Department of Educational Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Aligning Disability principles with practice in pandemic crisis: redefining the problem(s)- recasting Solution(s) to support disabled students

Disabled students' educational and psycho-social experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis

Vlachou, A., Toulia, A., Fyssa, A., Papazis, F., Papazoglou, Th., Tsermidou, L., Kalaitzi, S

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Introduction

- One billion people worldwide live with an impairment, but they are often overlooked in discussions of pandemic preparedness and response (WHO, 2021).

- Disabled children and adolescents were at disproportionate risk of harm from Covid-19 because of their pre-existing medical conditions or their social circumstances (Sabatello, et al., 2020).

- They also experienced disproportionate loss of access to medical services, education, and care (Shakespeare, et al., 2021).

Introduction

- Extended school closures and transition to remote learning have increased pressure on students alike.

- The short- and long-term consequences of this pandemic for disabled students are especially concerning (Toste, et al., 2021) since even prior to COVID-19, disabled students have experienced inequities in the educational system.

- These inequities have been further compounded by the risk associated with COVID-19 (Hui, 2021).

Introduction

Such struggles were the following:

- in the educational shift from face-to-face to online/distance learning processes disabled children and adolescents were not the priority, as their non-disabled peers;

- educational stakeholders wrongly assumed that each family could provide accessible computer- and internet-enabling technologies to support their children's education;

- educational stakeholders wrongly assumed that each disabled learner resides in a house with a family member with skills and/or time to help them; and

- teachers, therapists and other professionals were ill-prepared to fill the gap between remote teaching and disabled learners' development (Feinberg, 2020; Koran, 2020; Nadworny, 2020; Preston, 202).

Aim of the study & Research questions

- **How did disabled students experience the quarantine period during the pandemic crisis?**

- **What were their experiences of distance learning and returning to school in relation to measures during the pandemic?**

- **What were/are the perspectives of parents of disabled students on the way(s) schools responded to the educational and psychosocial needs of their children during the pandemic?**

Disabled students

N of disabled students	47
Male	30
Female	15
Regular schools	21
Special schools	24

Students aged 10-8 years old.

Type of students' impairment (N)	
Autistic spectrum disorder	18
Intellectual disability	10
Sensory impairment	7
Motor impairment	1
Multiple forms of impairment	8

Parents of disabled students

N of parents	125
Female	78.4% (98)
Male	21.6% (27)
Living areas	
Urban areas	109
Rural areas	16
Type of family	
Nuclear	60% (75)
Single-parent	21.6% (27)
Extended	18.4% (23)

Age of parents (years old)	
Below or equal to 30	0.8% (1)
31-40	16% (20)
41-50	58.4% (73)
51-60	25.6% (32)
61 or elder	1.6% (2)

Level of education	
Undergraduate degree	56.8% (71)
Master degree	22.4% (28)
PhD	2.4% (3)
Vocational training schools	22.4% (28)

Parents of disabled students – students' demographics

Type of students' disability	
Autistic spectrum disorder	62%
Intellectual disability	15.2%
Multiple impairments	12%
Physical impairment	7.2%
Visual impairment	2.4%
ADHD & speech problem	1 student

Type of school attended	
Regular school	50.4%
Special school	49.6%

54.4% preschool-aged and primary-school aged children

2/3 female
1/3 male

Instruments of the study

Interview

- **everyday life during COVID-19 quarantine period,**

- **distance learning experiences, and**

- **educational and social experiences when returning to schools after the quarantine phase**

Instruments of the study

5-point Likert type Questionnaire

- The first section included questions focusing on socio-demographic information
- The second section
  - provided timely and appropriate information and school organization in alignment with the COVID-19 response measures;
  - employed practices that facilitated disabled children's inclusion in distance educational processes as well as during their transition to learning in the school campus; and
  - promoted empowerment for parents with the aim to gain 'self-help' and 'self-reliance.'

