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A STUDENT WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS DURING A PANDEMIC – CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES FOR TEACHERS

UCZEŃ Z CHOROBAŁ PRZEWLEKŁĄ W CZASIE PANDEMII – WYZWANIA DLA NAUCZYCIELI

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest poznanie sytuacji trudnych doświadczanych przez nauczycieli edukacji włączającej w Polsce w czasie pandemii COVID-19, w szczególności w nauczaniu uczniów z chorobami przewlekłymi. Sytuacje doświadczane przez nauczycieli uczniów przewlekle chorych można analizować w kategoriach (1) niezaspokojonych potrzeb, (2) nadmiernego obciążenia pracą, (3) wyzwań w realizacji zadań, (4) pojawiających się konfliktów oraz (5) poczucia zagrożenia. Prowadzone badania miały charakter jakościowy. Metodą badawczą było studium indywidualnego przypadku. Grupa badana obejmowała 50 nauczycieli. Wszyscy nauczyciele, z którymi przeprowadzono wywiady, podkreślali wyzwania związane z dłuższymi godzinami pracy, brakiem narzędzi dostosowawczych oraz trudnościami w kontaktach z uczniami i ich rodzicami. Szkoły z mniejszością uczniów z chorobami przewlekłymi często nie mają możliwości, motywacji i wiedzy specjalistycznej do planowania działań wspierających nauczanie.

Słowa kluczowe: uczeń, choroba przewlekła, nauczyciel, pandemia, sytuacja trudna.

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine the challenges faced by inclusive education teachers in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in teaching students with chronic illnesses. The situations experienced by teachers of students with chronic illnesses can be analyzed in terms of (1) unmet needs, (2) excessive workload, (3) challenges in task completion, (4) conflicts arising, and (5) feeling threatened. The research was conducted from a qualitative perspective. The research method used in this study was a single case study. The research group comprised 50 teachers. All interviewed teachers highlighted the challenges of longer working hours, lack of adjustment tools, and difficulties in connecting with students and their parents.

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Schools with a minority of students with chronic illnesses often lack the capacity, motivation, and expertise to plan activities that support teaching.

Keywords: student, chronic disease, teacher, pandemic, difficult situation.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019 presented a challenging situation that Poland, along with the rest of the world, had to face. The state of the coronavirus epidemic was first observed in November 2019, and by March 2020, the WHO had declared it a pandemic that posed a threat to life and public health on an international scale (Coronavirus COVID-19, 2020). The pandemic caused the closure of schools, which had a significant impact on the education of children and youth worldwide (Gouédard, Pont, and Viennet, 2020). In response to this situation, the Ministry of National Education in Poland issued a regulation in 2020 that provided solutions for the temporary limitation of educational system units to prevent and combat the pandemic.

Research has been conducted in almost all countries to understand the impact of the ongoing pandemic on education. The research focused on topics such as the stress experienced by students (Livana, Mubin, Basthomi, 2020), the psychological effects of remote learning on students (Irawan, Dwisona, Lestari, 2020), the psychological characteristics of students (Hasanah et al., 2020), mental disorders occurring during the pandemic (Al Mamun et al., 2021), and depression experienced by students (Bignardi et al., 2021).

In Poland, the Ministry of National Education has undertaken numerous studies on education during the pandemic (Report of the Ministry of National Education, 2020), commissioned expert research has been carried out (Dynowska-Chmielewska et al., 2020), and theoretical and empirical analyses have been conducted (e.g., Buchner, Majchrzak, Wierzbicka, 2020; Domagała-Zyśk, 2020; Kocejko, 2020; Pauluk, 2021; Winiarczyk, Warzocha, 2021; Głodkowska, 2022; Kuracki, Tempczyk-Nagórka, Ligęza, 2022). However, there has been a lack of research in the context of educating students about chronic diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland.

