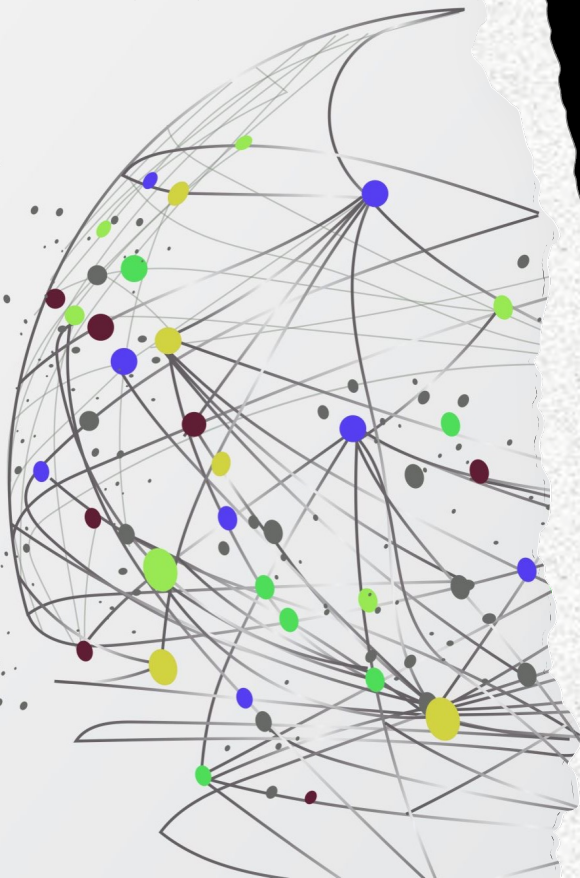


ECER 2023, 22/8, 17.15-18.45



Exploring Disabled Children's Inclusion and Parental Empowerment from School Closure to School Re-opening during COVID-19

Aristea Fyssa¹, Anastasia Toulia²
Filippos Papazis³, Anastasia Vlachou³,
Stavroula Kalaitzi³, Theodora Papazoglou³

¹Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras

²Department of Special Education, University of Thessaly

³Department of Educational Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Theoretical Background

Psychosocial challenges and inequalities in education for disabled pupils

(e.g., Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Dickinson et al., 2021; Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Jacques et al., 2021; Mbazzi et al., 2020; Paulauskaite et al., 2021; Symeonidou, 2022; Verengue et al., 2021)

Emotion regulation?

Social participation in peer groups?

Communication with teachers and other professionals?

Access and participation in distance education procedures?

Return in school sites and participation in learning processes?

Theoretical Background

Disabled pupils tended to rely on their parents for their education

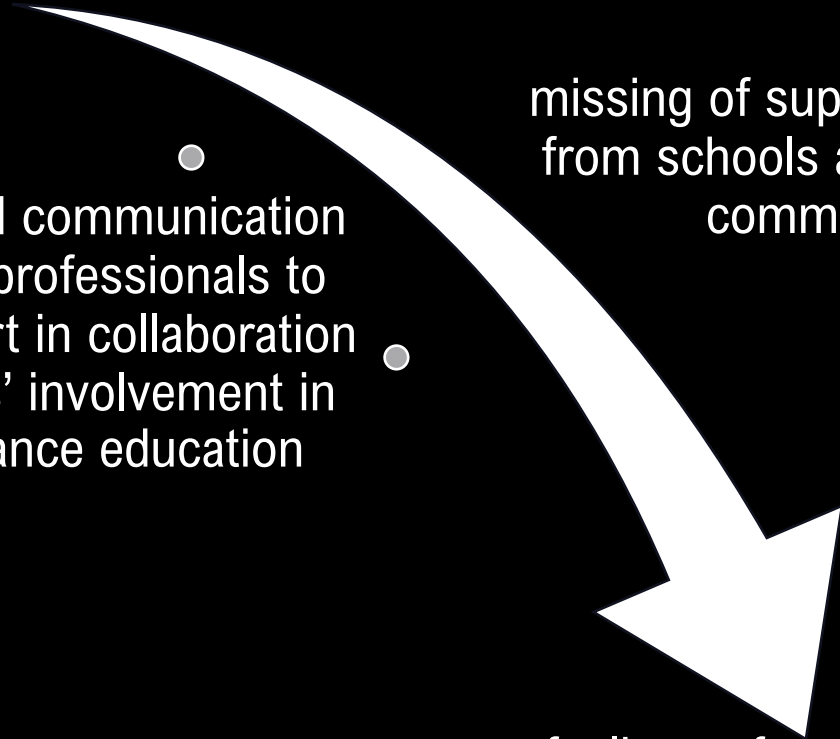
(e.g., Alhuzimi, 2021; Althiabi, 2021; Cacciopo et al., 2021; Singal et al., 2021; Valincenti-McDermott et al., 2022)