Results of the study
Students' perspectives

Disabled students' perspectives

- While students at the beginning of the remote learning expressed positive feelings towards the closure of schools, soon these feelings were replaced by **boredom** and an **eagerness to return to their school routine**.

- Most of the student participants expressed the view that **face-to-face instruction was more beneficial to them** than remote learning due to various factors, (i.e., better communication with the teacher, absence of technical issues, more tiring being in front of the screen for so many hours per day).

- Most of the students agreed that the use of asynchronous platforms was very limited. Most of the teachers in both regular and special schools used the **platforms only for uploading homework**.

- Communication between students and teachers was solely restricted to the synchronous learning.

Educational and psycho-social challenges

- Several disabled students experienced difficulties in attending remote classes.
  - Especially students with specific types of impairment, like autism and sensory impairments, expressed their dissatisfaction with the new form of learning that they had to experience.

Educational and psycho-social challenges

- Another difficulty experienced by several students was the use and navigation through the online.

  - In most cases, their parents helped them to overcome those difficulties. However, there were cases of students who were familiar with the use of computer and they did not face significant challenges in this aspect of learning.

  - Almost all of the student participants faced at some point of remote learning connectivity issues which hindered their effective learning.

Educational and psycho-social challenges

- Another challenge experienced by disabled students during the quarantine phase was the pause of their therapeutic sessions.

- As far as the social component of the educational experience is concerned, several disabled students felt that they were excluded by their peer group and missed their interactions with their school friends.

- As a conclusion, disabled students in most cases expressed their dissatisfaction in regard to remote learning. Most of them who attended regular schools mentioned in their accounts that shortly after the implementation of remote learning they felt ill-supported and eager to return to their previous school routine.

Positive experiences during the implementation of remote learning

- While most students shared difficulties in participating in remote learning, there were several of them who experienced positive feelings during this new educational experience.

  - Bill, a student with autism, claimed that remote learning offered him the peacefulness he needed in order to be productive and learn better.

  - Another student in the autistic spectrum, Gregor, was really enthusiastic by his English lesson. The teacher was using several digital tools which were really helpful for him to stay focused and enjoy the remote lesson, while his regular ed. teacher did not make such accommodations making him feel ill-supported.

Positive experiences during the implementation of remote learning

- Most of the student participants shared feeling proud of themselves following and adapting to the new rules and restrictions in their lives, like wearing face masks, washing their hands and keeping distance from each other.

Educational and psycho-social support

- In most cases of students there was an evident absence of psychological support offered to students during the quarantine.

- Specifically, disabled students who attended regular schools highlighted the inability of their special ed. teachers to adopt their role and offer them support during remote learning.

- Most of the interviewed students felt alone and turned to their parents to receive the support needed to meet the demands of remote learning.

Educational and psycho-social support

- Most of the disabled students who attended both regular and special schools claimed that the psychologists were absent, and they could not be reached during the quarantine phase.

- It was also evident in students' experiences that they needed support to handle various circumstances, like the fear of getting sick and the difficulty, in some cases, to adopt the new routine and lifestyle with all these restrictions.

- A factor which seemed to affect students' accounts is the type of impairment.

Educational and psycho-social support

- A student with visual impairment complained about the inability of the type of distance learning to adopt to her visual impairment. It was too difficult for her to join the online courses that were solely dependent on a computer screen. In order to be able to follow the course, she needed constant support from another person; usually her parents played that role.

- They further shared that regular ed. teachers did not take any initiative to adopt the materials used during online courses to students with sensory disabilities.

- Another barrier in the development of the skills of disabled students was the pause of most of the sessions attended by them in the after-school hours, like speech and language, occupational and physio-therapies.

Returning to school- Emerging from lockdown

- A challenge experienced by most of the students with sensory impairments was keeping distance between them when returning to schools after the quarantine. It was difficult for them to be able to communicate with their classmates, whilst following this safety measure.

