COVID-19 and education: Use technology for a more inclusive approach

By Katerina Mavrou, AAATE President

Inclusive education has been and still is in the core of the battle for educational change towards equal opportunities and non-discrimination for children with disabilities for many years. However, interpretations, policies and educational practices around the world vary, and a number of challenges emerge in developing inclusive educational practices (Haug, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a general agreement, that inclusive education is grounded on the values of equality and social justice, and it is a basic human right for children with disabilities, as this is also directed by the UN Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

In periods of crisis, all our systems are stressed and tested, as are our principles and values. During the COVID-19 pandemic, education, like all other sectors of our lives is looking for the most effective ways keep going, by turning to technology and online education solutions. And suddenly, or maybe not, we realize that the educational material is not accessible, the digital content in education is not accessible, students no longer have access to educational assistants (McCall, 2020), often no access to their school based assistive technology, while online learning platforms are not accessible, teleconferencing tools used are not effective for all students.

Once accessibility and inclusive education was not well understood and established in pre-COVID-19 periods, it is not easy to convince educators that this is the time to for it! However, the call is everywhere, and it's our reality today: #Stayhome, #WorkfromHome, #LearnfromHome. Maybe there is a chance to make this accessible and inclusive for all and maybe there is an opportunity to start thinking inclusive and support our quarantined students! Let's embrace inclusive education now!

Here are some suggestions:

- **Co-teaching and collaboration:**
  - Classroom teachers and special education support teachers and other professionals **stay in touch with each other!** Use this as an opportunity for collaboration.
  - Arrange an online meeting once a week to collaborate for **developing accessible and differentiated learning materials**

- **Family involvement: Keep in touch with the families of your students with disabilities**.
  - Arrange regular **short online meetings/chats/text messages/short videos,** whatever is convenient for a quick update
  - If possible, **create a personal blog with regular posts**. It can work as a diary with ideas and activities and keeps children tuned

- o For those that do not have access to the internet or computers **make a pick-up station at school** and prepare printed material in packages.

- **Access to and use of assistive technology products**
  - o Make sure your students have access to the assistive technologies they were using at school
  - o If not available at home talk with school and community to arrange a free loan and pick-up, **taking all protection measures for cleaning and purifying equipment**
  - o Arrange **for regular remote consultation meetings** for supporting assistive technology use.

- **Differentiated and Accessible material**
  - o If you are creating an online learning environment, please take into consideration accessibility features and characteristics. Some tips can be found here, as well as elsewhere in the web: http://webdevgroupcu.org/conted/gettingstarted.html
  - o If you are uploading or sending word documents, powerpoint presentations or pdf documents make sure they are accessible. Here is a link to how we create accessible documents: http://ncdae.org/resources/cheatsheets/
  - o Take colour contrast into consideration and avoid backgrounds that affect documents' readability
  - o Check your documents accessibility: https://support.office.com/en-gb/article/improve-accessibility-with-the-accessibility-checker-a16f6de0-2f39-4a2b-8bd8-5ad801426c7f?ui=en-US&rs=en-GB&ad=GB&fromAR=1
  - o Make information **easy-to-read** for both your students as well as for families that need support with language: https://easy-to-read.eu/
  - o Make sure that there are alternative options of presenting information, especially if you have students with sensory and/or learning disabilities (e.g. alternatives for visual info, alternatives for auditory info).
  - o If you are asking students to access websites and other online resources **take care of the accessibility of the resources**.
  - o If you are asking students to watch videos for their exams make sure there is **captioning**.

- **Resources: Search online for free assistive technology resources**.
  - o A number of manufacturers and dealers are offering their products free of charge for the crisis period. Find, collect and disseminate the links to your students
  - o Use lists available on the internet or elsewhere: Click here for an example of list of educational resources, Useful_educational_websites_eng.pdf
  - o Provide options and tools for participation. Here is an example of various useful applications: https://www.atandme.com/

- **Create short videos for guidance and demonstration**
  - Demonstration of Assistive Technology implementation and adaptations
  - Particular interventions and activities with assistive technology (e.g. use of specific approaches such as TEACCH, PECs etc)
  - Activities for Assistive Technology practice and technology (digital) skills development

- **If you are involved in the education of older students that need to take exams and other assessment procedures remotely, make sure that these are accessible:**
  - Provide for necessary adaptations (e.g. extra time, differentiation in assessment method, differentiations in materials and representation of information, accessibility, aural examination etc.)
  - Prepare alternative forms of assessment for some students (e.g. e-portfolios, simple language, shorter sentences)
  - Open Book exams: for some students this is chaotic! Help students to organize their notes/study by providing some guidance. You are not supposed to do this for them! But you can, for instance, provide a concept map or a structure of the course content that they need to study.
  - Oral Exams: adapt to students' profile (e.g. speak slowly, use simple language, or just read the questions of the test, etc.).

References and Useful Resources

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