly disagree	1,1	0,0	2,0	14,00**
	I rather disagree	6,2	3,9	8,1	
	Difficult to say	14,5	12,6	16,1	
	Rather I agree	40,9	35,4	45,6	
	Strongly agree	37,3	48,0	28,2	

The analysis of the data presented in Table 2 indicates that **distance education was generally perceived by teachers as a stressful and challenging experience**, regardless of whether they worked with students with intellectual disabilities or with other groups of students.

Statistically significant differences between the two groups were identified in several areas. Teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities **reported higher levels of stress related to online teaching** compared to those not working with this group ($\chi^2 = 12.97$; $p < .05$). They also more frequently indicated **a lack of technical support**, such as access to computers or reliable Internet connections ($\chi^2 = 9.94$; $p < .05$), which may have intensified the perceived burden of distance education.

Across both groups, an overwhelming majority of respondents **strongly emphasized the need for teacher training in computer programs used for distance learning**, suggesting that this need is systemic rather than group-specific. No statistically significant differences were observed with regard to concerns about unauthorized recording of lessons or declarations related to adapting teaching methods and materials to students' needs.

Distance learning was **predominantly evaluated negatively in terms of its educational benefits**, with teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities more frequently expressing critical views ($\chi^2 = 11.80$; $p < .05$). Moreover, respondents almost unanimously agreed that **distance education deepens disparities in knowledge levels between students with intellectual disabilities and students without educational difficulties**.

Significant differences were also found in teachers' perceptions of the impact of distance learning on school attendance among students with autism spectrum disorders ($\chi^2 = 18.93$; $p < .001$), as well as in beliefs concerning parental involvement. Teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities were significantly more likely to agree that **the educational achievements of these students during distance learning depend largely on parents' individual efforts** ($\chi^2 = 14.00$; $p < .01$).

Conclusion

The sudden transition to remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as an unplanned crisis that revealed significant mismatches between the existing digital infrastructure and the needs and capabilities of students with intellectual disabilities, as well as the competences of teachers and their level of preparedness to work in a digital environment (Al-Zboon & Al-Dababneh, 2022; Goldman et al., 2021). Although the pandemic is now a thing of the past, the experiences from this period remain crucial for the design of contemporary education systems in the context of ongoing crises, such as armed conflicts, environmental threats or other emergency situations disrupting the continuity of education and therapy (Stambekova et al., 2022). The results of the study indicate that remote education was perceived by teachers as more burdensome and less effective in working with students with intellectual disabilities than with other students with special educational needs. Viewed from the ecological perspective adopted in this study, the differences observed between the two groups may be interpreted in the context of the specific educational needs of students with intellectual disabilities and the nature of the support required in their education. As discussed earlier, their education frequently requires a high degree of individualisation, repetition, structured organisation of learning, practical experience and direct educational support. Transferring these elements to a remote environment may therefore have placed additional demands on teachers working with this group and may partly explain their higher levels of stress and more critical assessment of the benefits of distance education. This interpretation should, however, be treated cautiously, as the present study did not directly investigate the causes of the differences in teachers' perceptions. The findings can also be situated within a broader international context. In Finland, Sirkko and Takala (2022) found that teachers of pupils with intellectual disabilities encountered numerous challenges and emotions at the beginning of the transition to distance education, while gradually developing new ways of teaching and supporting pupils and their families.

Evidence from studies involving broader groups of students with disabilities points in a similar direction. Al-Zboon and Al-Dababneh (2022), in their study conducted in Jordan, found that most participating special education teachers did not perceive remote learning as an effective form of education for students with disabilities and assessed their own competencies in implementing it as relatively low. Philip and Bali (2022), examining special education during the pandemic in India, identified difficulties in conducting online classes and highlighted the need to reconsider teaching and learning strategies, improve access to educational technologies, and provide professional development for special educators in the effective use of digital tools. Despite differences in national contexts, participant groups and research designs, these studies indicate that the difficulties identified in the present study were not limited to the Polish educational context. Rather, they formed part of a broader international challenge of adapting remote education to the diverse needs of students requiring additional educational support. Taken together with the international evidence discussed above, the findings point to broader systemic challenges related to the adaptation of digital environments to individualised teaching, the methodological preparation for online special education, and the organisational and competence preparation of teachers. The finding that teachers in both groups strongly supported the need for training in computer programs used for distance learning reinforces the importance of this systemic dimension. Importantly, the absence of a statistically significant difference between the groups in this respect suggests that the need for better digital preparation was not specific to teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities. From a practical perspective, however, preparation for remote teaching in special education should extend beyond technical proficiency and include the ability to adapt tools, materials, communication and teaching methods to students' individual educational and functional needs. This has direct implications for teacher education and professional development, which should integrate technological competencies with competencies related to individualisation and accessible forms of instruction. Another finding that is particularly relevant from an ecological perspective concerns the role of parents. Teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities were

