Exploring the Experiences of Parents of Children with Special Needs during the Pandemic: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in education as academic institutions started to close and shift into online and distance learning. Nearly 200 countries shut down schools, with over 90% of these learners ranging from early years through higher education, facing some disruption to their education (UNESCO, 2020). Parental involvement is an essential factor for student achievement in traditional school settings. Parent support has demonstrated significant contributions to the success of learners in the virtual learning environment. This research aims to explore parents' experiences of children with special needs in a qualitative study. The study used random sampling to explore the experiences of parents of students with special needs. It has been found that most of the respondents claimed that the online learning modality helps provide the needs of children with special needs as they improve their knowledge and skills away from the classrooms. They also claimed that online learning makes their children comfortable despite interaction limitations due to the absence of face-to-face classes. It is recommended to create plans and programs to support the children with special needs as they strive to learn through online modality. This would help strengthen and improve the learner's knowledge and skills as the schools are just starting to prepare for face-to-face classes intended for exceptional learners.

Keywords— Parents of children with special needs, COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative study

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in education as academic institutions started to close and shift into online and distance learning. Nearly 200 countries shut down schools, with over 90% of these learners ranging from early years through higher education, facing some disruption to their education [1]. More than half a billion children have been forced to become virtual school learners as they shelter in their homes. In contrast, parents, siblings and other family members have taken on the new role of learning facilitators, pseudo-teachers and coaches [2].

Parental involvement is an essential factor for student achievement in traditional school settings. Parent support has demonstrated significant contributions to the success of learners in the virtual learning environment. Parents also take on new and unfamiliar roles, and responsibilities as their children participate in online education while experiencing increasing instructional responsibility for their child's learning. As a result, parents often struggle with understanding the role they should play in their children's online learning [3].

Furthermore, this research would open opportunities for children with special needs to assist them with their learning amidst the pandemic. Despite the potential of schools to open for full implementation of face-to-face classes, there is a growing need to assess the readiness and need of the students with special needs to become involved with conventional learning methods after being in online learning. This study would also contribute to the parents' well-being and support their children's learning and development. This would also pave the way for school administrators to create and develop policies and programs to improve learners' needs.

2. RELATED WORKS

3.

Moreover, most parents of children with autism cope with crises related to the crisis of learning of the child's diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. There was a complete shutdown of educational systems during the lockdown, and no type of service utilization was offered. Without sufficient tools and lacking the option of recruiting family help, parents had to take the role of being both full-time caregivers and educators, all this while trying to manage their jobs from home, dealing with potential health threats, and for some, coping with financial challenges [4].

Another experience by the parents of children with special needs was emphasized a the study as they reported that families of young children with Intellectual and Development Disabilities experienced decreased access to essential services, struggled to fill the gap, and dealt with significant concerns about the long-term impacts on education and social engagement opportunities [5]. A study noted how families are adapting and navigating through the crisis is critical to inform ongoing support as the pandemic continues and to plan for ongoing changes in service and support delivery, directly and indirectly, related to COVID-19 [6].

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education indicated the crucial role of parents in implementing various remote learning modalities amid the COVID-19 crisis. The department also issued a learning continuity plan as schools reopened. One of the provisions of the plan is the adoption of remote learning in different modalities taking into consideration the resources and situations of the communities [7]. It was also mentioned that early grade levels and children with special needs and disabilities need to be closely supervised by parents to use technology. It further responds to the challenge of orienting the parents despite apprehensions about whether parents are ready to take on this role.

However, despite the efforts to assist parents in this daunting task of educating their children at home, struggles are inevitable. This includes that parent have felt overwhelmed by responsibilities to educate their child at home, resulting in significant depression and even moderate to severe anxiety [8]. Indeed, understanding the experiences and perceptions of parents as they strive to support their children with special needs only highlighted to better provide financial, mental, and psychological support to both the parents and the children with special needs.