- When disabled students returned to school after the quarantine, almost all of them agreed that using face mask was the most demanding task they had to perform because of their difficulty to breath.

Results of the study
Parents' perspectives

Practices employed by teachers and school staff to support disabled children and their parents during COVID-19 **1/2**

Domain	Statement: I believe that…	N	M	SD
Providing information and school organization in accordance with the COVID-19 measures (M=3.05, SD=0.88)	Professionals informed my child about the pandemic and prevention measures (e.g., wearing a mask) according to his/her age and communication needs	125	3.94	1.09
	Professionals showed respect and understanding about my questions related to COVID-19	125	3.82	1.15
	I received prompt and clear information about COVID-19 preventive measures implemented in the school and community	125	3.74	1.07
	At least one professional was available to provide further clarification about the organizational processes followed in the school using language I could understand	125	3.45	1.30
	Professionals supported the smooth transitions of my child from in-person to distance learning	125	2.17	1.37
	Professionals supported the smooth transition of my child from distance education back to their schools	125	2.16	1.34
	The school provided educational seminars for parents on distance communication via the official educational platforms as offered by the Greek Ministry of Education (e.g., Webex or eclass) and/or informal ways (e.g., viber, messenger, email)	125	2.06	1.32

Practices employed by teachers and school staff to support disabled children and their parents during COVID-19

Domain	Statement: I believe that...	N	M	SD
Supporting transition from quarantine and distance education back to schools implementing mitigation responses to COVID-19 (M=2.87, SD=1.12)	Professionals organized the indoor and outdoor physical environment in the school by adapting the COVID-19 mitigation measures to the school's needs	125	3.46	1.37
	Professionals created protection signs against COVID-19 according to all children's age and their individual needs and placed them in accessible areas	125	3.09	1.41
	Professionals developed school activities to promote child-peer social interactions in the school after the lockdown	125	2.75	1.32
	Professionals taught children new ways of communication according to the protection measures against COVID-19 and their individual needs	125	2.72	1.38
	Teachers designed the educational program according to all children's educational needs with the aim to cover those that remained uncovered in distance education	125	2.66	1.36
	Professionals developed school activities to provide emotional support for all students, given the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and the school life	125	2.57	1.38

Practices employed by teachers and school staff to support disabled children and their parents during COVID-19

Domain	Statement: I believe that…	N	M	SD
Distance education (M=2.46, SD=1.05)	Teachers and/or school therapists adapted the steps for connecting to distance communication apps given the device that was available in my family (mobile phone, tablet or computer)	125	2.90	1.39
	Teachers processed distance learning in ways that ensured my child's active participation	125	2.81	1.39
	Teachers and/or school therapists adapted the steps to connect to formal (e.g., Webex) or informal distance communication apps (e.g., viber, messenger) according to my child's individual needs	125	2.80	1.42
	Teachers used pictures and/or videos to facilitate social communication for my child in distance learning processes	125	2.69	1.33
	Distance education processed in ways that ensured my child's progress in academic-oriented subjects, such as Maths and Greek Language	125	2.54	1.37
	Teachers embedded my child's individual goals in distance learning processes	125	2.50	1.39
	In distance education, teachers effectively managed my child's behavior	125	2.49	1.32
	Teachers differentiated in-class and homework activities during distance learning according to my child's individual needs	125	2.45	1.35

Practices employed by teachers and school staff to support disabled children and their parents during COVID-19