inadequately prepared

limited communication with professionals to support in collaboration pupils' involvement in distance education

missing of support services from schools and from the community

feelings of anxiety, stress, insecurity and low-level of emotional well-being



Research Questions

- *RQ1*: What type of practices were the teachers and school staff deployed to cover the educational and psychosocial needs of disabled students and empower the parents' supportive role during the COVID-19?
- *RQ2*: Is there a relationship between parents' responses about the supportive practices deployed by teachers and school staff and their socio-demographic profile as well as the profile of their disabled children?

Methodology *Sample (1)*

$N = 125$

- Parents of disabled students
- Recruited from 32 non-profit advocacy groups and organizations representing parents of children and young people with various disabilities
- Ethical approval from the research committee of the University Department of Educational Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens 32943/4-4-2022

Methodology Sample (2)

Table 1. Parents' profiles.

Characteristics	n	%
Gender (<i>women</i>)	98	78,4%
Age (<i>41-50 years old</i>)	73	58,4%
Education level (<i>University Degree</i>)	71	56,8%
Occupational status (<i>working in the public or private sector</i>)	45 or 33	36,0% or 26,4%
Location of the family's home (<i>urban areas</i>)	109	87,2%
Type of family (<i>nuclear family</i>)	75	60,0%
Children present in the household (<i>two children</i>)	63	50,8%

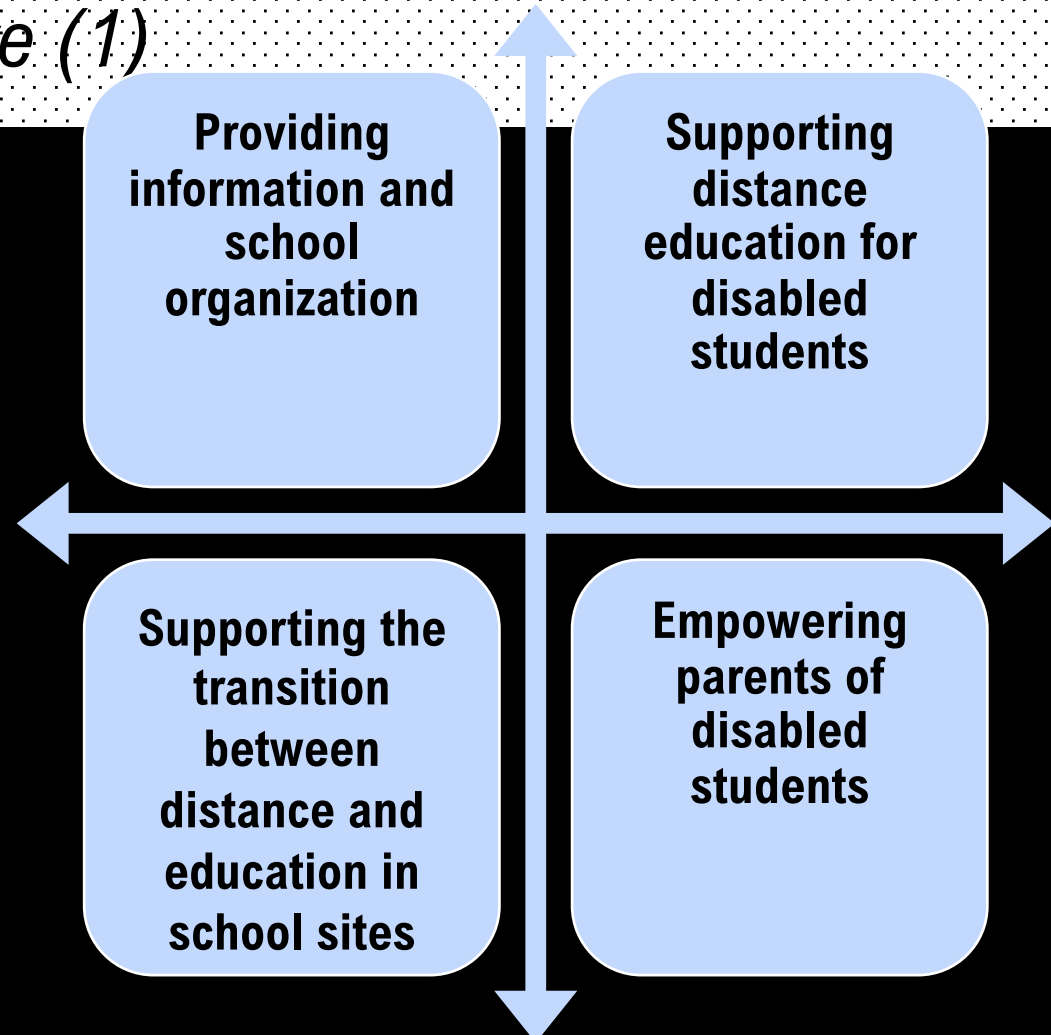
Table 2. Disabled students' profiles.

