



EXPLORING PARENTS' EXPERIENCE ON DISTANCE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH ASD

Efstratopoulou, M.¹ⁱ,

Delligianidou, S.²,

Sofologi, M.³

¹Associate Professor UAEU,

College of Education,

Department of Special Education,

Greece

²Greek Ministry of Education,

Special Education,

Greece

³Early Years Department,

University of Ioannina,

Greece

Abstract:

During the lock-down period, many educational programs have been changed making possible to continue the learning process for learners with disabilities and particularly for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). However, changing daily routines can result for elevated anxiety and stress for ASD learners. The aim of the study was to explore the experience of parents on Distance Learning with their children with Autism and Developmental disabilities. A qualitative research design was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of ASD students discussing about benefits and challenges of the distance learning procedure. Parents' responses indicated some benefits of the DL procedure during lockdown situations, however many challenges for both the ASD students and their parents were reported. Training for both parents and teachers were highly suggested to overcome the challenges during DL and improve the experience. Their overall experience and their suggestions can be used to improve the quality of the distance learning process for students with Autism and Developmental disabilities.

Keywords: ASD, distance learning, qualitative design, interviews, parents

ⁱ Correspondence: email maria.efstratopoulou@uaeu.ac.ae

1. Introduction

Many studies have approved the benefits of online learning for students without disabilities in; the flexibility of time and location, effective teacher's pedagogy, massive techniques, and innovative websites, an interactive environment (Dhawan, 2020), and financial profits in higher efficiency and student enrollment (Colorado & Eberle, 2010). On the other hand, several studies declare the drawback of online learning in personal, pedagogical, technical obstacles as well as financial and organizational obstacles (Lassoued et al., 2020).

Distance learning can be a significant solution in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it caused (Roberts, Crittenden & Crittenden, 2011). Since most educational systems have been closed there was a concern conveyed toward learners' access to education (Cahapay, 2020). Likewise, research approach online learning before the pandemic with individuals of disabilities in the inclusive education declaring that; no significant difference between students with visual, physical, learning, and hearing disabilities towards the use of e-learning (Saleh & Farouk, 2013), the virtual classroom is a gift for students with disabilities in increasing their motivations and active participation, considering their learning speed, abilities, and intelligence declare(Joan, 2018).

The United Nations Human Rights (2020) has a concern that students with disabilities, involving those with ASD, will be affected by the restrictions caused by the crisis (Cahapay, 2020). Therefore, efforts have been made to improve distance learning for children with ASD. The National Disability Rights Network (2020) for instance, has listed online approachable resources of instructional strategies during schools' lockdown to assist distance learning for children with ASD (Cahapay, 2020). This will ensure the safeness of students with ASD as it is almost impossible to ensure that children with ASD will adapt the safety instruction to protect themselves from the corona virus like, wearing masks or keeping distance between each other. Paist (1995), cited in Moisey (2004), highlighted the importance of location, scheduling, and delivery flexibility of distance learning.

Distance learning can also be a beneficial solution for children with ASD in rural areas as they usually don't have rehabilitation centers close to their homes (Menlove, 2004). Learning remotely will limit the number of children with ASD who are registered in waiting list, waiting to find a place in rehabilitation centers. It can be challenging for students with ASD due to their special characteristics like the communication issues, the limited eye-contact or attention deficit. Efforts have been made to evaluate the struggle to adapt with the changes which occur in the learning routine of ASD students (AI-Youbi et al. 2020). Researchers found a relation between stressors and the negative effects on individuals such as discomfort, stress, anxiety, depression (AI-Youbi et al. 2020, pp. 22–24).

Parents of students with ASD has a significant role in the distance learning (Cook et al. 2013 cited in Cahapay, 2020). However, the rapid educational shift from regular to distance learning as a result of Covid 19 public health crisis, may cause stress

for the ASD children's parents (Cahapay, 2020). The change in ASD students learning routine can subsequently lead to a struggle for a period of time until they get used to the new learning routine. However, to have a quality distance learning for children with ASD, several points have to be taken into consideration. One important factor is to offer opportunities for their communication and remote socialization. According to Parsons and Lewis (2010), there was a general concern among the social life affected by the pandemic caused restriction. However, it appears that the families of ASD children are mostly satisfied with distance learning offered social opportunities (Cahapay, 2020).