Domain	Statement: I believe that…	N	M	SD
Distance education (M=2.46, SD=1.05)	Teachers differentiated their instruction during distance learning according to my child's individual needs	125	2.43	1.32
	In distance education procedures, teachers promoted the social interactions between my child and his/her peers	125	2.36	1.23
	Distance education processed in ways that ensured my child's progress in subjects including, for example, Arts and Music	125	2.37	1.28
	Teachers created conditions that promoted my child's socialization	125	2.35	1.30
	The assistive technology that my child used at school was available to us at home to facilitate his or her involvement in distance learning processes (Not applicable)	21	2.33	1.39
	School therapists (e.g., occupational therapists) effectively processed distance therapeutic sessions promoting my child's individual therapeutic goals (Not applicable)	35	2.11	1.57
	Alternative communication systems that my child used at school were available at home to facilitate his or her involvement in distance learning processes (Not applicable)	34	2.06	1.35
	School therapists (e.g., speech-therapists, occupational-therapists) embedded my child's individual therapeutic goals in everyday activities at home (Not applicable)	34	2.00	1.44
	In my child's school, a psychologist or social worker was employed to remotely support children to deal with quarantine (e.g., routine management)	125	1.90	1.24

Parents Responses: Providing information and school organization in accordance with COVID-19 measures

- Teachers and school staff provided information in appropriate ways concerning their children's age and communication needs **(72.8%)**

- Teachers and school staff treated them in respectful ways and offered clear and prompt information about COVID-19 preventive measures **(68%)**

- At least one professional was available to provide clarification about school organization during COVID-19 **(56.8%)**

Parents Responses: Supporting transitions from school to distance education and back to schools

- The school had not organized seminars on distance education methods for parents **(66.4%)**

- The school had not supported smooth transition for their children from in-person to distance learning **(62.4%)**

- The school had not supported smooth transitions from quarantine and distance education back to their schools **(63.2%)**

Conclusions-Students' perspectives

- Most of the student participants expressed the view that face-to-face instruction is more beneficial to them than remote learning due to various factors, such as better communication with the teacher, absence of technical issues and more tiring being in front of the screen for so many hours per day.

- Several disabled students experienced difficulties in attending remote classes.

- Disabled students in most cases expressed their dissatisfaction in regard to remote learning. Most of them who attended regular schools mentioned that shortly after the implementation of remote learning they felt ill-supported and eager to return to their school routine.

Conclusions-Students' perspectives 2/2

- Most of the participating students found being proud of themselves following and adapting the new rules and restrictions in their lives, like wearing face masks, washing their hands and keeping distance from each other

- In most cases of students there was an evident absence of psychological support offered to students during the quarantine.

- Another barrier in the development of the skills of disabled students was the pause of most of the sessions attended by them in the after-school hours, like speech and language, occupational and physio therapies.

Conclusions-Parents' perspectives

- "Providing information in accordance to COVID-19 measures" was the best-evaluated domain reflecting on the minimal level of support offered to disabled students and their parents during the pandemic by schools

- All statements received below the midrange of the 5-point Likert scale concerning the promotion of inclusion of disabled students in distance education (minimal adaptation of apps, devices and platforms used as educational and communicational tools)

- For most parents their disabled children struggled to engage when not physically situated in the classroom environment

Conclusions-Parents' perspectives

- In most schools, no psychologists or social workers were available to emotionally support children or help them deal with the challenges of quarantine life

- Most of the parents did not receive support from teachers or school staff to help them deal with the demands caused by COVID-19 with regard to their children.

- Only one third of parents collaborated with teachers and school staff to support their disabled children's access and participation in distance learning processes as well as their transition from distance education back to their schools

Recommendations

- Rebuilding the relationship between parents and schools, teachers, psychologists and other professionals so that parents could feel fully aware and supported on how to deal with their children educational and psycho-social needs (necessary training in normal circumstances)

- Counselling programs for parents in anticipation of similar emergency conditions in supporting them deal with their children's needs at home

- Provide clear written instructions and directions to both disabled students and their parents helping them in accessing and feeling supported during quarantine and moving back to face-to-face learning

Recommendations

- Government and interested agencies need to investigate and find ways to improve the nature and quality of support offered to both disabled students and their families

- In order to improve distance education and offer the needed psycho-social support to disabled students, schools and parents should collaborate to overcome all home- and school-related challenges

Thank you
anavl@eds.uoa.gr