4. OBJECTIVES

Therefore, this research aims to explore parents' experiences of children with special needs in a qualitative study. The perceptions of parents are essential in assessing the needs of children with exceptionalities, especially during the time of the pandemic. This would also explore the challenges they encounter during the online modality.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive research design in exploring the needs of parents of children with special needs. This is also qualitative in nature as it uses frequency counts and percentage in describing the data gathered from the respondents. Moreover, it involves the use of thematic analysis to analyze and evaluate the themes that emerged from the responses of parents.

The study used random sampling to explore the experiences of parents of students with special needs. Out of 24 students, 9 of the parents of students with special needs enrolled in a public high school in Malolos, Bulacan, willingly participated in the study. This may mean that either the father or the mother participated in the study and shared their perceptions about the online learning modality experienced by their children during the pandemic.

The following demographic profiles were tabulated to assess further the status and demographics of students enrolled in School Year 2021-2022. In total, there are 24 students enrolled in the Junior High School Department in the selected public high school in Malolos, Bulacan.

Table 1. Demographics of Students with Special Needs Based on Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
13-16	10	41.6%
17-19	7	29.2%
20 and above	7	29.2%
Total	24	100

Table 1 describes the demographics of students with special needs based on age. It has been indicated that most of the students are 13 to 16 years old with 41.6% and with a

frequency of 10. This is followed by ages 17-19 and 20 and above with the same frequency of 7 and 29.2%.

Table 2. Demographics of Students with Special Needs Based on Gender

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Male	13	54.2%
Female	11	45.8%
Total	24	100%

Table 2 presents the demographics of students with special needs based on gender, wherein most of the students are male with a total of 13 or 54.2%, while female students have a total of 11 or 45.8%.

Table 3. Demographics of Students with Special Needs Based on Disability

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Learning Disability	4	16.7%
Intellectual Disability	10	41.7%
Autism	3	12.5%
Hearing Impaired	2	8.2%
Speech Delay	1	4.2%
Down Syndrome	1	4.2%
Undiagnosed	3	12.5%
Total	24	100

To further understand the conditions of the students, Table 3 shows the demographic profile of students with special needs based on their disability, with a majority of students diagnosed with intellectual disability with a total of 10 and 41.7%%. This is followed by students with learning disability with a frequency of 4 and 16.7%. Meanwhile, both conditions of autism and undiagnosed students have a total of 3 and 12.5%. On the other hand, 2 of the students are diagnosed with hearing impairment with 8.2% and speech delay and Down Syndrome with 4.2% and a frequency of 1.

Table 4 describes the demographics of students with special needs based on their academic status, wherein the majority are considered to be graded with a frequency of 17 and 70.8%. Meanwhile, 7 of the students are considered as non-graded with 29.2%. This means that the students in the graded status can follow the activities needed in their respective grade levels. On the other hand, non-graded are supported and well-guided by their special education teachers.

Table 4. Demographics of Students with Special Needs Based on Academic Status

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Graded	17	70.8%
Non-Graded	7	29.2%
Total	24	100%

The study used a validated self-made questionnaire subjected to content validity for reliability. The instrument

comprises ten items with options depending on the posted questions. The last question aims to determine the options necessary for students with special needs to learn during the pandemic.

The instrument is a web-based administered instrument which means that the respondents answered the survey using the online platform Google Forms. The survey would take five to 10 minutes to answer. The respondents are allowed to withdraw anytime in participating in the study. Meanwhile, consent forms were also given to ensure that the aims of the study were well-explained to the parents.

To ensure that proper procedure was followed, the following steps were done during the data gathering procedure:
1. The researchers sought approval from the School Principal and Special Education Head before disseminating the survey instrument.
2. Upon approval, the respondents would answer the consent forms stating the study's objectives, benefits and contact details.
3. After signing the consent forms, the respondents may answer the survey online.
4. The researcher also included ethical considerations by assuring that the respondents are well informed about the purpose of the study, and all of the information will remain confidential while anonymity is also considered.
5. The data are subjected to tabulation and interpretation.

