

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF REMOTE LEARNING ON PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DURING THE PANDEMIC, FOCUSING ON THEIR EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The closure of public spaces during the pandemic posed significant challenges for society as a whole. Among these challenges, education faced a particularly daunting task, as remote learning was a novel approach for many families and students. This was especially pronounced for families with children with special needs, who encountered a spectrum of experiences during remote learning, encompassing not only academic challenges but also behavioral adjustments in their children.

This study aims to explore the experiences of parents with special needs children during remote learning, focusing on aspects such as technological accessibility, pedagogical support, assessment of learning outcomes, academic progress, and the array of changes, successes, and failures experienced by parents during this period. By delving into the parental perspective during the pandemic, the study seeks to inform institutional interventions, aiming to enhance cooperation through sustainable and timely adapted strategies.

Key words: *remote learning, challenges, parents, children with special needs, experience, pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

Parents who have children with special needs in their family are often faced with a lack of information to fight with reality, contempt and ignorance. Although the difficulties encountered along the way, they succeeded to return hope, revealing to these people the desire for their future through what seemed like a huge obstacle. Doing that, they proved to everyone the great effort of being a human.

If someone would create the opportunity to give advice and hope for the special needs, these people and their families would not find it so difficult to face these problems or experience this pain threshold. For years families have been waiting something about this problem, but so far little has been done. All research shows that people with disabilities and their families need advice and support, but few make the decision to look into the problem. An even bigger challenge for these parents is the education and the learning process of their children, especially in the period of remote learning which became even more difficult. For this reason the study consists of:
The purpose of the study is to recognize the experiences of families who have a child with special needs during remote learning.

The importance of the study consists in evaluating the use of technology and remote learning, experiencing and overcoming the challenges faced by parents of students with special needs, increasing the effectiveness of their children's learning. Recommendations provided here will serve as a guide point for principals and teachers, for central institutions, in order to improve their work in the future, to obtain the desired results in students and to provide parents with mechanisms for their supportive role in their children's learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Remote learning can be considered communication between people in different times and places. Close of schools for the purpose of preventing measurements of COVID-19 spread, had an impact in education, quality of life and the function of educational system in the world. Faced with this situation Albania too was involved in this new form of teaching. In this situation while it was impossible to develop learning in the classroom, it was an immediate task to use technology for curriculum fulfilment.

Regarding the education of students with special needs, family has been considered very important, because it knows best the needs of children. According to ecological theory, children make their parents stronger in certain situations, making parents partners and competent people for the principle of “educating a child properly to adopt in the society”. (Milan.P 2003)

According to systemic orientations, family is been considered a complex ecosystem of connections and interdependence relationship with others systems. Andolf (2000) speaks for three applicative system theories for families that have children with special needs.

- a. Family as a **constant** or adaptive system for all different needs in different stades of development. This dual process comes as a result of maintenance of equilibrium between partners.
- b. Family as an **active** selfcorrect system with the set of rules and self-modifies through erroneous trial, allows parents to experiment different type of relationships until finding a stable rapport.
- c. Family as an **open** system in relationship with other systems like schools, therapeutic institutions, other groups of interest. It means interfamily reports rely in the connections they have.

Within each family every person has an important place, creates a certain function based on age, sexuality or social role that they have. There are also, feelings and ideas for what happens around them. For this reason **Andolf** said that: changes of family systems are achieved based on changing of other systems. Main role in changing family system is played by individuals and their self psychological, emotional and social development. Important in this process, is **gaining autonomy**, that is the purpose of every individual, parent or professional.

How can this system apply in an emergency situation as the concrete case of pandemic Covid-19. Many studies have been realised during this time for parents' experiences as well as for the educational system too.