Characteristics	n	%
Gender (<i>boys</i>)	84	67,2%
Age (<i>preschool- and primary school-aged or secondary school-aged</i>)	68 or 53	56,2% or 43,7%
Type of school attendance (<i>special or regular school</i>)	62 or 63	49,6% or 50,4%
Type of disability (<i>in the autism spectrum</i>)	78	62,0%
Users of alternative communication systems	34	27,2%
Users of assistive technology	21	16,8%

Methodology Questionnaire (1)

A two-part questionnaire

- Part 1 – Closed questions about the participants' demographic characteristics
- Part 2 – 55 statements describing four domains of research-based (e.g., Couper-Kenney & Riddell 2021; Dickinson et al. 2021; Singal et al. 2021) practices of support from schools during the COVID-19 period. A 5-point Likert-type scale was employed.



Methodology Questionnaire (2)

Table 3. Cronbach alpha coefficients of the four domains of the survey questionnaire.

Domains of the survey questionnaire	Cronbach as
Providing information and school organization	0.83
Supporting distance education for disabled students	0.85
Supporting the transition between distance and education in school sites	0.82
Empowering parents of disabled students	0.81

Table 4. Intercorrelations among the four domains of the survey questionnaire.

Domains of the survey questionnaire	1	2	3	4
1 Providing information and school organization	-			
2 Supporting distance education for disabled students	0.59**	0.57-		
3 Supporting the transition between distance and education in school sites	0.67**	0.57**	-	
4 Empowering parents of disabled students	0.65**	0.61**	0.67**	-

** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Results

Results *Support practices offered by schools to disabled students and their parents*

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the survey questionnaire's individual domains.

Domains of the survey questionnaire	M	SD	Min	Max
Providing information and school organization	3.05	0.88	1	5
Supporting distance education for disabled students	2.45	1.05	1	5
Supporting the transition between distance education and education in school sites	2.87	1.12	1	5
Empowering parents of disabled students	2.25	1.03	1	5

Table 5a. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to provide information and organization in accordance with the COVID-19 measures.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
Teachers and school staff informed my child about the pandemic and prevention measures (e.g., keeping distance from others, wearing a mask) in appropriate ways according to his or her age and communication needs	3.94	24,0% (16/125)	72,8% (91/125)
Teachers and school staff showed respect and understanding in my questions related to the COVID-19	3.82	13,6% (17/125)	68,0% (85/125)
I received prompt and clear information about COVID-19 preventive measures implemented in the school and community	3.74	16,0% (20/125)	63,2% (79/125)
At least one professional was available in the school to provide further clarification about the organizational processes followed in the school using language or vocabulary I could understand	3.45	24,0% (30/125)	56,8% (91/125)
Teachers and school staff deployed practices to support the smooth transition from in-person to distance learning for my child	2.17	62,4% (78/125)	20,8% (26/125)
Teachers and school staff deployed practices to support the smooth transition from distance education back to their schools for my child	2.16	63,2% (77/125)	22,4% (28/125)
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)	2.06	66,4% (83/125)	17,6% (22/125)

