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Designing a digitally-supported intervention process for school refusers

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Abstract School refusal (SR) can affect one pupil per class and last for several months or years. These students, who tend to be more or less absent from school, pose a significant challenge for teachers. Indeed, teachers may find it difficult to understand these disorders and to implement solutions to keep students in school. It is therefore important to provide support and guidance to both teachers and pupils. Early identification of school refusal is one of the important factors so that appropriate action can be taken to avoid disruption to the student's career. The SCREEN test helps to identify at-risk students at an early stage, but simply identifying is not enough. To maintain a schooling environment that enables pupils to bypass anxiety factors associated with school, we propose a digital intervention process, offering face-to-face and distance learning sessions to meet the needs of SR students. An advisor ensures good communication between all parties involved and the SR pupils. Digital technology is being proposed as an intermediary between teachers and anxious pupils who refuse to attend school, its role being to deliver the same educational content that is provided in class. In summary, the proposal described in this paper aims to create a new ecological system for intervention and monitoring of pupils with school refusal due to anxiety.

Keywords: school refusal, eLearning, blended learning, education

1 Introduction

Pupils suffering from school refusal (SR) are "children who, for irrational reasons, refuse to go to school and resist with very strong anxiety or panic reactions when they are forced to do so" [1]. The figure of 1 to 5% of school-age children suffering from SR has been put forward in various scientific publications. The causes are manifold and may be rooted in the child's personal history or in school bullying [2].

The literature on SR is more developed in the field of psychology where therapeutic treatments are very well documented [3]. However, there is very little scientific literature in the field of education on schooling for SR pupils and there are no systemic provisions that allow for cooperation with educational institutions. In particular, there is a lack of research on specific types of schooling arrangements. Yet SR leads to high levels of absenteeism from school, and pupils are at high risk of dropping out if nothing is done. On a more positive note, the Covid pandemic showed that the use of digital technology could help dropouts return to school [4].

For the latter reason, this study proposes the design of a digital system to keep SR pupils in school according to their needs and the possibilities available in the school.

2 Methodology

In order to conceptualise a school intervention process based on a digital approach, it is necessary to be able to draw up an inventory of teaching practices among the various stakeholders: national education staff on the one hand, and pupils and their families on the other.

Semi-directive interviews were conducted with ten National Education staff. A questionnaire based on three main themes was used to address: (1) the staff's knowledge of the SR, (2) their use of digital technology and, finally, and (3) the different social ties that remained for pupils during the SR phase. Similarly, five pupils, contacted via APADHE¹ and the APS51 association², all of whom had gone through the SR, and four mothers answered a questionnaire on issues related to their school careers during the SR. They were able to talk about: (a) their difficulties, (b) their needs and facilitating factors at school, and (c) their use of digital technology.

The experiences of the SR pupils and their needs were confronted with the pedagogical difficulties of the school's stakeholders. The results enabled us to identify a number of important areas for possible remedial action. The outcome was the design of a digital-based teaching tool as part of a process for welcoming students into the school.

3 Results

3.1 Difficulties for teachers in dealing with school refusers

The different actors in the National Education system emphasised the clear difficulty of maintaining contact with the pupil when absences become too frequent: “*We put the pupil down as absent because we're used to the fact that he's absent on the application form, he's absent! And then that's it! We forgot about him!*” Teachers deplored the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the impossibility of providing continuity in teaching and, above all, of not knowing how to maintain contact with absent SR pupils: “*In the middle school, for example, we don't have much. Apart from the PAI³, we really have nothing. No, we have nothing!*”, “*To take care of such a child (...) takes a lot of energy because we spend a lot of time talking to each other, to the teachers, to...*” In their view, the lack of training and awareness of the problem among the various professionals in the education system makes it difficult to provide specific care in schools.

Even when digital tools are available in school, it is not easy for teachers to use them: “*It's more of a tool that they (the teachers) appreciate, that makes their lives easier. It will still take them a long time to load all the courses and write all their lessons on it.*”

¹ Educational support at home, in hospital or at school

² School refusal association 51 (Association Phobie Scolaire 51)

³ Individualised welcome project (Projet d'Accueil Individualisé)

3.2 School refusers and their needs

School refusers and their families have reported a prolonged period of inactivity between the onset of symptoms and diagnosis. Diagnosis may take several months or even more than a year, during which time absences from school may become more frequent and longer. In some cases, the lack of treatment and educational solutions can lead to complete withdrawal from school.