In accordance with Polish education law, children and young people with chronic diseases are entitled to learn in all types of facilities, including general, integrated, or special schools, based on their individual needs, developmental opportunities, and current health condition. If the chronic disease is not accompanied by any other disorder or disability, these students will receive an inclusive education. "Inclusion" is a process that supports students in overcoming obstacles to attendance, participation, and achievement (UNESCO, 2017, p. 13).

Students with chronic illnesses often encounter numerous challenges in their academic pursuits. If the ailment has been present since birth, those in their

environment may fail to recognize certain symptoms that would otherwise be apparent in other circumstances. Conversely, if the illness manifests later in life, the entire community must contend with difficult information, adapt to a new lifestyle, learn medical prescriptions, and cope with the stress of a constant threat to life.

Teacher surveys indicate that the majority of teachers feel responsible for their students' academic performance. Teachers frequently note that students with chronic illnesses may experience fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and somatic symptoms that affect their schooling. Teachers should be particularly attentive to students who exhibit high levels of anxiety, avoidant coping mechanisms, reduced activity, educational difficulties, a depressed mood, or who hide their illness from school staff and peers (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Recognition of the difficult situation in inclusive education for teachers of students with a chronic disease concerning the pandemic situation

Difficult situations are commonly defined as specific discrepancies between an individual's subjective conditions and external limitations in effectively carrying out life tasks and functioning. This approach is reflected in the works of scholars such as Clayton (2012), Hobfoll (2006), and Seyle (1960). Psychologically challenging situations are often linked with frustration and stress and analyzed in terms of both the emotional state and discomfort experienced by the individual, as examined by Lazarus and Folkman (1986).

The concept of a difficult situation in Poland was first introduced by Tomaszewski (1963, 1966). This concept has since inspired theoretical and research exploration by scholars, including Gajdzica (2011), Łukaszewski (2015), Karaszewska and Silecka-Marek (2016), and Głodkowska (2022). According to Tomaszewski (1963), all psychological phenomena should be considered in the process of regulating the relationship between individuals and their environment.

A difficult situation is characterized by factors that disturb the normal course of activity, threaten the fulfilment of needs and aspirations, and are a threat to the values highly rated by the individual. This can result in experiencing strong tension as a reaction to mental overload and experiencing negative experiences and emotional states. Such situations can contribute to lowering the sense of self-efficacy and affect the individual's life significantly.

When facing challenging situations, individuals must utilize their coping mechanisms to overcome perceived difficulties. Sometimes, established methods that have proven effective in similar situations can be utilized. However, the unpredictability of the situation may require the development of new solutions and coping strategies. Coping involves selecting actions that restore a sense of security by meeting both internal and external requirements while utilizing available resources (Hobfoll, 2006, p. 70).

The perception of a situation as normal or difficult may stem from the unpredictability of the situation, particularly in the case of relationships with a student who has a chronic disease. A teacher's sense of competence and readiness to take action can influence how they perceive a situation. Difficulties may arise when educators face risks of failure in achieving educational, upbringing, or therapeutic goals. A lack of effective coping mechanisms characterizes difficult situations, as well as limited possibilities for dealing with them. Situations of deprivation arise when the basic elements and conditions necessary for normal human functioning are absent. Difficulties may also arise from unforeseen and unnecessary elements that disrupt or cause chaos in the course of a specific task.

The article discusses the various situations that can arise during the education of students with chronic illnesses, specifically in the context of the pandemic. This conceptualization of difficult situations serves as the theoretical basis for the research conducted in this article, which aims to analyze the experiences of teachers in educating students with chronic illnesses during the pandemic. The article proposes that teachers may face challenges related to the deprivation of needs, overload with school duties, difficulties in fulfilling tasks, emerging conflicts, and experiencing threats.

Methodological research

The research was conducted using an interpretive approach in adherence to conventional methodology. This approach was chosen as it was deemed capable of providing "grounded" knowledge of the phenomenon under study. The objective of the research was to examine the situation of inclusive education teachers in the context of the challenging circumstances they face while teaching students with chronic diseases amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical framework employed in the study was the concept of a difficult situation, which was used to analyze the situations encountered by teachers of inclusive education in relation to (1) unmet needs, (2) excessive workload, (3) task completion difficulties, (4) emerging conflicts, and (5) experiencing threats.

