

Lessons Learnt from the Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on young people with autism: A Special Needs Independent School reflective blog.

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The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 affected all educational institutions without warning. It seems from our experience, special schools, particularly those who work with young people with autism, have been the most affected. The impact has in many ways exposed the unpreparedness of educational institutions and systems to effectively respond to disasters caused by pandemics like COVID-19. In hindsight, the experiences and lessons learnt during the pandemic will serve to inform sustainable policies and measured responses to problems of educational institutions and systems (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Unfortunately, there seemed to be very limited documentation on young people with autism and how they were affected by the pandemic. We were therefore interested in how they were coping with sudden changes and the unpredictability of situations during the pandemic, as people with autism are generally known to struggle with change (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009).

Many children are currently lagging behind in their reading and writing (Azorin, 2020), with special education schools struggling to support the children during the pandemic due to suspension of many supporting services. This meant that opening special education schools without other relevant supporting services would have a severe impact on the quality of education the children were going to receive.

With limited solutions and less than effective support to health and wellbeing during the pandemic, many parents and children suffered mental health distress, following long periods of staying in the house due to the lockdown (Spinelli et al., 2020). Most parents had to oversee the learning and support of their children with very little support from schools whose online preparedness was far from being adequate. This was even worse in our experience of working with young people with autism as their parents could barely manage their behaviour during lockdown, let alone their learning.

With the continuous growth of child poverty and severe inequalities in communities, it has become clear that a lot of households were disadvantaged by limited access to the internet and expensive gadgets like laptops (Van-Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Reflecting on our own experiences, we found this lack of resources to be prevalent in most the families of autistic young people we work with. Our school resorted to using non-governmental sources of funding to buy laptops for the students.

On reflection, we believe there is need for a clear strategy supported by a strong policy on special education during pandemics like COVID-19. Specific contingency plans for young people with autism who would be most disadvantaged in the face of unprecedented and unpredictable situations would be helpful. It may be worthy looking at staff training to prepare for a pandemic and opening other support services to help young people with autism and their parents. The current government initiative to train mental health practitioners is a positive step in the right direction especially if every school or a cluster of schools can have access to such expertise.

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