In addition to the fact that many students with disabilities were not receiving their full program of IEP services, there is also evidence that the quality of special education services that were provided was negatively impacted during the pandemic. Numerous reports by major media outlets describe individual families' experiences. While some children with disabilities thrived in a remote setting, most anecdotal reports detail struggles and signs of regression. (Hannah Natanson, Valerie Strauss and Katherine Frey 2021)

Teachers and school administrators also acknowledge the negative impact of COVID-19 on special education delivery. Surveys reported a variety of logistical and instructional factors that lessened the quality of special education services during the pandemic, such as shortened school days (lessening the amount of time available for special needs) and the limited capacity of home caregivers to assist in providing specialized instruction and related services. There were concerns about students not receiving services in the same manner as they did prior to distance learning, including failure (Anya Kamenetz 2020);

Perry Stein and Valerie Strauss, “Special education students are not just falling behind in the pandemic they're losing key skills, parents say,”

Surveys found that most teachers felt they did not receive sufficient guidance for conducting remote teaching with students receiving special education services and a majority of teachers struggled to satisfy the requirements of students IEP's during remote learning. (Melissa Kay Diliberti and Julia H. Kaufman)

Education experts have said that it may take months or years to fully grasp the learning loss that children have suffered from remote schooling during the pandemic. But many of the parents and guardians of students with disabilities say they have already seen drastic damages from their children's loss of their usual therapies, services or learning accommodations. (Amanda Morris 2021)

METHODOLOGY

This study has been realised in July 2021-2022 in order to identify parents experiences regarding remote learning.

The purpose of the study is to recognize the experiences of families that have a child with special needs, during remote learning.

Hypothesis: if family school co-operation increases, parents can develop strategies in support of children's learning

Research questions of the study:

What changes and successes have parents experienced?

Can parents build pedagogical strategy interventions?

Number of participants is 25 and all of them are parents that have children with special needs. Parents have been interviewed in different environments, and on average an interview lasted about one hour. Respondents are from different demographic places. As for their gender 23 of them are female (mothers) and 2 male (fathers).

The instrument used is a semi structured interview, as a method that gives us qualitative data for the feelings and personal experiences of the target sample. Participants of this study are asked about their age, education, settlement and the age of child. Other part of interview is oriented in these questions:

What problems does the child have?

How did you feel about closing of school during the pandemic?

What teaching methods were used and did you know how to use technology?

Could you do the role of the teacher?

Could you evaluate your child's learning skills?

What changes and challenges did you experience or experiment?

DATA ANALYSING

In 25 interviewees 23 of them were females and 2 males. As for their level of education 6 parents have a University degree, 10 with secondary education and 9 with 8-9 years of education.

Residential areas are Vlora, Tirana, Kavaja, Shkodra, Durres. 20 interviewees live in urban areas and 5 in rural areas.

In terms of disabilities children have diverse problems such as autism spectrum disorders, hyperactivity, dyslexia, intellectual difficulties and Down syndrome.

Age of children is between 8-18, chosen this age in order to evaluate the children that attend school.

How did you feel about close of schools?

The experience of almost all parents for the closure was not good. In general all parents testified that they were depressed, stressed, upset, irritated. Only one of the parents stated that he experienced it with optimism as it made her stay longer with the family.

The closure of the school for the parents hindered a developmental process that had begun to normalize the child's adaptation to school activities and the structure of relations with others. Parents felt lonely, without orientation milestones that a good part tried to produce themselves. During this time parents declare that they have been extremely tired, emotionally and mentally charged. For many parents it has been an exhausting period in terms of energies but at the same time absolutely beautiful!

What teaching methods were used and did you know how to use technology?

The method used was via the WhatsApp app from the phone and only 5 used the zoom app. Parents generally knew and adapted the use of technology.

Regarding children's problems: parents prove that they have various problems. Parents who have children with special needs testify that: My child has autism spectrum disorders, has difficulties in communication and interaction, in general development. Suffers from emotional stress, closure and passivity. He is reluctant to express himself and to act effectively.

Another parent testifies that my child is a teenager and has great behavioral difficulties which added to the pandemic.

My child has Down syndrome he is calm but has great memorization difficulties and the time to learn is long.

My child is mentally retarded and has behavioral problems, he becomes aggressive very quickly if he does not fulfill his wishes. There is a problem with communication and learning.

My child is hyperactive and more than the learning part I have problem in his behavior as it is impossible to manage it.

My child has dyslexia problems, which we like parents didn't know what was, it is very difficult for us to manage this problem.

Some of the testimonies of the quoted parents make it possible for us to look at a general profile of the problems that the parents have as well as to understand in what situations they occurred during the pandemic period.