Thus, the primary research problem was formulated as follows: What difficult situations did the surveyed teachers experience while educating students with chronic diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic? This problem led to the formulation of specific research questions:

1. What kinds of difficult situations did the surveyed teachers encounter in the context of unmet needs?
2. What kinds of difficult situations did the surveyed teachers encounter in the context of excessive workload?

The research method used in this study was a single case study. A semi-structured interview technique was employed to collect data, designed to elicit descriptions of difficult situations experienced by the surveyed teachers. The study

involved 50 early childhood education teachers working in public schools in Warsaw that implement inclusive education for students with chronic diseases. Each of the surveyed teachers had contact with at least 6 students with a chronic disease. All respondents were female with a mean age of 37 and held higher education degrees with pedagogical preparation.

The research was conducted in 2022 in seven randomly selected schools in Warsaw. To ensure a comprehensive and truthful presentation of the respondents' perspectives, a qualitative content analysis approach was utilized to analyze the collected data.

The process of content analysis involved coding, which, as per Babbie (2003, pp. 406-407), entails the classification or categorization of individual data fragments, complemented by a systematic approach to locating them. Coding facilitated the identification of patterns that shed light on the perceptions of the interviewed teachers regarding challenging situations and how to handle them. In analyzing the gathered material, a key was utilized to generate a set of concepts that underpinned the treatment of content centered on the primary research problems. This key involved thorough and repeated reading of the entire material, with particular attention paid to recurring content and the relationships between thematic areas, as well as discerning differences in the extent to which the described issues were addressed. At times, references to quantitative data were used to illustrate specific trends.

Results

Qualitative research results, adhering to methodological principles, will be presented in five cognitive areas: (1) needs deprivation; (2) schoolwork overload; (3) task fulfilment difficulties; (4) emerging conflicts; and (5) experiencing threats. The surveyed teachers' difficult situations will be showcased through specific statements that describe their experiences of deprivation, hindrance, overload, conflict, and threat.

The evaluation of deprivation situations focused on the surveyed teachers' experiences of limitations or their inability to carry out activities for full-time teaching of children with chronic illnesses in inclusive education settings. Out of the 50 respondents, 30 teachers (60%) who worked with students with chronic diseases primarily experienced difficulties in direct communication with these students, their parents, who provided them with information about the student's well-being, and doctor's recommendations to work with them. Students often faced difficulties due to their somatic conditions, learning gaps after hospital stays, and online classes.

For example, one of the statements made by the teachers is:

I often had a lot of problems contacting the parents of my student, who has epilepsy, and working long hours during lessons in front of a computer monitor was not easy for him and could lead to an attack of the disease. I asked the doctor to give me some indications, but it was still very difficult for me. (23T)

In addition, the respondents had a sense of difficulty in direct contact with other teachers and specialists providing support to students with the disease in carrying out classes at school in stationary conditions, and to a large extent they experienced limited pedagogical support for their students with the disease at a specific moment of the lesson or class. As a consequence, this decreased their sense of effectiveness in the tasks performed:

The biggest problem for us was contact with other teachers. It was hard to work together and share ideas. (24T)

It happened that the deprivation of a few teachers (14%) referred primarily to the inability to feel full contact with their students, giving them a sense of belonging to the school, especially after a long absence due to hospital stays before the pandemic.

My student with the disease is often in the hospital. The time of the pandemic and remote lessons meant that I had to postpone all my treatments to make her feel good with us in stationary conditions. (17T)

In addition, they had a sense of loss of personal and professional values that were important to them in terms of performing basic tasks resulting from the role of a teacher. Here is an example:

I was wondering how I was supposed to teach. What should I do for the lesson to be fully realized in a situation where Karol has his problems anyway? More than once, I felt a great need to meet my students at school, in our class. I did not know when it would be possible. (31T)

Another area of learning about difficult situations experienced by the respondents was the overload situation. For the vast majority of respondents, it was associated with states of physical and emotional exhaustion, including headaches, backaches, and limb pains.