Furthermore, each ASD student needs a convenient environment at home to learn. This includes a quiet place, a computer device and a good Internet connection. This emphasized on the significance of the support offered for these families and their children. A large number of ASD learners' parents state that they were able to help their children with the support offered (Cahapay, 2020). According to Moisey (2004), there is a significant need for support to the ASD learners' families to help their children reach their full potentials as the more support offered leads to more success for them.

2. Statement of Problem

Distance learning can be challenging especially for children with ASD due to their special characteristics, persistence on routines, lack of social interaction and coexisting attention problems. This research explored the parents' experiences on the distance learning process of their children with ASD with a focus on its benefits, challenges and discussed their recommendations to improve the overall experience for children with ASD.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

A qualitative research method design, and semi-structured interviews, used to explore the parents' perspectives on distance learning for children with ASD in Greece. Interviews conducted with 10 parents (eight mothers and two fathers) having children with ASD who have been experiencing the distance learning during closed schools and lockdown periods due to Covid 19 pandemic. All children had verbal skills were classified as high functioning students and were attending special primary schools in Greece. Parents vary in their educational level from bachelor to University Degrees and their age level ranged from 25 to 46 years and only one of them has another child with a disability different than ASD (physical disability) at home. Seven out of ten of the parents were working and all of the participants had more than a child in the family. Finally, all of the parents considered to be in a good financial condition, and they were able to afford a device and an internet connection for their children to study online from home. The participants were informed about the aim of the study, before participating in the interviews and they signed individual consent forms. Semi-structured interviews were used to give to the parents the option discuss their experience and feelings concerning the distance learning as it was a new experience for many of them. Interview questions

were open-ended to provide the participants with the opportunity to add their own comments and suggestions.

3.2 Procedure

The interviews were prepared by the Head teachers of the schools and conducted at schools and recorded. Each interview lasted from 40 to 55 minutes. Data collected from the parents' answers have been written in transcript using a Word document. The data collected in the transcript divided into themes and analyzed.

4. Discussion of the Findings

Apparently, the parents of ASD learners were convinced on the importance of DL and all of them agreed on that. One said: " *yes, I think it is important especially in some situations when children with ASD cannot go to school. They need to continue learning and DL is a solution that can work* However, most of the parents (9 out of 10) added that even if there was some advantageous of the DL, the face to face learning will still is the more beneficial for ASD learners. According to them (six of the mothers), physical presence is essential in order for their children to improve their social skills. Findings by theme are presented below (Figure 1).

4.1 Challenges for Both Parents and Children

The parents stated a number of challenges they and their children faced during the DL classes. Regarding the ASD students' challenges, most of the parents agreed that convincing the child to stay on the chair to receive the instruction was a big challenge. Some of them believe this is because the children did not understand the idea of DL. Others refer this to the ASD characteristics that is, persistence on routine and difficulty to adapt with the change.

Another challenge was the difficulty of using the (mouse) in computer device for the ASD learners due to lack in fine motor abilities and problems with motor coordination. They also mentioned that the ASD child does not accept the instructions from their parents as they used to receive it directly from their teacher. In addition, in the house there were a number of disruptions for the learning process like, the other kids. According to parents, the ASD learners' challenges can be determined to the following points:

A. Interacting with Others in Distance Learning

The parents' answers in regard with the interaction opportunities that DL offers has varied whether the interaction is with the teachers or peers. The parents were asked if the DL allow their children with ASD to interact with their teachers and half of them answered that it does not! One parent stated that even if there is interaction between the student and the teacher it will remain lesser than the interaction in regular learning. In the other hand, the interaction between the ASD student and their peers was almost missing as the sessions conducted individually most of the time.

