The impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on families of students with special education needs

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant events affecting the largest number of countries at the same time around the globe. Governments instituted the closure of schools and lockdown of cities and other areas to prevent the spread of the virus. Students had to learn through online platforms meant to enhance continued learning. The current study aimed to explore the extent to which Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown impact families of students with special education needs. Qualitative approach was used; semi-structured interviews were undertaken using online communication tools via Google Meet platform and for data analysis Atlas.ti program was used for coding and categorizing. The findings revolved around main themes in the study include; behavior problems in the children, psychological distress for the parents, and difficulty of delivering the rigid content and schedules. Implications for school and social support are discussed for policymakers in Jordan.

Keywords: COVID 19, families, lockdown, students with special education needs.
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1. Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic that started in China in late 2019 has been the most disruptive event taking place globally for most people. In efforts to contain the spread of the novel and deadly virus, many countries and cities were put on lockdown with learning institutions stopping their in-person instructions and training. Most institutions migrated to long-distance or online learning to ensure that learners would continue with their education. According to the European Disability Forum (2020), there is a huge demand to adapt the online learning format to the educational needs of disabled children to ensure inclusion. The shift in learning formats, lockdowns, and physical distancing requirements alongside other contextual aspects of the pandemic have adversely affected children with special needs due to their relatively higher level of vulnerability.

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced significant challenges for families especially due to loss of income and the health-related problems befalling those affected. Children with special education needs and their families experience a higher level of vulnerability and obstacles compared to others because the children with special needs may have more healthcare needs. The virus may affect them more intensely because it aggravates existing health conditions (United Nations, 2020). Parental concerns may intensify as a result of limited support and resources from the government and other bodies as a result of the lockdowns. As a result, ensuring the health and wellbeing of children with special needs during the pandemic becomes a serious challenge. Besides the health and wellbeing challenges, the issue of access to education and inclusivity in learning is another major problem facing parents of children with special education needs owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies across the world have shown that the pandemic resulted in the reduction of overall wellbeing as well as the mental states of individuals. They have reported increased mood disorders, fear due to the spread, and high-stress levels that aggravate parenting practices (Wang et al., 2020; Zhang and Ma, 2020). Duraku and Nagavci (2020) also showed that changes in the moods and behavior of children with autism caused increased physical fatigue, fear, and anger among parents.

Children with special education needs represent a large number of the total population below 14 years. Global estimates range from 93 to 150 million with the OECD also reporting that about 20% of children are likely to develop a special need during their schooling years (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2015). The right to education and inclusiveness in the provision of it is protected by the laws, but there are significant challenges to educational involvement for children with special needs such as the absence of resources, negative attitudes, poor teacher training, pedagogical inadequacies, and lack of policies. These issues indicate the challenges facing teachers and other education professionals in ensuring inclusive learning for children with special needs (Sakarneh, & Al-Swelmyeen, 2020).

The issues identified above are exacerbated by the need to provide education in remote settings through online platforms. Inclusive educational policies indicate the need for the learning environment to be accessible to all students (Sakarneh, 2011). However, in practice, teachers report challenges in understanding what the least restrictive learning environment is for the students in online platforms. The difficulty of implementing inclusive learning practices in online classrooms is a serious challenge for teachers. Couple this with the fact that teachers may not be present to help the students with special needs when they are at home (Lach et al, 2009).

Students with special education needs have been shown to have significant challenges associated with learning on online platforms. A study by De la Varre et al. (2014) showed that students with special education needs had a lower willingness to learn and complete their assignments compared to traditional learning. Some of the main challenges identified in the study were technological difficulties, distance from teachers, low motivation for learning, and lack of support from the parents. The students were found to have lower levels of engagement with the teacher and less support from their parents. Rice and Carter (2016) also reported that having a disability was a significant predictor of low grades in online classes.

In a review on the special education needs of children in the UK, the Economics observatory argued that they face significant educational challenges during the school year due to the pandemic. Students with special educational needs were found to be the most vulnerable in terms of the likelihood of missing out on school and widening the achievement gap. The support provided for students with an Education Health and Care plan was

not universal and did not cover all support needed for the students. Supporting the children with special educational needs to continue with their learning at home was a major challenge in the UK as indicated in Bones et al (2020). The fact that families who have children with special education needs are more likely to be economically disadvantaged also presents major difficulties for home learning (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020) and lower internet accessibility (Phoenix, 2020).