Table 5b. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to support the transition between distance and education in school sites.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
Professionals organized the indoor and outdoor physical environment in the school by adapting the COVID-19 mitigation services to the school's needs	3.46	27,2% (34/125)	59,2% (91/125)
Professionals created signs for protection against COVID-19 according to all children's age and their individual needs (also including my child's needs) in the school and placed them in accessible areas indoors and outdoors	3.09	35,2% (44/125)	47,2% (59/125)
Professionals developed school activities to promote child-peer social interactions in the school after the general lockdown	2.75	44,8% (56/125)	30,4% (38/125)
Professionals taught children about the new ways of social communication according to the protection measures against COVID-19 and their individual needs (also including my child's needs)	2.72	48,0% (60/125)	34,4% (33/125)
Teachers designed the educational program according to all children's educational needs (also including my child's needs) with the aim to cover those that remained uncovered due to distance education	2.66	48,0% (60/125)	28,0% (35/125)
Professionals developed school activities to provide emotional support for all students, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and the school life	2.57	50,4% (63/125)	25,6% (32/125)

Table 5c. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to support the distance education for disabled students.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
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	(N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*
The alternative communication systems that my child used at school were available to us at home to facilitate his or her involvement in distance learning processes (N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*
School therapists (e.g., speech-therapists, occupational-therapists) effectively processed distance therapeutic sessions and, thus, promoted my child's individual therapeutic goals (N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*
School therapists (e.g., speech-therapists, occupational-therapists) embedded my child's individual therapeutic goals in everyday activities at home (N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*	(N/A)*
Teachers and/or school therapists adapted the steps to connect to distance communication apps on the basis of the device that was available in my family (mobile phone, tablet or computer)	2.90	46,4% (58/125)	39,2% (49/125)
Teachers processed distance learning in ways that ensured my child's active participation	2.81	47,2% (59/125)	36,0% (45/125)
Teachers and/or school therapists adapted the steps to connect to formal (e.g., Webex, eclass) or informal distance communication apps (e.g., viber, messenger, email) according to my child's individual needs	2.80	47,2% (59/125)	34,4% (43/125)
Teachers used pictures and/or videos to facilitate social communication for my child in distance learning processes	2.69	53,6% (67/125)	29,6% (37/125)
The distance education processed in ways that ensured my child's progress in academic-oriented subjects, such as Maths and Greek Language	2.54	65,6% (82/125)	20,8% (34/125)
Teachers embedded my child's individual goals in distance learning processes	2.50	60,0% (75/125)	28,0% (35/125)

Table 5c. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to support the distance education for disabled students.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
In distance education procedures, teachers effectively managed my child's behavior	2.49	59,2% (74/125)	25,6% (32/125)
Teachers differentiated in-class and homework activities during distance learning according to my child's individual needs	2.45	59,2% (74/125)	24,8% (23/125)
Teachers differentiated their instruction during distance learning according to my child's individual needs	2.43	58,4% (73/125)	27,2% (34/125)
Teachers differentiated the educational material used in distance learning processes in ways that responded to my child's educational needs	2.43	60,8% (76/125)	25,6% (32/125)
The distance education processed in ways that ensured my child's progress in subjects including, for example, Arts and Music	2.37	65,6% (82/125)	20,8% (26/125)
In distance education procedures, teachers promoted the social interactions between my child and his or her peers	2.36	60,8% (76/125)	18,4% (23/125)
Teachers created conditions in distance education that promoted my child's socialization	2.35	60,0% (75/125)	20,0% (25/125)
In my child's school, a psychologist or social worker was activated to remotely support children to deal with quarantine (e.g., routine management, free time)	1.90	73,6% (92/125)	14,4% (18/125)
In my child's school, a psychologist or social worker was activated to remotely provide emotional support to children during quarantine	1.85	74,4% (93/125)	12,8% (16/125)