Since the study is qualitative in nature, frequency and percentage counts are used to analyze the data gathered from the respondents. To further determine the experiences of the parents, a thematic analysis was also done to identify the emerging themes based on the respondents' perceptions. This would create an in-depth analysis in exploring the experiences of parents of children with special needs during the pandemic.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore parents' experiences of children with special needs in a qualitative study. The study employed a descriptive research design in exploring the needs of parents of children with special needs. Out of 24 students, 9 of the parents of students with special needs enrolled in a public high school in Malolos, Bulacan, willingly participated in the study. The study used a validated self-made questionnaire subjected to content validity for reliability.

To further determine the parents' experiences in the online learning modality of their children with special needs, the following data are derived from the parents' responses.

Table 5 shows the options preferred by parents for their children with special needs. It can be shown from the table that most of the parents prefer face-to-face learning with 55.6%, followed by hybrid learning or a combination of face-to-face or online learning with 33.3% and distance learning

with 11.1%. This would imply that majority of the parents have used to having their children learn in the traditional classroom setup.

Table 5. Options for Learning

	Frequency	Percentage
Distance Learning	1	11.1%
Face-to-face Learning	5	55.6%
Hybrid Learning	3	33.3%
Total	9	100%

Table 6 presents their children's experiences as perceived by the parents during the pandemic, wherein they have claimed that there is less learning with 55.6%, while others have seen that there is the same amount of learning acquired by the learners with 44.4%. None of the respondents chose more learning as an option. It can be gleaned that the learning of children with special needs is less learning encountered and acquired due to the drastic shifting from face-to-face to online learning modality.

Table 6. Experiences in Distance Learning during the Pandemic

	Frequency	Percentage
Less Learning	5	55.6%
Same Amount of Learning	4	44.4%
More Learning	0	0%
Total	9	100%

Table 7 describes the length of time the learners with special needs spend during online learning. The study may be gleaned that most students spend half a day. This means that most learners spend half a day or an average amount of time learning in the online learning modality.

Table 7. Length of Time in Participation for Learning

	Frequency	Percentage
Half a day	5	55.6%
More than half a day	1	11.1%
Almost a day	0	0%
After class hours	1	11.1%
1 hour	1	11.1%
2 to 3 hours	1	11.1%
Total	9	100%

Table 8 presents the respondents' perception of the comfortability of their children with special needs in attending distance learning. 55.6% are comfortable with the online or distance learning modality, while 33.3% are moderately comfortable. On the other, 11.1% claimed not to be comfortable attending distance learning. It may be gleaned that the students are adjusting to the online learning modality, making them comfortable with attending classes online.

Table 8. Comfortability in Attending Distance Learning

	Frequency	Percentage
Comfortable	5	55.6%
Not Comfortable	1	11.1%
Moderately Comfortable	3	33.3%
Total	9	100%

Table 9 shows which among the options became the most significant challenge for their children in distance learning. Among the choices, the parents' work has the highest percentage of 55.6%, followed by lack of technology and lack of internet connection with 22.2%. This can be implied that the parents need more time to focus on their work and support their children's needs with special needs. Other challenges are common struggles of students in the online learning modality since there is a need for resources in terms of internet connection and availability of gadgets.

Table 9. Greatest Challenge Encountered in Distance Learning

	Frequency	Percentage
Parents' Work	5	55.6%
Lack of technology	2	22.2%
Lack of internet connection	2	22.2%
Total	9	100%

Table 10 describes if the parents have seen the support of the school for their children with special needs in distance learning. It has been indicated that 55.6% claimed that the school administrators are helpful and supportive to the children with special needs as they learn using the online modality. This is followed by really helpful with 33.3% and moderately helpful with 11.1%. It may be gleaned from the study that the parents have seen the support of the school and assist their needs through distance learning.

Table 10. Help Offered by the School through Distance Learning

	Frequency	Percentage
Helpful	5	55.6%
Really Helpful	3	33.3%
Moderately Helpful	1	11.1%
Not Helpful	0	0%
Total	9	100%

Table 11 shows how their children's teachers communicate with them to support and provide the assistance needed in online learning. It shows that the majority of the parents mentioned that their teachers most of the time communicate with them with 55.6%, while others claimed that they often communicate with 44.4%. No one from the parents answered that the teachers do not communicate. This means that aside from the school administrators, the teachers

are also well supported and are guiding the children well despite the limitations caused by the pandemic.