The lockdowns and closure of schools have a significant and negative effect on children with special needs due to the potential challenges associated with learning support, behavioral issues, routine, and technical barriers. Lack of structure in the online learning approaches may play a critical role in exacerbating the behavior problems facing children with special education needs. Lack of social contact with teachers and other students is also a major factor affecting how students with special needs learn with the lockdowns and school closures due to the Covid-19 regulations. Understanding how the pandemic and associated lockdowns have affected learning for children with special needs is an important factor in determining how to address them more effectively and ensure that they are not left behind when schools reopen.

A major issue with the lockdowns resulting from the covid-19 pandemic is that most parents felt overwhelmed by the need to support their children's academic work. Lack of adequate knowledge and experience in handling online learning coupled with the special needs of such children make it more difficult for the parents to support children with special needs. This research article is meant to assess how the covid-19 pandemic affected children with special needs and their families in terms of access to education through online platforms. It seeks to identify the perspectives of the parents regarding the challenges they faced in schooling their children with special needs during the covid-19 lockdowns.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Model

The approach adopted in undertaking a research study is based on the philosophical approach of the researcher and the aims that it seeks to achieve. This research focuses on the exploration of an issue of relevance to the education of children with special educational needs. As a result, the study needs an exploratory research design that would enable the assessment of their core issues and identification of key themes that are important in understanding the experiences of parents and children owing to the pandemic and the lockdowns. The goal of the study is to explore the factors and the experiences of children and their families in online education programs that have been implemented due to the closure of traditional in-person learning. The study adopts a philosophy of interpretivism where the researcher does not rely on a scientific and statistical approach. Instead, the issue is evaluated from a subjective perspective where the experiences of the selected participants are evaluated and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The focus of the study is to come up with observations and patterns that can be filtered into more abstract conceptualizations and generalizations. The analysis of the experiences of the parents of children with special educational needs was done using an open-ended approach that relies on interviews with the relevant participants. The key issue in the study is to identify relevant data that can be used to generate meaning and patterns out of the data by identifying the broader themes that can apply to the research issue (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012).

2. 2. Instrument and Procedure

To accomplish its goals, the study was undertaken by collecting in-depth data from parents of children with special educational needs in Jordan. The main areas of focus in the study were the impact of the pandemic, lockdowns, and implementation of online learning for the students with special education needs and their families. The questions were framed to capture the experiences of

the parents and their children with special education needs following the pandemic. The questions focused on the areas of (1) ease of using the online systems considering the needs of the children; (2) behavioral effects of the lockdowns; (3) effect on learning outcomes; (4) parents' psychological impacts; and (5) level of inclusion and quality of education.

The study was undertaken in Jordan using a semi-structured questionnaire that was developed with the critical issues in mind. The parents of students with special educational needs were identified through snowball sampling. This was considered because the participants in the study would be identified from personal networks and connections with the researcher to provide a way of identifying those who would be most appropriate for gathering the required information. The snowball sampling approach was adopted to achieve data saturation by getting as many themes as necessary.

2. 3. Participants

The participants of the study were 10 parents contacted to participate and none declined the opportunity. The interviews were undertaken at the time selected by the participants and lasted for 45 minutes to an hour. Some of the key ethical considerations in the research included the fact that the participants were asked to participate voluntarily and were made aware of this. The research participants were also made aware of the confidentiality considerations that were made in the study. The confidentiality and privacy issues were given priority with the researcher also providing all possible room for the participants to express their views in an unbiased manner. The small sample size was appropriate for the research methodology and allows for in-depth exploration of the research issue.

2. 4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection procedure involved semi-structured interviews that were undertaken using online communication tools due to the Covid-19 protocols of avoiding physical contact and unnecessary travel. The platform for the interviews was Google Meet and the participants were contacted prior to it and provided with information about the study, its purpose, and that the information they provided would be confidential.

The data analysis and coding for the study were undertaken using the Atlas.ti program where the codes for the themes and sub-themes were generated. Classical content analysis was applied in the study where the presence and frequency of the themes and concepts in the text were considered as the critical elements in their consideration within the interview responses. The coding was done with the help of two independent coders who were experienced in the field of qualitative analysis. The categories and themes in the responses given by the participants were discussed after the final analysis. The data was presented in narrative format and descriptive memos that aided in ensuring that the critical issues in the study could be effectively identified.

3. Results

The data collection was undertaken with the 10 participants who were engaged through virtual meetings on Google Meet. The main aspect of the study was to identify the main themes in line with the 5 identified areas. The main themes and subthemes are presented in table 6 in the appendix of the paper. The presentation of the results was undertaken in line with the 5 thematic areas identified in the methodology.