significantly more likely to indicate that students' educational achievements during distance learning depended on parents' individual work efforts. This result can be considered in relation to the findings of Sirkko and Takala (2022), who found that during distance education teachers and guardians interacted frequently to discuss pupils' learning needs and ways of supporting them. The authors also reported increased cooperation between teachers and guardians and emphasised the important role of family support in the implementation of distance education for pupils with intellectual disabilities. In the present study, however, this result should be interpreted as reflecting teachers' perceptions rather than as evidence of a causal relationship between parental involvement and students' educational achievement, as such a relationship was not directly examined.

An important limitation of the present study concerns the heterogeneity of the comparison group, which included teachers working with students with a range of special educational needs, such as autism spectrum disorder, specific learning difficulties, school failure, sensory and physical disabilities, and chronic illnesses. As these categories involve diverse educational and support needs, the comparison group should not be regarded as homogeneous. Consequently, the observed differences should be interpreted as differences between teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities and a heterogeneous group of teachers working with students with other special educational needs, rather than as differences between specific categories of special educational needs. Future research should therefore consider comparisons involving more homogeneous groups.

From the perspective of educational practice, this finding indicates the importance of developing models of cooperation with families that support educational continuity without transferring the primary responsibility for education to parents or guardians. This is particularly important in crisis situations, when the availability of direct professional support may be temporarily reduced. Educational systems should therefore provide families with accessible communication channels, clear guidance and appropriate forms of support while maintaining the central role of teachers and specialists in planning and implementing the educational process. This means that the rapid digitization of education is not synonymous with its actual transformation. From the perspective of information systems, remote education should be treated as a socio-technical system requiring the simultaneous design of technology, teaching processes, organisational support and user competences. The lack of this integration leads to an increased burden on teachers, an excessive transfer of responsibility to families and the risk of deepening educational inequalities.

The recommendations formulated below are directly linked to the findings of the present study. The higher levels of stress associated with online teaching and the more critical assessment of the benefits of distance education among teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities point to the need for digital solutions that better accommodate individualised forms of teaching and support. The strong endorsement of training in computer programs used for distance learning in both groups indicates the need for systematic preparation of teachers for digital education. The greater importance attributed to parents' individual work efforts by teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities highlights the need to develop models of cooperation with families that support educational continuity without transferring responsibility for education to parents. Finally, teachers' concerns that distance learning may deepen differences in knowledge levels between students with intellectual disabilities and students without educational difficulties underline the importance of considering accessibility and the prevention of educational exclusion when planning remote education. On this basis, the following recommendations for the design of resilient digital education systems can be formulated:

- Designing educational platforms in accordance with the principles of universal design (UDL) – systems should allow for flexible adaptation of content, pace of work, forms of communication and level of support, rather than being based on a uniform teaching model.
- Include special education requirements at the IT system design stage – functionalities supporting individualisation, repeatability, daily structure and visual communication should be an integral part of the platform architecture.

- Systematic preparation of teachers to work in a digital environment – competence development should cover not only the use of tools, but also the design of the teaching process in an online environment and the management of remote educational relationships.
- Building hybrid support models – digital solutions should strengthen the role of teachers and specialists, rather than replace the relational elements of education that are crucial for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Including inclusive education in the digital resilience strategies of the state and educational institutions – business continuity planning should include crisis scenarios with clearly defined organisational, technological and methodological procedures.
- Reducing the risk of exclusion by designing support ecosystems for families – systems should offer communication tools, instructions and asynchronous support so that parents can support the educational process without taking over the role of the teacher.

The findings of the present study suggest that the effectiveness of remote education cannot be considered independently of the type and intensity of students' educational and support needs. The more strongly the educational process depends on individualisation, direct interaction, structured support and cooperation with families, the greater the challenge of transferring it to a remote environment. This is particularly relevant to the education of students with intellectual disabilities and indicates that emergency remote education should not rely on uniform solutions designed for the general student population. Instead, preparedness for future disruptions should include differentiated models of digital education that take into account the specific support needs of different groups of learners. The research findings show that the resilience of the education system does not depend solely on providing access to technology, but on the ability to maintain the quality, accessibility and inclusive nature of education in changing conditions, for every student – regardless of their abilities and diverse needs. The experiences of the pandemic can therefore serve as a starting point for designing accessible, consciously developed digital education environments around the world.

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