My eyesight deteriorated from the monitor and hours spent on remote work, and my eyes often watered. I was thinking about my students, for whom the need for exercise or a walk in the fresh air would also be good as a break.

I used to talk sometimes, and now we get up and move. We jumped and did various exercises. (15T)

In addition, the surveyed teachers' statements revealed a sense of increasing nervous tension and anxiety because they often did not have a sense of self-efficacy in working with a student with a chronic disease and did not know how effective their actions are in providing students with new content at a distance. Some of them directly said that their work was ineffective because students with chronic diseases, due to the specificity of a given unit, work slowly, and the inability to observe the students' activities meant that teachers were not able to adjust the pace of teaching and the degree of implementation of educational issues to the current psychosomatic abilities of the child, which influenced their experience of difficult situations.

Among the situations of overload, a significant number of teachers (66% of those surveyed) reported feeling irritable and nervous when receiving new tasks from the headmaster.

Every time I saw the principal's icon on my monitor or it was green, I was afraid that he was telling me to prepare some guidelines or new materials for everyone. (5T)

The respondents often avoided or distanced themselves from new tasks and situations. They also mentioned the challenges of long working hours, which meant sacrificing personal and family time to prepare lessons.

Some teachers failed to explore new technological and internet solutions or adapt existing tools to support students with chronic diseases while working remotely. Many representatives of this group claimed that they had effective methods of operation and saw no need to learn new ones or seek alternative solutions. Here is an example:

I haven't learned anything new. I used multimedia solutions before. They are tested, and I have used them. (19T)

Only three teachers (6%) mentioned feeling overwhelmed when it came to fulfilling all their tasks while working remotely with a student who has a chronic disease.

For me, this whole remote education thing didn't make sense. She was just a fictional character we were trying to live up to. (9T)

The surveyed teachers shared statements about challenging situations they have encountered. They described the sensation of struggling with tasks due

to the presence of unnecessary or extra elements. According to the respondents, common challenges during remote work included a lack of appropriate teaching resources, limited access to presentation tools, and difficulty in making classes engaging for students.

I didn't know how to cut out the pictures and arrange them so that the students, when I shared the screen with them, would see them reflected like me. I had no one to ask. (12T)

In many cases, teachers faced challenges in obtaining necessary information for collaborative activities with the headmaster, other teachers, and organizational specialists. They also experienced frustration and irritation when they were unable to complete tasks due to technical difficulties, Internet interruptions, or disconnection with the student:

At the very beginning, I felt completely left to myself. Neither the school, we, nor the students were prepared. Just meeting with the director in one place and agreeing on one type of carrier and data transfer is a complicated process. It took me at least 1.5 months. (33T)

Nine respondents (18%) encountered challenging situations as obstacles. These challenges include motivating students with chronic illnesses, keeping their focus on fundamental content to enhance their knowledge and skills, and evaluating their well-being and reluctance to participate in assigned tasks and exercises during lessons.

Some teachers may find criticism of their actions or rejection of new solutions to be a significant obstacle to their work:

What annoyed me the most was when someone told me that I had to do this and that. And I didn't want to hear it. (3T)

Among the conflict situations in the education of students with chronic diseases during the pandemic, teachers identified difficulties in selecting appropriate educational content for individual students during distance learning. They also faced challenges in engaging and meeting the diverse needs of students with varying abilities. Here is an example of a statement.

