



COVID-19 Impacts on Special Education : Challenges and Innovations

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges to the education sector worldwide. Special education faced unique obstacles due to its tailored approach to cater to the needs of students with disabilities and learning differences. This review paper examines the challenges faced by special education during the pandemic and explores the innovative strategies and technologies that emerged to address these issues. The analysis highlights the importance of adapting to the "new normal" while fostering inclusivity and equal educational opportunities for all students.

Keyword: COVID-19, Pandemic, Special Education, Disabilities, Learning Differences

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 led to unprecedented disruptions in various sectors, including education. Among the most impacted groups were students with disabilities and learning differences, who rely on specialized education and support systems to meet their unique needs. The sudden closure of schools and transition to remote learning posed significant challenges for special education providers, educators, students, and their families. Special education is a critical aspect of the educational landscape, striving to ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, receives a meaningful and inclusive learning experience. It tailors instructional methods, services, and accommodations to meet the diverse needs of students with a range of disabilities, such as intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional, and developmental disabilities. The pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to remote and hybrid learning models, creating novel barriers for special education practitioners who were already working to address pre-existing educational disparities. Maintaining the quality of services, individualized education plans (IEPs), and therapeutic interventions in a virtual setting became a daunting task. This review paper aims to explore the specific challenges faced by special education during the COVID-19 pandemic and delve into the innovative strategies and technologies that emerged to overcome these obstacles. By analyzing the successes and failures of these adaptations, we can gain valuable insights into reshaping special education practices in the face of future crises and fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students. In doing so, we can better understand how to create a resilient and effective special education system capable of navigating the ever-changing landscape of education during and beyond the pandemic.

Challenges Faced by Special Education:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, special education encountered a myriad of challenges that significantly impacted the learning and well-being of students with disabilities and learning differences. The unique nature of special education, which heavily relies on personalized support and one-on-one interactions, made it particularly vulnerable to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Some of the key challenges faced by special education during this time include:

Limited Access to In-Person Services: The closure of schools and educational facilities restricted students' access to crucial in-person services, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, physical



therapy, and specialized instruction. For many students with disabilities, the absence of direct, face-to-face support impeded their progress and hindered their overall development.

Disruptions to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs): IEPs are tailored plans designed to meet the unique needs of each student with a disability. The pandemic made it challenging to implement these plans effectively, leading to delays in assessments, difficulties in providing appropriate accommodations, and adjustments to academic goals.

Lack of Teacher-Student Interaction: Special education relies heavily on individualized attention and close teacher-student relationships. With the shift to remote learning, many students struggled to engage with educators, leading to reduced learning outcomes and heightened feelings of isolation.

Inequitable Access to Technology and Internet Connectivity: Disparities in access to technology and reliable internet connectivity presented significant barriers for students from low-income families or underserved communities. Students without access to suitable devices or a stable internet connection faced difficulties participating in online learning activities.

The Exacerbation of Educational Disparities: The pandemic further widened existing educational disparities, disproportionately affecting students with disabilities. Those with complex needs, students from low-income backgrounds, and students from marginalized communities faced additional challenges in accessing educational resources and support.

Challenges in Parental Support and Involvement: Remote learning often required parents to take on a more active role in supporting their child's education. However, many parents of children with disabilities faced their own challenges, such as limited knowledge of specialized instructional techniques and balancing work responsibilities with caregiving.

Social and Emotional Impact: The sudden disruption of routines, separation from teachers and peers, and uncertainties surrounding the pandemic's duration took a toll on the mental health and emotional well-being of students with disabilities.

Innovations in Special Education During COVID-19:

Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the special education sector witnessed the emergence of several innovative strategies and technologies. These innovations aimed to bridge the gap between remote learning and personalized support, ensuring that students with disabilities continued to receive quality education and services. Some of the notable innovations in special education during the COVID-19 pandemic include:

Virtual Classrooms and Online Learning Platforms: Special education teachers and therapists quickly adapted to virtual classrooms and online learning platforms. These platforms allowed them to deliver live lessons, interactive activities, and educational resources to students at home. Virtual classrooms facilitated real-time interactions, enabling educators to provide individualized support and monitor students' progress.

Teletherapy and Tele practice for Related Services: To address the lack of in-person therapy sessions, teletherapy and tele practice became popular alternatives. Speech therapists, occupational therapists, and other related service providers conducted remote sessions using video conferencing tools. This approach allowed students to receive essential therapeutic interventions without leaving their homes.

Assistive Technologies for Remote Learning: The pandemic highlighted the importance of assistive technologies in enabling students with disabilities to access the curriculum independently. Special education software, screen readers, speech-to-text tools, and other assistive technologies became integral components of remote learning environments, catering to diverse learning needs.



