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The dimensions of the role of the educator in distance learning environments in covid19 era

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Abstract

The global pandemic that unfolded in recent years has left indelible marks on all aspects of daily life and social interactions. Universally, the prevalent form that dominated the Covid-19 era for the educational process at all levels was the use of teleconferencing and electronic communication tools. Educators of this new era have faced multiple and unexpected changes that have brought about transformations in their roles. For this reason, in Section 2, the multidimensional nature of the educator, as influenced by the pandemic, will be analyzed. Specifically, the second section of the main part will highlight the elements adopted during this period that will continue to shape future educational practices for achieving maximum learning outcomes. In contrast, the third section will address the key challenges faced by educators during the period of changes, as studied in the relevant literature. The fourth section of this work will provide a specific example for discussion, illustrating the difficulties that emerged from the challenges mentioned in the previous section. Finally, useful conclusions will be drawn from the literature review and the analysis of the subject.

Keywords: Role of the educator; Distance Learning; Covid19; Education strategies

1. Introduction

Students worldwide, in both Western and Eastern societies (Tarkar, 2020; Sar & Nayir, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), faced unprecedented situations that elicited strongly negative emotions. Specifically, the pandemic affected nearly 1.6 billion students in more than 200 countries (Pokhler, Chherti, 2021). Consequently, the role of educators expanded to strengthen "the mental resilience of the student body to mitigate its negative impact" (Balta, 2022). According to Balta's study, educators were called upon to play the role of a psychologist, designing "psycho-educational actions" to alleviate unpleasant emotions and their impact on students' socio-emotional development. Lesson planning involved creating learning communities and using asynchronous technology for communication within and outside the course program, serving as essential tools in this direction.

As Zhu and Liu (2020) pointed out, the new trend in remote education signifies a shift from traditional teacher-centric activities, such as lecture formats, to more student-centered group collaborative activities focusing on discussion, experiential learning, and limiting traditional lectures. This evolution leads to the redefinition of both learning and the role of the educator (Flores, 2020). Regarding curriculum, it is now designed to meet the specific needs of students, with clear practical purposes based on the evolution and needs of learners (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). For these reasons, tools and technologies such as online course platforms (xMOOCS) and the use of social media were employed.

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2. Elements Utilized in the Post-COVID Era - Example of Best Practices

All the elements presented in the previous section are highly positive and deemed necessary for the evolution of the educational process and the achievement of multisensory lessons. Specifically, many of these elements could be integrated into courses of all specialties and at all levels for further student development and framing.

Educators, during remote teaching and their professional development, came into contact with various platforms and tools widely known for tele-education purposes, such as WebEx, e-class, e-me, as well as liveworksheets, and learningapps, as mentioned in the study by Manousou et al. (2020). In their research, Reimers et al. (2020) highlight multiple tools, their utility, the skills they help cultivate, and the satisfaction level they offered to educators in achieving their goals during this period. It is noteworthy that during this challenging period, educators are developing and adopting "best practices, attempting to highlight the potential of the educational community in post-COVID times," while simultaneously "experimenting with teaching/learning approaches, sharing them, interacting, receiving feedback, and improving them" (Manousou et al., 2020). This entire process of familiarizing themselves with tools and the trend of incorporating remote teaching techniques into conventional classes seems to have created a more interactive climate in classrooms in the post-COVID era.

Additionally, collaboration and interaction among educators have proven particularly useful in the 21st-century education and are leveraged for the benefit of students (Evangelia Manousou, 2021). In this collaborative atmosphere, educators make efforts to share ideas, materials, advice, and address their cognitive and emotional needs with their colleagues through social media, according to the research by Trust et al. (2021). The example of sharing among educators was a characteristic feature of the teachers at the 1st Primary School of Agios Athanasios, Thessaloniki, who shared the material they created, distributing the workload into small and manageable sections.

3. Challenges in the Covid-19 Era

Educators of the modern era faced multiple changes that undoubtedly triggered feelings of fear, anxiety, and distress. Specifically, with research conducted by Raikou et al. (2021), they arrived at valuable insights regarding the psychological synthesis of the average educator during the pandemic. Researchers identified emotions such as anxiety and reduced self-confidence related to the tasks they undertook during the pandemic.

Moreover, another significant challenge that emerged is the limited time available to educators for the design and creation of online lessons, as well as for their preparation (Daniel, 2020). As mentioned in the article by Anastasiadis (2020), this "Emergency Mode" situation without the possibility of "recovery" within a predictable timeframe created the need for fast and effective solutions. Distance education had to meet not only the cognitive needs of the educational population but also the "openness, (the) exploratory-discovery learning, (the) collaborative creativity, and (the) social solidarity," the fundamental characteristics of distance learning environments.

At the same time, serious issues of accessibility and electronic equipment availability on the part of students and educators should not be overlooked. There is talk of significant needs in many countries for reliable internet connection, while cases of students who did not have the financial means to purchase devices and equipment that would facilitate their participation in online classes are also mentioned (Pokhler, Chherti, 2021).

Furthermore, a sense of inadequacy on the part of educators is highlighted, stemming not only from a lack of resources but also from insufficient skills. In particular, the comprehensive study by Palaiologou et al. (2021) identified additional challenges faced by educators, who felt they had "insufficient technological knowledge, inadequate technological equipment, a lack of relevant experience in distance education and teaching, and the feeling that 'they won't make it,'" which not only induced fear but also resistance to the use of online classes, increasing their levels of anxiety.

4. Cases and Examples of Challenges

In the face of all these difficulties and challenges arising from the implementation of distance education programs, coupled with restrictions on people's movement and their close proximity, serious concerns have arisen regarding the education of students in purely practical fields and sciences, such as medicine. Specifically, concerns focus on the skills they need to acquire for the completion of surgical interventions. Given that the practical training and exposure of students to real surgical settings would jeopardize the integrity of both patients and their collaborators in hospitals (Chick et al., 2020), their practical training was suspended. With restrictions on medical students' interaction with real

patients to limit the spread of the pandemic, as well as hindrances to their attendance and completion of their studies, it has been argued that the educational system's ability to fully adapt to the realities

5. The role of digital tehnologies

Concluding, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education in Covid-19 era, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [19-22], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [23-42], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [43-50]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [51-79], accelerates and improves more than educational practices and results, especially in in Covid-19 era, treating domain and its practices like assessment and intervention.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, as observed through research in the relevant field, the COVID-19 era brought numerous challenges to educators, who were called upon to play multiple roles and develop various skills within a short period. All these skills and tools that were utilized can be universally employed by educators for the optimal performance of their students, even upon the return to conventional classrooms. Challenges and difficulties, as they arose and were effectively addressed, demonstrated the demanding role that educational institutions managed to play and how effectively educators rose to the occasion. It should also be noted that the study of research worldwide, beyond the narrow confines of Western European scientific studies, played a significant role in drawing these useful conclusions.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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