Could you do the role of teacher? Was another topic discussed with parents. In terms of parents' education, only a few of them had a University degree and most of them had secondary education, even 8 or 9 years of education, which has led to problems in taking on the role of the teacher. Most of parents testify NO even though some of them are teachers themselves. Becoming a teacher with your child is very difficult, the "rigor" of learning has been replaced by "patience" and insistence on appropriate encouragement in the child. Although the parents testified that it was very difficult to do the role of teacher, they showed their efforts to succeed. Many of them had searched on internet for methods to work but most had tried to adapt. Some of the parents had abandoned the teaching part during the pandemic period because they could not do it.

Could you evaluate your child's learning skills?

Partly YES have testified a part of parents, but most of them have not been able to assess the child's learning. Even though the parents have tried to follow the progress of the child's learning, it's proven that they did not do it in the right way. Most parents testify that their children missed a lot of this period as in addition to the school part they lost therapeutic interventions according to the problems of each. In this aspect the parents can better understand the regression that the children benefited during this time, where for most of them it was devastating for the development of the child. Parents have mostly tried to keep the child active in the learning part rather than having had a learning assessment analysis.

What changes and challenges did you experiment?

It was a good experience in some aspects but I do not like to repeat it. I learned to know the child in another aspect, probably more organized, because in addition to the mother, I also had to become a teacher.

The most stressful period of life. The whole house got out of my control especially in the first closing period.

Not a good experience because sometimes it seemed to me that I did not know my child.

Often the closure made them very aggressive. My son is strong and used violence several times during the pandemic, while he was experiencing strong crises and we had to take him to the hospital. We were mostly managed by him, we didn't take the role of teacher. It was a shock.

I began to understand the details of my daughter's behavior and learning. I remember at first just shouting which made her more confused. Time by time I began to learn from her that in such a fragile way she was trying to figure out where her mistakes were.

Parents have felt lonely, without orientation milestones even though they have tried to create their own. During this time an increase in stress has been evident.

Creating complementary activities cited by some of the parents, was a parenting experience where they engaged the children inside the house albeit in closed conditions. Planning and organizing time and learning, routine, increasing communication efforts, promoting positive behavior. Planning self-care and home was another activity that parents have developed during this period such as how to feed or prepare it, learning to dress or hygiene. Education with a sustainability model was something evident in most of the parents's testimonies.

What parents seem to have experienced was fatigue, insecurity, ways to learn, to understand more. The main experience seems to have been the fear of possible changes during the closure which has made some of them stronger, more aware and more emotionally rich. This period seems to have further strengthened trust and communication with children. Endless physical fatigue ...!

CONCLUSSIONS AND RECOMANDATTIONS

For the parents it is very difficult to do the role of teacher. Internet searches for pedagogical intervention methods were their attempts and mostly tried to fit. Some of the parents had abandoned the teaching part during the pandemic period because they could not do it.

Most of parents have not been able to assess their child's learning. Despite their efforts they did not do it properly. Children with special needs during this period in addition to the school part lost therapeutic interventions. This period for most of them was devastating for the child's development. Parents have tried to keep the child active in the learning part than they have had a learning assessment analysis.

Parents could not do the role of teacher. Some of the parents had abandoned the teaching part during the pandemic period because they could not do it. Becoming a teacher with your child is very difficult, the "rigor" of learning has been replaced by "patience" and insistence on appropriate encouragement to the child. Although it was very difficult to do the role of teacher, the parents tried to succeed.

Creating complementary activities cited by some of the parents, was a parenting experience where they engaged the children inside the house albeit in closed conditions. Planning and organizing time and learning, routine, increasing communication efforts, promoting positive behavior.

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This period seems to have further strengthened trust and communication with children. Endless physical fatigue ...!

Some additional recommendations from this study include:

- Employing additional evaluators or virtual evaluation platforms to decrease evaluation backlogs;
- Providing positive behavioral interventions and mental health services for children with disabilities, including hiring more counselors and procuring resources to support socialemotional learning;
- Increasing use of assistive technology devices in the general education classrooms for children with disabilities;

- Developing programs to help children with disabilities transition into post-secondary activities;
- Hiring additional special education teachers and related service providers to reduce caseloads;
- Improving programming for children with disabilities who have been expelled from school or are incarcerated;
- Increasing the number of high-need children with disabilities who are funded with State aid • Expanding opportunities for parent and family engagement.

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