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Family roles in their children's education: A critical discussion of the future roles of families in educating their child with special educational needs and disabilities.

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Abstract

One of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is partial or whole school closure, which requires students in all age groups to study from home in some countries. For students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), distance learning can be a challenge in terms of meeting all the students' unique profiles of needs. The parent educator has been highlighted in the literature as an important part of successful practice. However, the response to the current pandemic has included an emphasis on the family being more engaged in the formal education process. For instance, with respect to the family or caregiver's knowledge and skills, this suggests that they need to be prepared and trained for using specific interventions and strategies used for their children in schools (Stenhoff et al., 2020). Therefore, this paper discusses how parents' roles in their children's education need to be considered by educators now and in the future. This is supported by the experiences of one of the authors who has a child with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) to give an authentic picture of their role in educating their children during the pandemic. This paper is useful for SEND parents and workers in the education field.

The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly changed the world, causing people to change the way they carry out their lives, whether at work, school, or in social settings. It is difficult for children to understand the need for the sudden changes brought by the pandemic, more so for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), such as those with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (Buchnat and Wojciechowska, 2020). In this paper, we will discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted education practices for children with SEND and their families globally and the importance of family involvement in children's learning. This will be followed with a reflection from a family of a child with ASD. This paper is helpful for SEND families and teachers in the education sector.

Covid-19 and online remote learning

In terms of education, one of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is the discontinuity of providing formal education in the traditional way where students are physically present in school. Countries have reacted differently towards the circumstances, and education provision has been affected in various ways (Jeste et al., 2020). One of the widely used

approaches was to switch to online remote learning, wherein students use technology to assist them with learning and interacting with teachers and peers. However, the use of this approach is highly dependent on the quality of internet services (Parmigiani et al., 2021), the availability of electronic devices, and the ability of students, families and teachers to use them (Buchnat and Wojciechowska, 2020). Teachers who are less adept with the use of technology may encounter many challenges with online teaching (Smith, 2020). Further, families carry the load of responsibility for their children's learning at home, and if they designate insufficient time for online remote learning or have less understandings of children's learning processes, the equality of education could be adversely affected (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020) especially for the students with some complex needs that require parent or caregiver supervision (Asbury et al., 2021). Thus, regardless of the challenges of moving to online teaching for teachers, they need to provide clear instructions for families to support their children at home (Stenhoff et al., 2020).

The consequences of Covid-19 on children with SEND and their families can be profound compared with non-SEND children (Asbury et al., 2021). In spite of the difficulties in identifying the relation between the effects of the pandemic and the increase of issues facing children with SEND and their families during unexpected periods of disruption (Bailey et al., 2021), there are many concerns regarding the move to online remote learning for children with SEND and their families. Such concerns include students' and families' mental health, transition challenges, and reduced social and learning opportunities. Each of these will now be considered in turn.

Questions have been raised regarding the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children with SEND and even their families (Asbury et al., 2021). The children's wellbeing and the family as a whole tend to be negatively affected by losing access to in-person services such as educational and therapeutic interventions (Neece et al., 2020; Jeste et al., 2020). Parents and other guardians tend to be anxious about the consequences of Covid-19 on their children and the difficulties of adjusting to the new situation (Mutluer et al., 2020). They show a level of dissatisfaction and anxiety as they lose social support from other families and friends (Bailey et al., 2021) and their children miss the psychological and mental health support from other people (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

Another consequence of children being required to study at home is the environmental change for students with SEND. Generally, children with SEND have transition plans to help them adjust to changes in their lives and reduce the likelihood that any changes in behaviours or delays in their learning development would arise. This includes transitions for changes in daily routines, from school to home learning, and in moving from one task to another. For instance, children with ASD and intellectual disabilities can display changes in their behaviours and moods because of changes in their routines which can be extremely challenging for their parents (Parenteau et al., 2020; Bailey et al., 2021). Students with SEND need more time to properly transition from learning in schools to moving to the home setting. Nevertheless, adequate time for transition seemed not to be possible during the beginning of the pandemic (Stenhoff et al., 2020).

Students with SEND require special services from professionals in schools such as therapies and behavioural supports to help them with their learning developments (UNESCO, 1994).