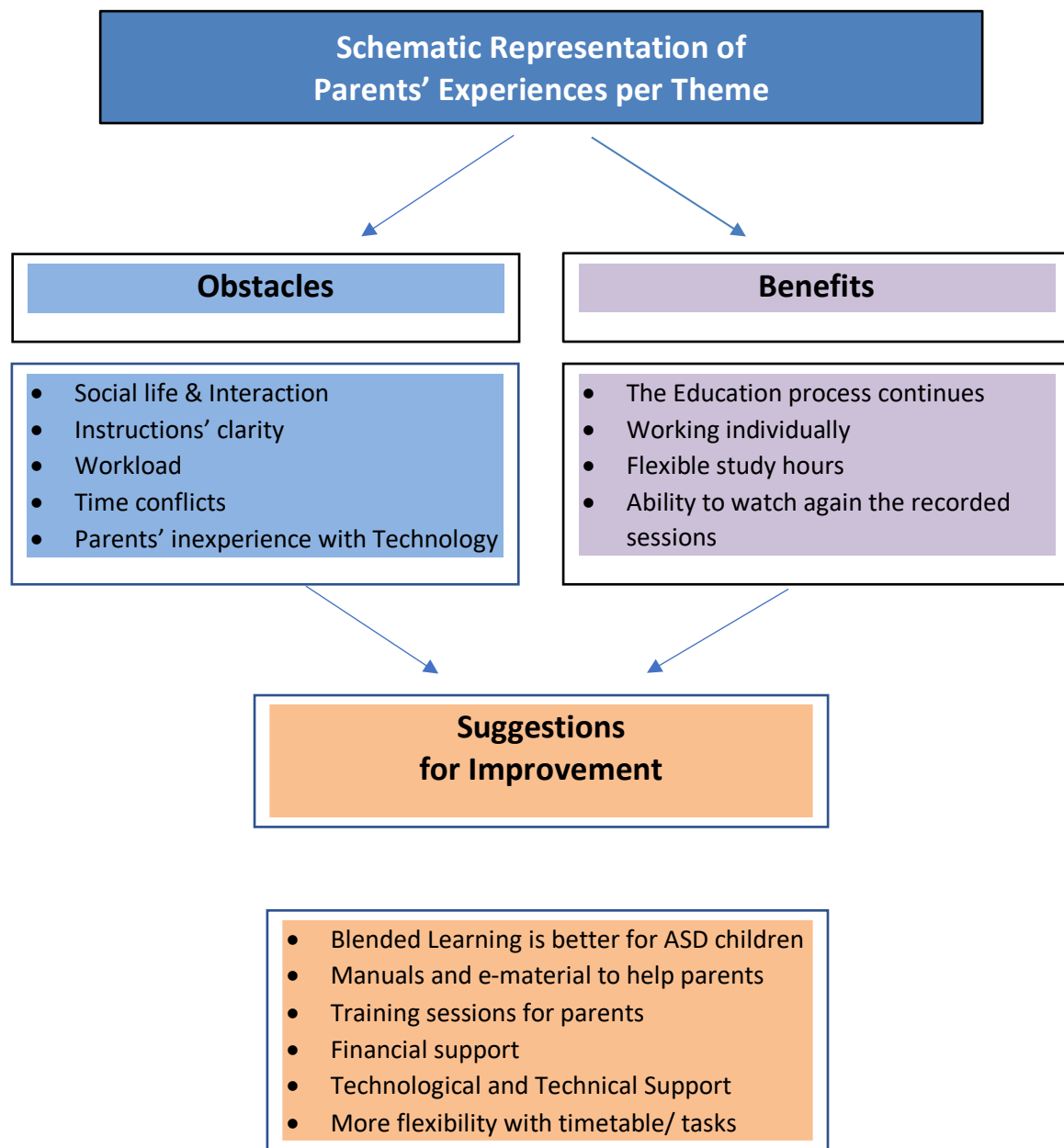


Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Parents' Experiences per Theme

B. DL Instructions Clarity

Considering the level of satisfaction, most of the parents agree that they are not satisfied with the DL instructions' clarity. One parent stated that:

"It was difficult at the beginning but, it becomes clearer with the time and we get used to it".