Table 1: Ease of Using the Online Systems Considering the Needs of the Children

Technical challenges	• How to use the systems
	• Internet access/ infrastructure
	• Child's proficiency in using the system
Difficulty helping the leaner	• Parents' expanded role as a teacher
	• Getting the child's attention
	• Motivation to study
Time constraints	• The difficulty of keeping up with the others
	• The difficulty of managing time with other parenting tasks

The main themes in the question on the ease of using the online learning systems for children with special education needs were technical challenges, the difficulties of helping the learner through the parents' expanded role as a teacher, and time constraints. The parents cited the technicalities of using the online learning systems, inadequate intent infrastructure, and the proficiency of the child in navigating the online learning platforms as the main issues they encountered that prevented them from actually learning.

The lockdowns and transition to online learning required the parents to work closely with children, which highlighted significant difficulties associated with the need to help the learner. The expanded role of the parent as a teacher ensuring their attention when learning, and motivating them, to accomplish learning tasks or assignments were the main issues cited by the parents. They also cited time constraints as a major theme of the challenges experienced by parents. The sub-themes in this area were the difficulties faced by the child is attempting to keep up with the rest of the class to complete the curriculum. They also reported time management challenges because they had to combine their parenting and other tasks with teaching the child at home.

Table 2: Behavioral Effects of the Lockdowns

Child mood swings	• A child becomes overly aggressive
	• Mood swings make the child difficult to handle lack of support with behavior management
Behavior management	• Need social work support to improve it

Two main themes were identified in the area of behavioral effects of the lockdowns on children with special education needs. These were mood swings in the child and behavior management challenges. The mood swing problems mainly involved the child becoming overly aggressive towards the parent. This made the children difficult to handle and manage for the parent including lack of effective support in managing the behavior of the children to ensure their learning the second theme was on the need for behavior management where the parents indicated that they wished they had social workers visiting and providing support to them for social and behavioral management.

Table 3: Effect on Learning Outcomes

Incomplete homework	• Identify ways of motivating the students
Failure to complete the syllabus	• Rigid/ non-adjustable learning routines
Ineffective learning format for online delivery	• The content is not in an appropriate format for me to teach the child
	• No parental support program

The effect of the online learning approaches occasioned by the school closures and lockdowns included the fact that most parents reported that their children did not complete their homework. They lacked the motivation to continue learning after being left by the parent to complete any homework allocated to them. The difficulty of completing the syllabus was associated with the learning routines being highly rigid and not having adjustable components that would enable them to adapt to the child's needs. Ineffectiveness of inappropriateness of the learning format was another major theme in this area. The parents reported that they felt the content was in a format that was appropriate for them to teach the children. The key issue here is that the children do not require conventional teaching strategies and they have to be adapted to their needs. The fact that the content is simply the traditional learning materials in digital format indicates a need for a lot of parental support to help them accomplish this important role (Bonal & González, 2020).

Table 4: Parents' Psychological Impacts

Psychological distress	• Children's behavior problems causing anger and fear
	• Fatigue from trying to manage the child
No emotional support	• No support from the schools in managing the child
	• Did not get assistance from family members

The responses from the interviewees showed that they faced significant and adverse psychological effects arising from the lockdowns and having to teach their children at home. The main issues identified here were psychological distress among the parents due to the behavior problems displayed by the children. The parents also reported experiencing emotional and physical fatigue in their efforts to manage the child. They also reported not having any support from the schools or family members in teaching the child or managing them.

Table 5: Level of Inclusion and Quality of Education

Poor content access	• Need to adapt the curriculum to child's needs
	• Instructional/ pedagogical challenges
No commitment in child	• A child does not complete homework
	• The child complains not feeling like learning
Low achievement	• Does not seem to be learning much
	• Assessments not undertaken
No collaborative activities/ interactions with classmates	• A child wants to play with others
	• The child complains of feeling locked up

The responses indicate a low level of inclusivity in the online learning strategies adopted for children with special education needs. These include the view that the content had instructional or pedagogical challenges and was not adapted to the needs of the child. Low commitment on the part of the child was another issue cited concerning the quality of education since they reported not feeling motivated to learn and not completing homework. Low achievement of the learning outcomes and lack of collaboration with classmates were other critical issues affecting the quality of learning negatively.