(Continued)

Table 5d. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to empower the parents of disabled students.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
I felt that school professionals were respectful of my family's needs and priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic	3.05	40,0% (50/125)	45,6% (57/125)
The school informed me about my rights as a parent under the COVID-19 legislation and ministerial decisions	2.86	45,6% (57/125)	40,0% (50/125)
I worked with school professionals to facilitate my child's smooth transition from quarantine and distance education back to school	2.86	41,6% (52/125)	36,0% (45/125)
I worked with school professionals to promote my child's access to and participation in distance learning processes	2.77	47,2% (59/125)	35,2% (44/125)
I was actively involved in making decisions about the individual goals of my child during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.67	51,2% (64/125)	31,2% (39/125)
I maintained constant communication with school professionals and their feedback made me feel confident in my ability to support my child's education in online home-schooling throughout the COVID-19 pandemic	2.69	51,2% (64/125)	32,8% (41/125)
I maintained constant communication with school professionals and their feedback made me feel confident in my ability to support my child's emotions (e.g., stress, anxiety) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic	2.44	59,2% (76/125)	26,4% (33/125)
I had access to information about the type and quality of support my child received from the school professionals throughout the COVID-19 pandemic	2.34	60,8% (76/125)	21,6% (27/125)
When problems arose with my child, school professionals helped me to deal with them throughout the COVID-19 period	2.33	62,4% (78/125)	23,2% (29/125)
School professionals encouraged other parents and me to interact and support each other throughout the COVID-19 pandemic	2.18	67,2% (84/125)	20,0% (25/125)

Table 5d. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to empower the parents of disabled students.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
School professionals informed me about available free resources to understand my child's emotional or behavioral difficulties (e.g., sleeping difficulties, eating problems, leisure time management difficulties) during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.14	64,0% (80/125)	20,0% (25/125)
Professionals encouraged me to tell what I think about the support my child received from the school during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.08	68,0% (85/125)	16,8% (21/125)
School professionals encouraged me to share my personal struggles I faced every day at home throughout the COVID-19 pandemic	2.06	71,2% (89/125)	16,8% (21/125)
School professionals in the school informed me on the services or organizations (e.g., health, psychological/counselling or social services) for children and families that were available in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.05	67,2% (84/125)	26,0% (20/125)
I had access to psychological/counselling services (within or outside the school) to help me maintain hope, optimism, and positive feelings about my child and family or the situation we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.04	71,2% (89/125)	17,6% (22/125)
School professionals supported me in taking the initiative to find the services that my child and family needed during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.02	70,4% (88/125)	17,6% (22/125)
School professionals worked collaboratively with the professionals I had activated outside the school to better support my child and family during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.02	71,2% (89/125)	18,4% (23/125)
I had access to psychological/counselling services (within or outside the school) to help me understand and deal with difficult emotions (e.g., anger, fear of death, stress anxiety, depression) about my child or the situation we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic	2.00	71,2% (89/125)	18,4% (23/125)

(Continued)

Table 5d. Mean and frequency of strategies employed by teachers and school staff to empower the parents of disabled students.

Statement: I believe that...	M	Disagreement or low agreement	High or very high agreement
School professionals helped me gain control over my family life during the COVID-19 pandemic.	1.92	75,2% (94/125)	16,0% (20/125)
School professionals encouraged me to get into contact and share my emotions with other parents who experienced similar difficulties to my own throughout the COVID-19 pandemic	1.86	75,2% (94/125)	12,0% (15/125)
School professionals helped me educate and engage other family members and/or friends, who were members of my secure bubble during the COVID-19 pandemic, to share the challenges I faced with my disabled child	1.82	78,4% (98/125)	14,4% (18/125)
School professionals helped me to solve problems concerning my other children and/or family members during the COVID-19 pandemic	1.75	80,0% (100/125)	12,8% (16/125)
School professionals supported me to focus also on my own health, needs, work and/or interests during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis	1.74	80,8% (101/125)	12,0% (15/125)

(Continued)

