

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Classrooms: Challenges and Strategies Post COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, exacerbating existing challenges to providing equitable educational opportunities. Before the pandemic, inclusive education focused on integrating students with disabilities using individual education plans (IEPs) and support services. However, the transition to remote learning revealed significant barriers, such as technological divides, inaccessible digital platforms, and a lack of personalized support typically found in physical classrooms. This article examines the challenges that students with disabilities faced during the pandemic and proposes strategies for improving post-pandemic inclusion. Key strategies include using hybrid models that combine in-person and online learning, investment in assistive technologies, ongoing teacher training in inclusive pedagogy, mental health support, and active parent-teacher collaboration. These approaches seek to address the unique needs of students with disabilities, resulting in a more adaptable, accessible, and inclusive educational system. The study advocates for a shift in traditional educational practices to create a strong, supportive environment in which all students, including those with disabilities, can thrive in both virtual and physical learning environments.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Students with Disabilities, Hybrid Learning Models, Assistive Technologies, Post-Pandemic Strategies

Introduction

Transformations in the education sector were highly prevalent, especially among students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the pre-pandemic period, efforts were oriented towards providing mainstream classes to students with disabilities as part of the global shift to inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020). Such programs aimed to offer equal educational opportunities to both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers in most cases via specially prepared individual education plans (IEPs) and other support services tailored to the specific needs of the student. However, the shift to distance learning has been unprecedented. It has led to the fact that most disabled students suffer from a disparate disadvantage in comparison with the digital divide because they do not have access to the appropriate technologies or become confused in navigating the inaccessible online learning platforms that are created without consideration for accessibility (Keshavarzi et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2020).

In addition to the technological barriers, remote learning environments fail to offer the type of individual support that students with disabilities enjoy in traditional classrooms (Sims et al., 2021). For example, students with visual or hearing impairments struggled with inaccessible material on online media that lacked or inadequately provided accommodations such as readers or captioning services for students with screen reader accessibility needs (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Moreover, students with learning disabilities struggled to move into independent and self-paced learning settings where teachers were not as involved in peer-to-peer interactions (Lee, 2021).

These barriers highlighted the demand for flexible and accessible education systems that could cater to various learners in both virtual and physical classrooms (Thapa et al., 2022). Re-entry to schools would require revisiting inclusion methods, whereby students with disabilities should not be denied an opportunity to learn through comparative instruction in class.

This calls for redesigning the hybrid models that are readily available, blending in-person learning with online studies to suit the different needs of students who have disabilities (Zhang et al., 2021). Schools should also invest in assistive technologies and train the teachers on the implementation of inclusion activities in both physical and virtual classrooms (Smith et al., 2021). Suppose such critical changes do not take place. In that case, pupils with impairments will likely maintain the lagging trend in learning while deepening and widening a pandemic-driven gap in achievement (Keshavarzi et al., 2022).

Many students with disabilities faced difficulties in accessing the learning material and tools they required during the pandemic. It became difficult for some to access the proper tools, support, and accommodations needed to keep up with their peers. For instance, pupils with hearing impairments may have found it difficult to follow virtual classes that needed captioning or sign language interpreters (UNICEF, 2020). Many students with learning disabilities require one-on-one support, which is pretty hard to arrange in a remote setup.

The social isolation also impacted the mental health of students with disabilities. In the regular classroom, they experience peer support and a sense of belonging, which was almost impossible to replicate during digital learning (Lee, 2021). The long-term implications of these issues are still under research, but there is a need for more effective strategies in the future as the schools move on.

Strategies for Effective Inclusion Post the Pandemic

Hybrid Learning Models

Hybrid learning has shown a promising picture, wherein students spend part of their time within the traditional setup and other parts working from the comfort of their homes. Hybrid models would allow students with disabilities to participate in both settings, giving a much wider flexibility to meet their unique learning needs. For instance, students with physical disabilities who struggle to attend classes physically daily will appreciate the opportunity to access lessons online at will (Thapa et al., 2022). Hybrid models allow students to review online lessons, ask questions online, and pursue learning at their own pace, lowering anxiety concerning classroom performance (Zhao et al., 2021). Hybrid learning also offers greater flexibility for individualized support. For individuals with disabilities who require extra time to understand specific topics, online components of hybrid learning models allow them to

review learning material as they can. This flexibility makes it more accessible and inclusive through a more diverse set of preferences and needs for learning (Basham et al., 2021).

Assistive Technology

School institutions should invest in assistive technologies to promote accessibility to learning for students with impairments. These assistive technologies come in various forms and require defining, assisting, and overcoming barriers. For example, screen readers allow students with visual impairments to access digital content, and text-to-speech programs can help those suffering from learning disabilities read written material.

Captioning aids cannot be underemphasized for students with hearing impairments since class material can be dispensed live even when online or hybrid classes are used (McKinney & Smith, 2021). With voice recognition software, a student with a motor disability can type and submit assignments without dependence on anyone else during the learning process and, therefore, gain greater independence in their learning path (Alper & Raharinirina, 2020). As schools incorporate these into the fabric of every instruction, they create an inclusive setting that enables all children to thrive.

Training of Teachers

Many inclusive practices require trained teachers who understand the special needs of students who are highly disabled. Therefore, post-pandemic education should not only maintain consistent teacher training on inclusive pedagogy but must not also just be limited to face-to-face instruction but also incorporate digital means of learning in order not to fall victim to integration in hybrid learning environments (Smith et al., 2021; Keshavarzi et al., 2022).

Teachers should be equipped with differentiated instruction techniques; that is, they must know how to modify lessons to accommodate the varied abilities of learners. Furthermore, understanding how to make technology accessible will provide teachers with an empowering opportunity to aid learners with disabilities without interrupting their overall experiences from being awkward lapses in the physically and virtually led classrooms, Scott et al. (2020).

Mental Health Support

Many students, more so those who have disabilities, endured due to the lockdown and tension that defined the experience of a pandemic; this again further compounded their mental health. The expertise of in-person schooling for students with disabilities relies on social interactions as well as relationships that constitute peer relationships to grow worse isolation and anxiety (Lee, 2021). This calls for schools to offer increased support in mental health, including counselling services, peer support programs, and group therapy.

Peer mentoring affords returning students to school with disabilities an opportunity to reintegrate into their peers via social support. The programs enable the students to share their experiences, build better friendships, and learn ways of coping with stress and anxiety (Dvorsky et al., 2020). Secondly, schools should focus on educating teachers about mental health so that they can recognize signs of emotional distress and institute early interventions that make it possible to support the students in question.

Parent-Teacher Collaboration

Due to the remote learning used during the pandemic, most parents have been involved in their children's education. Schools should also take this opportunity to incorporate the parents in the children's IEP development and equip them with resources to support their children at home (UNICEF, 2020). Teachers would gain an understanding of the students' needs and interact with the parents, thus creating better education policies that are in tune with the children's needs.

Parent involvement in the decision-making process and offering workshops on promoting children's learning at home can help a school build a more inclusive educational environment (Keshavarzi et al., 2022). Collaboration can also help ensure that reintegration into the classroom environment is less hectic for students with disabilities, as the latter has sometimes required more support in readjusting to the physical school setting.

Conclusion

Although this task means returning to the classroom in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, there will naturally be an opportunity to rethink how students with disabilities are supported. There are opportunities to create an inclusive education system for all students through hybrid learning models, assistive technologies, teacher training and mental health support, and keeping parents on board.

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