Pupils and their families also explained the difficulties involved in recovering lessons from teachers who may or may not pass them on: *“On the other hand, there are teachers who say that if he wants the lessons, all he has to do is ask his mates to give them to him. My son doesn't want to be the weakling who always must ask his friends for things”*. Recovering lessons could easily be done using the digital tools they have mastered through basic, everyday skills: *“I'm always either on my phone, my computer or my console. (...) If the lessons were sent out and there was a difficulty in understanding something, (...) because it's complicated to explain certain things in writing, it would have been much easier to do it on video.”*

Although the origin of the anxiety disorders developed by pupils and leading to an SR may or may not be related to the school environment, the stress generated by school is real.

During their SR, which can last several years, pupils' families also complain about the lack of continuity in their relationship with the school and the uncertainties expressed by the school system.

4 Discussion and proposal

The reflective analysis of the interviews allowed us to identify the issues related to the retention of SR students in school. In the rest of this paper, we propose several major areas of remediation for the education of SR students. These elements are part of a new ecological system based on a program of digital interventions [5] designed to meet the needs of these students and address the challenges they face in school. This system provides both intervention and follow-up support over time. However, this approach may require secondary school teachers to change their pedagogical paradigm. The traditional reference framework for face-to-face teaching needs indeed to be transformed into a hybrid model that combines distance learning for some subjects and face-to-face teaching for others.

As a result of the qualitative analysis, we propose the following interventions.

4.1 Change of procedure in student tracking

Students with SR in secondary education are usually identified through the GPDS⁴ due to absenteeism. They are often treated similarly to other students and may be at risk of dropping out of school if their psychological difficulties are not addressed. However,

⁴ Drop-out prevention group (Groupe de Prévention du Décrochage Scolaire)

the SCREEN⁵ tool can be used to identify and assess SR in schools [6]. This assessment can be used as a first step in identifying the cause of absenteeism and preventing prolonged absence, differentiating SR from other students. If a student displays moderate symptoms of SR and is frequently absent, they may benefit from the school's reception system we are proposing. On the other hand, cases involving complete withdrawal from school should be given priority for medical treatment. Students should not be enrolled in another support scheme to avoid having to deal with too many different individuals. In addition, literature shows that in order to use digital technologies the pupils must not be facing significant difficulties at school, as digital technology may increase the pupil's difficulties [7].

4.2 A mixed approach to school organisation

In primary and secondary education, all teaching is carried out strictly on a face-to-face basis. For SR pupils, the school intervention process provides for a timetable to be drawn up at school, with time spent in class with the other pupils and time in a quiet room. This arrangement should cover a part of the subjects, as computer work is very tiring for the student. The timetable arrangement is reviewed every two months and may not last longer than six months continuously to prevent fatigue caused by the use of digital technology. At the end of the 6 months, it is possible to replace the subjects taken by others [8].

4.3 An advisor to facilitate links between students, their families and teachers

In order to ensure a successful return to full-time education, it is crucial to maintain a consistent and continuous link between the school and the pupil, even in the event of further absences. A designated member of staff is responsible for collecting and organising information about the student, ensuring that the online subject material matches the student's progress in the home classroom and is distributed regularly. Their role is also to facilitate communication between the various parties, reassure the student and guide them through their school career [9]. Communicating with students can take place in face-to-face or digital tutorials to suit their needs, while for other staff this can be digital.

4.4 Digital technology as an educational tool

School teachers are mobilised to provide online lessons that follow the same progression as students' home lessons. The teachers involved in distance learning are not necessarily the teachers in the student's original teaching team. In turn, pupils upload their work to a digital space for correction and guidance from the teacher, who can communicate with them digitally. Standardised assessments should be avoided as they can cause anxiety [10]. An objective assessment that takes into account the work completed,

⁵ School REfusal EvaluationN

the skills developed, the long-term investment in the digital system and the effort expended can replace traditional assessments.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we argue that it is possible to provide schooling for anxious pupils who refuse to attend school by setting up a specific digital intervention process. This intervention may or may not be hosted in a school. The intervention program should take into account the needs of the pupils, in particular their difficulties in attending class due to anxiety about the school environment. In order for this intervention to be successful, teachers should change their teaching practices to combine face-to-face and distance learning. Finally, an advisor ensures that the whole intervention program runs smoothly over time. The proposed intervention process is currently undergoing testing in several secondary schools as part of a longitudinal exploratory study.

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