Table 11. Communication with Teachers

	Frequency	Percentage
Often Communicates	4	44.4%
Most of the Time Communicates	5	55.6%
Do not communicate at all	0	0%
Total	9	100%

Table 12 presents if the parents are worried about their children's social and emotional well-being as they cope with the changes in the online learning modality. It has been indicated that the majority of the parents are not worried about 44.4%, 33.3% are not worried, and 22.2% are worried. This only implies that parents trust the teachers and school administrators in helping and supporting their children during this time of the pandemic.

Table 12. Experienced Worriness for the Social and Emotional Well Being of their Children

	Frequency	Percentage
Not really worried	4	44.4%
Not Worried	3	33.3%
Worried	2	22.2%
Total	9	100%

Table 13 describes which the ways are effective in communicating with their teachers. It has been indicated that social media garnered 100% as an effective way of communication. This means that parents communicate easily through social media, particularly Messenger, for updating and monitoring their students during the online modality.

Table 13. Ways of Communicating with the Teacher

	Frequency	Percentage
Social Media	9	100%
Telephone	0	0%
Home Visit	0	0%
Total	9	100%

Table 14 describes the possible options in supporting the children with special needs as perceived by the parents. Based on the meaning unit or the actual responses of the parents, a condensed unit was derived to get the main idea of the answers. At the same time, subthemes were developed to create and identify the emerging theme based on the perceptions of the respondents. The responses were also translated into English to effectively acquire an accurate theme based on the given meaning unit.

It was found out that based on the actual responses of the parents, the theme, which is the need to prepare for the face-to-face classes, emerged as the main theme in identifying possible options for supporting children with special needs. This only implies that parents prefer face-to-face learning

more than online learning. Still, they also claimed that distance learning helped their children to improve their knowledge and skills through the help and support of their special education teachers and school administrators.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results gathered from the respondents of the study, the following findings have been derived:

1. It has been found that most parents still prefer face-to-face learning compared to hybrid learning and online learning for their children with special needs. This indicates that parents have seen the potential of going back to a conventional method of learning to help further their children learn.

2. Most of the respondents claimed that the online learning modality helps provide the needs of children with special needs as they improve their knowledge and skills away from the classrooms. They also claimed that online learning makes their children comfortable despite interaction limitations due to the absence of face-to-face classes.

3. It was also found that all of the respondents have used social media, particularly messenger, to communicate with their children's teachers with special needs. Additionally, they have claimed that the teachers most of the time communicate with them to give them updates on the progress of and development of the learners in the online learning modality.

4. It was revealed that the need to prepare for the actual face-to-face classes emerged as the main theme when parents were asked about the possible option in supporting the learning of the children with special needs.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended to create plans and programs to support the children with special needs as they strive to learn through online modality. This would help strengthen and improve the learner's knowledge and skills as the schools are just starting to prepare for face-to-face classes intended for exceptional learners.

2. It is recommended to collaborate with teachers, non-government organizations, local government units and other members of the community further to support the needs of learners with special needs. This may give them opportunities to acquire the needed technology and internet connection as it was observed that these areas are lacking. This may also help the school develop projects and sponsors as they strive to sustain and assist the students with their needs since assistive technology would surely help the children with special needs adjust to their learning and studying routines.

3. The study also recommended providing training for special education teachers to increase their engagement and motivation to help and support the children with special needs.

Since the study found out how important the role of special education teachers is to the students with special needs, equipping them with knowledge and skills would help them become more productive and efficient educators.

4. It is also recommended to conduct related studies assessing the readiness of school administrators, teachers, parents and students for the possible face-to-face classes for children with special needs. In this way, it would provide opportunities for the school to prepare themselves and allot more time and resources to assist the students' additional needs once they get back to school.

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