Those with severe, moderate, or multiple disabilities who are used to having 1:1 learning in schools are more likely to be negatively impacted by the changes. Although they can participate in online remote learning with their family's or carers' intensive support (Parmigiani et al., 2021), teachers have found that it is especially challenging to provide online education for students who have multiple disabilities (Smith, 2020). With limited teaching resources available online, they may not suit some students' skills (Stenhoff et al., 2020).

In addition to learning challenges, social skills can be highly affected by the pandemic. Children with SEND are less likely to be socially accepted and have relationships with their peers (Broomhead, 2019). Making friendships contribute to developing the emotional and social skills of children (Bauminger-Zviely and Agam-Ben-Artzi, 2014), thus, improving social understanding is highly important for SEND children. However, given the lockdown and shift to online remote learning, it has been difficult for children with SEND to engage in social interactions (Neece et al., 2020; Parenteau et al., 2020) even for students who attend mainstream school with non-SEND students. It is challenging to implement inclusive learning through an online platform, especially with limited preparation and resources (Parmigiani et al., 2021). Families noted that the fewer social contact opportunities and less social interaction could have an impact on their children's mental health (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020). The influence of online interaction on the friendship and social skills for children with SEND is a new area that could be addressed in future research.

However, on a more positive note, the pandemic has given families the chance to understand their children better, have more awareness of their children's education (Beaton et al., 2021), and for children with SEND, they have had the opportunity to spend more time with their families and improve their relationships (Neece et al., 2020). Families who have been practising home-schooling before the pandemic show positive and enjoyable outcomes with their children with SEND (Parsons and Lewis, 2010). While it is not the focus here to compare families who had chosen to educate their children at home with families who found themselves home-schooling because of the current circumstances (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas, 2020), it is important to consider whether or not online remote learning is suitable for children with SEND especially for those who receive extensive support or intensive intervention that includes data-based processes. This issue raises questions about the capabilities of parents or carers to effectively help teach the students at home and the extent of their involvement with their children's learning before the pandemic. According to Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020), parents of students with SEND indicate that they were less prepared to teach their children at home because they had not received adequate information and guidance to support their children's home learning. The next section will explain this in detail.

Family involvement

Home education, also known as home-schooling, means that parents or guardians teach their children at home and in different places (Martin, 2020). There are numerous reasons why parents would lean towards home-schooling. One possible reason may be that they are not happy with the available school places or because their children are not learning effectively in conventional schools. Ray (2015) highlighted that home-schooling is currently one of the

adopted modalities with guidelines for application, in addition to being strongly received by parents of children with disabilities. The number of children with disabilities experiencing elective instruction at home has essentially expanded since the rise of home education (Cook et al., 2013). As the parents are fully responsible for educating their children at home, involving them in the whole learning process is essential.

Students and stakeholders have recognised the benefits of family-school partnerships (Turnbull et al., 2015). Family involvement has been related to a number of positive results for children with ASD, including higher levels of academic achievement (Jeynes, 2011), lower levels of challenging behaviours, and improvement in social emotional skills (Sheridan et al., 2013). This involvement is highly important for families of children with ASD. Given the cross-setting nature of support for children with ASD and the potential for lifelong involvement with benefit providers, family involvement is likely to extend the effectiveness of the intervention (Matson et al., 2009).

Family and teachers' relationships have been studied over a considerable period of time (Minke et al., 2014). Recent studies have shown that effective parent or carer and teacher relationships can support children's academic and behavioural outcomes (Garbacz et al., 2015) and can be strengthened through family-school collaborations. For families of children with ASD, parent and teacher relationships are especially important during the move from early education to school, which incorporates the shift from specific family benefit plans to individualised educational programs (Murray et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to explore factors that anticipate family involvement, and parent and teacher connections that affect families of children with ASD.

There are several factors that affect parents' involvement and the relationships between parents and teachers. This includes the characteristics of their children, maternal education, sources of support, and satisfaction with services. Walker et al., (2005) explained that parents' beliefs about their role in educating their children and their decisions about taking part in their children's learning program can be impacted by a number of factors. This includes the children's needs, behaviour, language and communication skills, hyperactivity, adaptive behaviour skills, severity of the behaviour, and social interaction difficulties (Wang et al., 2011).