I often didn't know if my student would make it. Considering his difficulties, won't he have someone at home with him to sit on it? Will what I prepare for him be suitable? (14T)

Some respondents encountered conflicts due to limitations on contact or communication with colleagues and specialists, as well as challenges with students' parents or guardians:

We were not always able to reach an agreement. Everyone had a different vision of what it should look like. It wasn't easy for us either. However, when we wanted to think together about what we could do to help the child, there was no space for it. (1T)

Some teachers also mentioned the lack of support in addressing educational issues related to remote learning, which made them feel isolated. They also expressed concerns about the blurred boundaries between their personal and professional lives. Here is an example:

It was very difficult for me to combine working from home with my other responsibilities. I didn't know when to stop and take care of my children and home, or even do anything for myself. I walked into the room where I was working and felt like I should do something else. (18T)

The surveyed teachers in the field of remote education with a student with a chronic disease experienced a situation of threat to the values important to them due to the sense of loss of a valued position and social recognition, which would translate into an appreciation of their work. This was mostly combined with criticism and a lack of effectiveness. In their statements, the respondents often referred to substantive competencies, doubting their knowledge and the ability to transfer it remotely. The deficit of praxeological competencies concerned organizational skills, a constant race against time, and planning lessons so as not to overload students with the disease. As far as communication competencies are concerned, they resulted mainly from a sense of disagreement and an assessment of the situation, which was not always revealed directly. Sometimes it happened that the respondents indirectly learned about the criticism of their parents about the classes they conducted.

Only a small number of respondents (4, or 8%) mentioned feeling a sense of danger due to their perceived lack of control over their thinking, actions, and professional tasks.

The surveyed teachers, who faced challenging situations, did not attribute their coping strategies to any specific cognitive context, such as deprivation of needs, overload with school duties, difficulties in fulfilling tasks, emerging conflicts, or experiencing threats.

Additionally, all respondents engaged in one-on-one conversations with students to understand their specific needs and challenges, and to assess their overall well-being.

A significant portion of the respondents (30 people, or 60%) expressed the importance of regular team meetings for psychological and pedagogical support as a method for dealing with challenging situations.

The surveyed teachers also mentioned that they found telephone conversations with the principal and school psychologist helpful for coping with their difficulties. These conversations served as a way to discuss their challenges and find solutions together, both in terms of content and organization.

During breaks, the subjects listened to relaxing music and engaged in physical exercises to relax and reduce tension. Some students made it a permanent ritual to meet after classes.

Some respondents mentioned the need to upgrade equipment, improve internet speed, or consider renting it from the school.

Unfortunately, 10 out of the surveyed teachers (more than 20%) expressed dissatisfaction with the strategies they employed to handle challenging situations within their assigned tasks. The principals were clearly supportive and focused on surviving the pandemic. They were contemplating when it would end and what teaching would be like in the post-pandemic period.

Conclusions

The situation of deprivation refers to teachers' experiences of feeling a sense of lack or limitations in schools that operate under normal teaching conditions, such as full-time learning.

Teachers encountered difficulties in maintaining direct contact with students who had chronic illnesses and their parents. These parents provided valuable information about the student's well-being and their doctor's recommendations for working with them. Students frequently experienced challenges related to their physical condition during online classes, and they would struggle to catch up on their learning after a hospital stay.

One difficulty is the limited ability to directly communicate with teachers and specialists who provide support to students with illnesses in a traditional school environment.

Limiting pedagogical support for a student with an illness during a lesson or class can decrease the sense of effectiveness in completing tasks.

Some teachers also faced challenging situations related to deprivation, including: The inability to fully connect with their students and create a sense of belonging in the classroom, especially after a prolonged absence due to a hospital stay before the pandemic. Teachers may experience a sense of loss in personal and professional values when carrying out basic tasks in their role.

The majority of surveyed teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed during classes with students with chronic illnesses, particularly during the pandemic situation: feeling tired and emotionally exhausted, physical exhaustion, including

headaches, backaches, and limb pains, the growing intensity of nervous tension and anxiety arises from their inability to achieve desired outcomes, teachers often struggle to effectively work with students who have chronic diseases, particularly in adjusting the pace of teaching and implementing educational issues based on the child's health capabilities. This lack of teaching effectiveness can lead to difficult situations and challenges for teachers.