Collaborative Approaches Between Educators, Parents, and Students: The shift to remote learning necessitated increased collaboration between special education teachers, parents, and students. Regular virtual meetings and communication channels facilitated ongoing discussions about student progress, IEP goals, and areas where additional support was required.

Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers: Recognizing the need for upskilling, educational institutions and organizations provided professional development opportunities for special education teachers. Webinars, online workshops, and training sessions equipped educators with the necessary tools and strategies to effectively deliver remote instruction and support students with diverse needs.

Accessible and Inclusive Content Design: Content creators and curriculum developers paid greater attention to creating accessible and inclusive learning materials during the pandemic. Educational resources were designed to accommodate various learning styles and ensure that students with disabilities could engage with the content effectively.

Flexible Assessment and Evaluation Methods: In light of the challenges posed by remote learning, educators adopted more flexible and innovative assessment methods. Performance-based assessments, project-based evaluations, and alternative forms of assessment were utilized to gauge student progress and understanding.

Review of literature

(FitzGerald et al., 2023) studied “Perspectives of School Leaders on Supporting Learners With Special Education Needs During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Ethic of Care Analysis” and said that To characterise and direct the work of educators, especially those who deal with pupils who have special education needs, “the ethic of caring has been utilised (SEN). Thirty-six Canadian school administrators from four provinces were contacted for this study to learn about their experiences supporting kids with SEN during the pandemic. The ethics of care provided a framework for analysing the responses. It was clear from the comments that principals care deeply about meeting the needs of their students, their families, and their staff. Teachers' discomfort at not being able to address all of their students' scholastic needs, as well as the social needs of the kids with SEN and their families, seemed to be of particular concern to principals.” Despite many principals' accounts of the emotional toll of their work during the pandemic, I heard nothing about any self-care practises. An ethic of care is discussed in relation to these findings, and it is argued that providing assistance to students, teachers, and administrators is the best way to create schools that are healthy and prepared for the future. Pandemic, principle, all-encompassing curriculum, caring ethic, mental wellness are some of the keywords here.

(Kilinc et al., 2023) studied “Mothers As New Teachers During The COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities” and said that The social, economic, healthcare, and educational systems have all been negatively impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic. To stop the spread of the virus, all schools shifted to online instruction in the spring of 2020 with almost no warning. This study employs a theoretical framework from Disability Studies in Education to inquire into the experiences of parents of impaired students whose children attended U.S. public schools (K–6) during the 2009 COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative phenomenological study involved interviews with 15 mothers of children in special education. The benefits and drawbacks of mothers taking on the primary role of at-home educators for their impaired children were examined using a constant-comparative data analysis. There was a clash of teacher and mom identities and the boundaries between school and home, as well as a reliance on moms for too much distance learning, too many responsibilities, and too much new information and technology. Because of these challenges, the moms' emotional health and their relationships with their children suffered. However, along with this increased confidence came exciting



new opportunities as educators. In particular, parents were able to gain insight into their children's learning potential and skills thanks to the transparency provided by distant education.

(Martin et al., 2023) studied “Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Service Access for Diverse Families of Young Children With and Without Developmental Delays” and said that “Caregivers of young children, especially those with developmental impairments or who do not speak English at home, faced new and difficult circumstances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's abrupt shift toward online education (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2022). The current study's objectives are to (1) explain the range of parental concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) examine whether these concerns varied according on the parent's ethnicity or the presence or absence of their child's developmental delay. As shown by the findings, non-Latinx caregivers of DD children reported more general COVID-19 concerns than Latinx caregivers of DD children, and caregivers of DD children with disabilities endorsed a greater number of general and education-specific COVID-19 concerns than caregivers of TD children. Carers of children with DD reported feeling significantly less competent of doing educational activities at home and experiencing a larger impact from the loss and/or delay of services compared to caregivers of children with TD. However, nearly all study caregivers reported feeling stressed due to distance learning. These results highlight the importance of addressing the mental health” of caregivers and investigating the long-term effects of school cancellations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to special education, disrupting traditional learning approaches, and exacerbating existing disparities. Despite these challenges, educators, parents, and stakeholders demonstrated resilience and creativity, developing innovative strategies and technologies to maintain quality education for students with disabilities and learning differences. The pandemic highlighted the importance of inclusivity and equitable access in special education, highlighting the need to address existing disparities proactively. Collaboration between educators, parents, and students has been positive, with professional development for special education teachers crucial for navigating remote and hybrid learning environments. Parental involvement has been instrumental in supporting students' education during the pandemic, providing resources, guidance, and understanding of specialized instructional techniques. Reflecting on the pandemic's lessons and integrating successful innovations into future special education practices can create a stronger and more responsive system capable of meeting the diverse needs of all students.

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