Cook et al., (2013) emphasised the significance of the family's role and having proficient experts for the home education of children with ASD. However, Rose et al., (2020) expressed concerns about achieving such parent-teacher collaboration amidst the Covid-19 pandemic when families of children with ASD were subject to unavoidable stress because most social services were in critical demand. There is a challenge for the collective effort of many families to home teach children with ASD. Moreover, the more extreme behaviours the individual with ASD is detailed to have, the greater the detailed degree of stress experienced by the caregiver. Studies even before the pandemic (Hall and Graff, 2011; Rivard et al., 2014; Manning et al., 2020) have illustrated a higher level of stress on caregivers of older individuals with ASD compared with caregivers of younger individuals with ASD.

The effect of Covid-19 pandemic on families with children with ASD: personal reflection

In this section, one of the authors shares her experience as a mother in educating and training her 9-year-old autistic child and how they faced difficulties and challenges in undertaking his education and training during the lockdown and school closures in the pandemic.

“What helped me at the beginning, was having received pre-training to support my child, continuous communication with his specialists before the pandemic, in addition to awareness of the goals included in his educational and training plan. When his education and training became remote, I became his specialist at home. His counsellor directed me remotely via ZOOM or FaceTime as I offered an entire session daily for not less than 5 hours. It is crucial for me to adhere to and continue the training so that my child does not lose the essential skills for learning, the most important of which are self-care skills, going to the bathroom, communication, language, and speech skills.

I have faced many difficulties, especially challenging behaviours and the loss of some skills my child had already acquired, which I attribute to changing routines and sitting at home for extended periods. Further, some skills, such as toileting and self-care, cannot be sufficiently explained through distance learning, so I needed a specialist to help me understand the goal more clearly. It is a stressful experience for parents, especially with no support during the pandemic. I have experienced stress and pressure, especially in balancing my work and my child's education. This pressure varies daily based on my son's behaviour and readiness to learn. During school closure in the lockdown, I was thinking about other families with ASD children around the world who did not receive any training for their children. To sum up, from my experience, I have concluded that it is best to prepare and train parents to educate their children to reach the best possible results. In addition, it is vital to have professional support for families and inform them that they are not alone in facing any difficulties and they can request help at any time they wish. It is also important to focus on the parents' mental and psychological health to help them cope with stress during critical periods and in times where their child's progress is interrupted.”

In conclusion, this paper has discussed the impact of Covid-19 on education, specifically on students with SEND and their families, as well as the consequences of moving to online remote learning. It also demonstrated the importance of involving families in the education of children with SEND and effectively engaging with their children's learning. This pandemic has shown how challenging it is for families to teach their children at home without adequate skills and sufficient support. The family, as the first teachers of their children, needs to play a substantial role in their education in order to support their learning at home (McKenzie et al., 2021). Families and teachers need to know and share the capabilities and goals of their children and to anticipate any possible emergencies so that the children do not lose their acquired skills or have their conditions deteriorate. Considering these factors will contribute to improving educational services for students with SEND and their families.

Furthermore, having a particular institution that would offer on-demand assistance at any time, providing families with psychological counselling or counselling related to children's behaviour and how to intervene would directly increase the families' sense of safety and would reduce parents' stress levels in return. This will not only help families mentally, but also impact the quality of training they offer to their SEND children. Moreover, there is a need for

effective training for parents in order to make them an essential part of their children's education and training. Also, assessing the families' performance and their cognitive and professional ability for the purpose of developing their skills in order to deal with all types of behaviours children may or may not project is highly recommended. Equipping parents with the necessary knowledge and training in addition to offering regular assessments of their abilities will help them to overcome any obstacles they may face in their daily lives. Researchers can also help in that matter via conducting comparative studies, for example to compare the performance and progress of SEND children living with families that received training and those who live with families that did not receive any training or assistance at all. It would be interesting to discuss which factors impact the children's progress (whether positively or negatively) other than their parents' training or the lack thereof, in addition to comparing stress levels between parents who received training and those who did not. Such information would be valuable to parents and specialists as well.

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