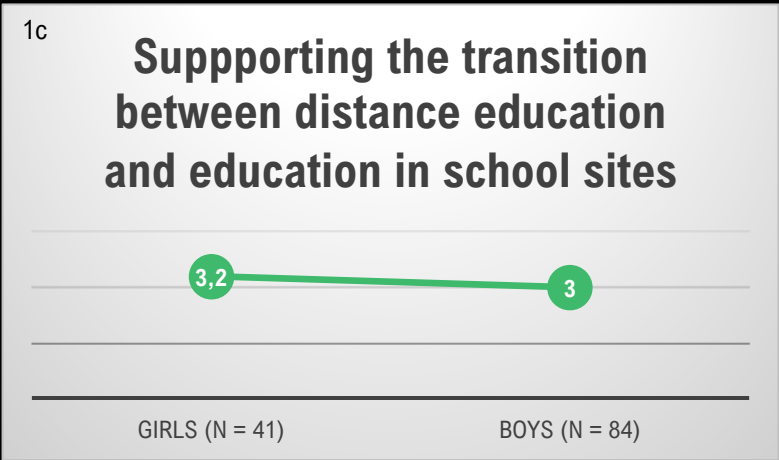
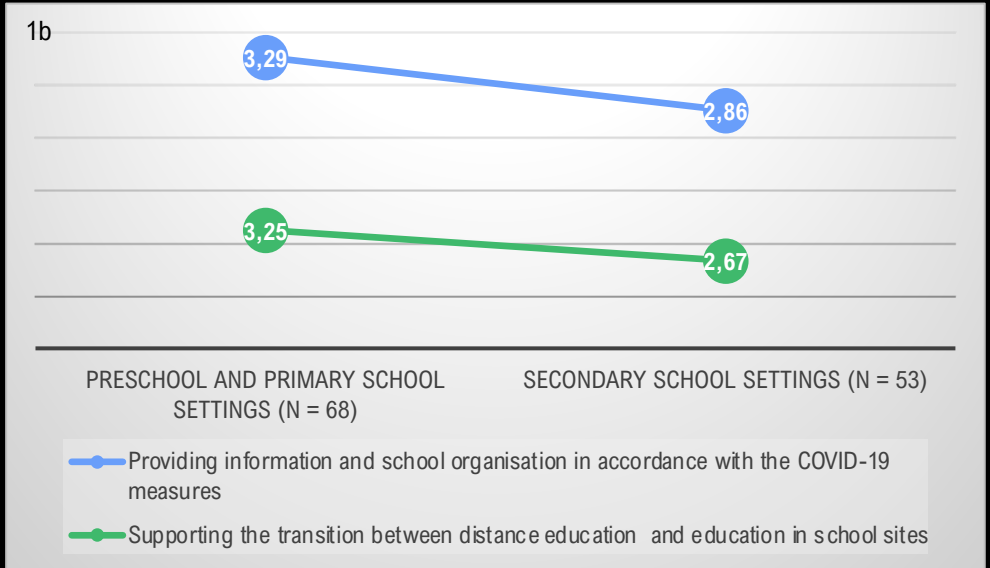
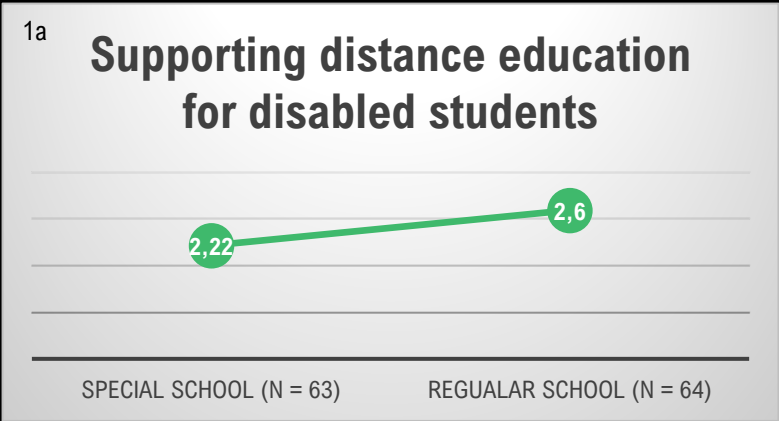
Results *Variables affected parents' perspectives (1)*

Table 6. Correlations (Spearman rho) between parents' responses and aspects of their profiles and their families.