4. Discussion

This research was meant to evaluate how the Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures have affected students with special educational needs and their families. The focus of the study was on how students with special education needs were provided with online learning options and how it was delivered. The focus of the research is on the type of effects that the pandemic has had on the students and their parents concerning how they undertook online learning. The results indicate that most parents were overwhelmed by having their children at home instead of being in school (Di Pietro, Biagi, Costa, Karpiński, & Mazza, 2020).

The results indicate that the parents faced significant challenges in utilizing the systems to help their children continue with their education. The ease of using the online learning systems was a major problem for parents and students alike. The technical challenges regarding infrastructure and how to work the systems were in line with the findings of Bonal and González (2020) that parents were hindered by the technicalities of using computer systems for learning. Poor internet accessibility in these families and time constraints were also significant considerations that lowered the capacity of the students to learn and to get assistance from their parents. This indicates a need for policymakers and schools to identify ways of supporting their learners who have special needs and help them to access the systems and use them, appropriately for learning.

The issue of parents needing to help their children as teachers is also significant. The parents were overwhelmed by the behavior changes in their children resulting in physical and emotional fatigue. The parents reported having difficulties keeping their children motivated to learn and committed to completing homework. This can be addressed by having support and assistance from the school for behavior management and collaborating with the teachers to get the children engaged. Most parents are not aware of the relevant strategies they should adopt in teaching their children and getting them interested in learning. As a result, training for the parents and resourcing them while at the same time providing them with behavior management support can play a major role in reducing the emotional distress and helping the children to learn.

It is essential to acknowledge that the parents cite the format of the content and how it is delivered as being relatively ineffective in meeting the needs of children with SENs. The content needs to be in an appropriate format and delivered in a manner that is adjustable to the needs and routines of the child with special needs. Parental support in teaching the children and working with them can also be beneficial in ensuring that the expected learning outcomes are achieved. As found out in Duraku and Nagavci (2020), the pandemic has exposed the ineffectiveness of delivering inclusive education with most parents arguing that they have been left out. Lack of support from the schools and social workers to support the learning for learners with special needs exacerbates the worry and pressure felt by the parents about the fate of their children. There is also a need for social support on how to engage the children and involve them in active learning to ensure that they are motivated.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study highlight how the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected the learning outcomes and behaviors of children with special education needs. It has also focused on the impact that the pandemic and its associated lockdowns presented for parents. Most of the reported effects have been negative with the need to support the students in their learning exacerbating the fears of parents who had lost income after the closure of their workplaces. The closure of schools also presented a lot of fear and concerns regarding the available opportunities for the students to continue learning. Low achievement of learning outcomes and commitment to learning as well as motivation to complete assignments is significant challenges reported by parents. Children's behavior problems result in fatigue and emotional distress for parents indicating a need for social support to help with behavior management.

6. Recommendations

Based on the currents study's results, it can be recommended that the education stakeholders and policymakers should develop robust plans for distance learning. These plans should include the aspects of one-line teaching and learning and behavioral modification strategies for both parents and teachers to help these children. Furthermore, families have children with special education needs should be trained and supported in terms of funding to cover the expenses of healthcare and the wellbeing of their children.

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Appendix

Table 6: Main Themes and Subthemes

		Themes	Sub-themes
1.	Ease of using the online systems considering the needs of the children	• Technical challenges	• How to use the systems • Internet access/ infrastructure • Child's proficiency in using the system
		• Difficulty helping the child	• Parents' expanded role as a teacher • Getting the child's attention • Motivation to study • The difficulty of keeping up with the others • The difficulty of managing time with other parenting tasks
		• Time constraints	
2.	Behavioral effects of the lockdowns	• Child mood swings	• A child becomes overly aggressive • Mood swings make the child difficult to handle lack of support with behavior management • Need social work support to improve it
		• Behavior management	
3.	Effect on learning outcomes	• Incomplete homework	• Identify ways of motivating the students Rigid/ non-adjustable learning routines
		• Failure to complete the syllabus	
		• Ineffective learning format for online delivery	• The content is not in an appropriate format for me to teach the child • No parental support program

4.	Parents' psychological impacts	• Psychological distress	• Children's behavior problems causing anger and fear • Fatigue from trying to manage the child
			• No support from the schools in managing the child
		• No emotional support	• Did not get assistance from family members
5.	Level of inclusion and quality of education	• Poor content access	• Need to adapt the curriculum to child's needs
			• A child does not complete homework
		• No commitment in child	• The child complains not feeling like learning
			• Does not seem to be learning much
			• Assessments not undertaken
			• A child wants to play with others
		• Low achievement	• The child complains of feeling locked up
		• No collaborative activities with classmates	