The respondents identified situations of overload among their experiences: the employee shows signs of irritability and nervousness when receiving new tasks from the director, teachers may exhibit a tendency to distance themselves from or avoid new tasks and situations, which can be attributed to the challenges associated with longer working hours, specifically in terms of lesson preparation, avoiding the search for new technological and internet solutions and instead focusing on finding and adapting tools, implementing established operational methods that provided a sense of familiarity and consistency. Only two teachers reported feeling overwhelmed when carrying out all their tasks remotely with a student who has a chronic disease.

The difficulties experienced by teachers often revolve around the presence of unnecessary elements or the absence of essential elements, which hinders their ability to perform tasks effectively. It primarily concerns: exhibiting signs of nervousness and irritation when confronted with challenges or constraints, nervousness can occur when there is a lack of appropriate teaching aids for remote work, limited access to presentation tools, and difficulty in making classes engaging, limited access to information hampers collaboration and communication among the principal, teachers, and organizational specialists, frustration and irritation can arise when obstacles, such as technical difficulties, internet interruptions, or loss of connection with the student, prevent the completion of a task.

Among the respondents, a few experienced challenging situations that hindered their progress. Some examples include: motivating students with chronic diseases and keeping their attention focused on basic content aimed at developing their knowledge and improving their skills can be challenging, difficulties in accurately diagnosing the current state of discomfort and a lack of motivation to engage in the suggested tasks and exercises during the lesson, increased response to criticism and identification of potential solutions that the teacher may not have considered.

Few of the respondents experienced difficult situations in the context of a hindrance, among which the following can be indicated: difficulties in motivating students with a chronic disease and focusing their attention on basic content aimed at developing their knowledge and improving skills, difficulties in diagnosing the actual state of malaise and a lack of willingness to perform the proposed tasks and exercises during the lesson, increased response to criticism and pointing out possible solutions that the teacher himself did not see.

Conflict situations arise in the experiences of teachers when dealing with the challenges of educating students with chronic diseases during the pandemic:

difficulties arise when deciding on the content of education for distance learning, one challenge in education is the difficulty of diversifying one's involvement in teaching students with varying abilities, the lack of contact and communication with other teachers and specialists is a limitation, difficulty in contacting the student's parents or guardians, there is a lack of support in addressing educational issues related to remote learning, the lack of clear boundaries between personal and professional life.

Situations that pose a threat to the cherished values of teachers who work with students with chronic diseases primarily arise from a sense of: loss of a valued position and social recognition, loss of competency, including substantive, praxeological, and communication skills, criticisms of remote classes, the ability to adequately support students with chronic diseases. Only a small number of respondents encountered dangerous situations due to their limited control over their thinking, actions, and professional tasks.

The surveyed teachers highlighted various difficult situations they encountered while educating students with chronic diseases during the pandemic. They attributed this lack of coping mechanisms to factors such as the deprivation of needs, overload with school duties, difficulties in fulfilling tasks, conflicts, and threats. The following actions can be indicated among those taken by them: conducting online meetings and phone conversations with parents, teachers, and specialists is essential for sharing activities, exchanging information about the student's well-being, and discussing effective strategies for working with them, regular team meetings are held to provide psychological and educational support and to develop operating procedures and information flow, the principal and school psychologist had telephone conversations to discuss difficulties and find solutions, implementing a standardized framework of classes, methods, and work formats that motivate students to willingly complete assigned tasks, restructuring tasks and implementing personalized approaches in working with each student, engaging in home workouts while listening to calming music, increasing the speed of the internet connection, purchasing or renting new equipment, and sometimes renting it from the facility are all ways to improve the internet connection.

The analysis of educational experiences during the pandemic can provide valuable insights for understanding the future and navigating challenging situations. Experiences in the field of unpredictable educational circumstances, particularly for students with special needs, such as chronic illnesses, necessitate action on multiple levels. This will help us gain a comprehensive understanding of the various situations that arise due to deprivation, overload, obstacles, conflicts, and threats.

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