Profile characteristics	Domains of school practices of support	
	Parental empowerment	Supporting distance education for disabled students
Parents' level of education	-0.180*	-
Number of disabled and non-disabled children in the household	-	-0.199*

* $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Results *Variables affected parents' perspectives (2)*



Figures 1a, 1b, 1c. Parents' perspectives about school practices of support in the COVID-19 era by type of school setting and level of school attendance and their disabled child's gender.

Conclusions *(In relation to RQ1)*

- Most Greek parents felt poorly supported during the quarantine and distance education as well as during the transition of school services in school sites in the COVID-19 period.
- While they claimed that they received adequate information and experienced a school organisation which was to some degree helpful, school professionals were not able to promote their disabled children's active participation in the learning processes and to offer them the needed psychosocial support.
- In a context, where also no direction was given to schools by the Ministry of Education about how to build and ensure quality parent-professional partnerships during crisis times, parents were not felt empowered.

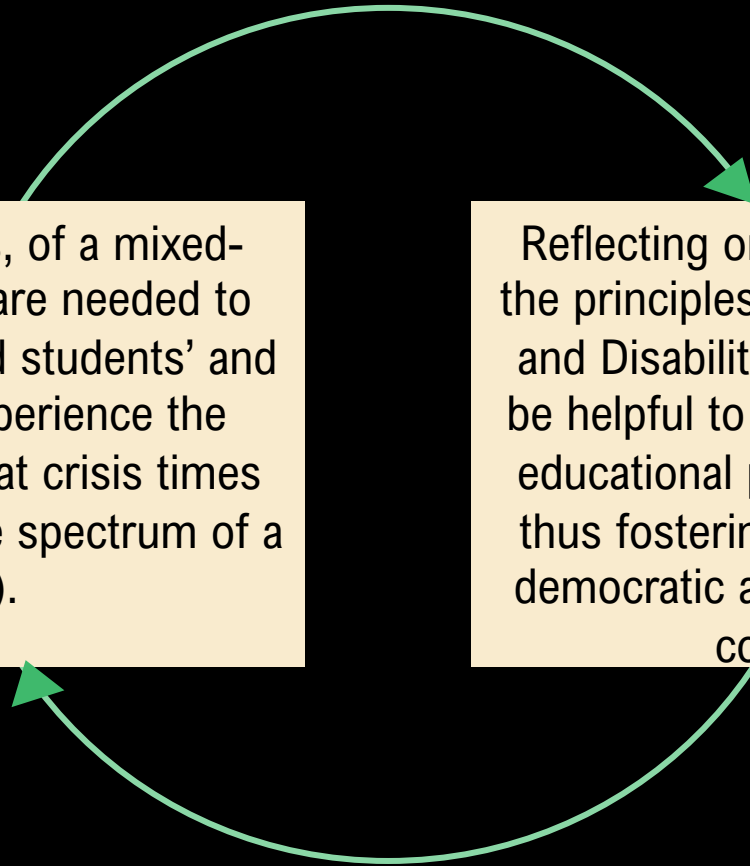
Conclusions *(In relation to RQ2)*

- Parents with a higher level of education rated lower the 'parental empowerment' domain of the supportive practices.
- In the households where more than one child were present, disabled children experienced many difficulties in distance education.
- When we compared parents' responses according to their disabled children's school placement, we found more positive beliefs about the delivery of distance education in regular than in special schools in Greece.
- Lastly, parents' of girls and preschool-aged and primary school-aged children were more positive about how professionals responded to their disabled children's needs during the re-opening of schools and, only the second group, about the provision of information and school organisation, as well.

A way forward

Additional studies, of a mixed-methods design, are needed to unveil how disabled students' and their parents' experience the school processes at crisis times (covering the whole spectrum of a crisis).

Reflecting on their voices through the principles of Inclusive Education and Disability Studies fields would be helpful to critically challenge the educational policies and practices, thus fostering the development of democratic and sustainable school communities.



The ALDiSo team thanks you very much!



eds.uoa.gr



aldiso@eds.uoa.gr

aldiso



H.F.R.I.
Hellenic Foundation for
Research & Innovation