C. The Impact of DL on ASD Students' Academic Performance

Sadly, most of the parents indicated that despite of their efforts to support their children during the DL, their children's academic performance was negatively affected. Overall, the ASD children's parents' responses indicates that, they do not prefer the DL over the regular learning and is better for their children from different aspects. These aspects

involve, the social communication, instruction clarity and children with ASD's academic performance. The majority of the parents believe that class teaching offers the chance to their ASD children to communicate better with their teachers and peers. Most of them also think that instructions have more clarity and smoothness than DL for them and their children. More than the half of them stated that, their children performance has affected in a negative way during the DL process. In addition to the learning problems parents also mentioned a number of other challenges that they experienced during their children's online learning procedure.

a. Communication Difficulties

Even the parents themselves face different challenges when their children learn from distance. One parent said:

"The communication, even between us and the teacher, takes so much of the class time because sometimes we cannot hear each other clearly due to technical issues."

b. Workload

Some parents claimed that they were overwhelmed and does not have the time to support their autistic child's learning as they have other children who need them at the same time. One parent stated:

"I think DL is a child-parent-teacher relationship not just a student-teacher relationship and I don't mind that if I don't have other things to do. I want to support my child, but I have husband, other kids, work and home."

The availability was another challenge which most parents mentioned especially working parents. They stated that their worktime and their children's class times were conflicting.

c. Reported stress during online learning

Most of parents (all participants mothers) indicated that they are stressed, get easily nervous, and body exhausted. One of the mothers commented that: *"my son takes all my strength, efforts and make me easily nervous. I am doing my best to put him in front of the screen to sit and focus. I get so tired to continue doing so."* Mothers complained that their children usually put them in difficult situations. *"he rarely concentrates with the teacher and when she asks him a question, he asks me to give him the answer otherwise, [he telling me] his friends will laugh at him."* Mothers who were working at home found it so difficult for their children to understand the new situation besides, their additional responsibilities for other children that were imposed by the quarantine. One of them commented,

"I feel a lot of stress, and I always feel guilty. I blame myself every day and get angry if I missed one of his assignments and not finished."

D. Improving the Experience - Suggestions

The parents of ASD learners were asked to provide their suggestions to improve the DL. Most of the parents suggested to specify the time of the classes of their children according to their available time to avoid future conflicts between the class time and their work. One parent added: *"maybe it is better to make the time of the classes flexible for both the teachers and parents, do not forgot the teacher have kids too"*.

One of the fathers stated: *"we need to be well trained to benefit from the DL, from my experience, most of the class time is wasted trying to connect and communicate with the teacher, we need to learn how to cope with the technical issues occurred during the class"*.

Another parent mentioned the need for financial support since it is difficult for some families to afford buying laptop especially when more than one child in the family is using a laptop or a tablet to work and participate in class. Interestingly, one of the participants suggested: *"we need a place to share our experience and receive advices from others how have been in the same situation, we want to discuss what we do during our ASD children classes, what problems we face and how can we manage it"*.

5. General Discussion

The study explored the experiences of parents with ASD children about the DL process in Greece. The literature indicated some of the benefits of the DL for the ASD learners especially for those in rural areas and in the lockdown situations (Menlove, 2004). The parents participated in the interviews have asserted on this point, as most of them believed that DL was an alternative educational process during the Covid 19 pandemic. However, DL can be challenging for ASD learners and their parents due to their special characteristics like the desire to follow their daily routines. According to Obrad (2020), changing the routine can result for anxiety and stress for ASD learners. The parents reported that it was difficult to convince their child to stay on the chair and follow the instructions from a computer rather than the teacher directly. The parents also indicated the time conflict between their work and their children's classes time as another challenge they suffer from. In addition, there was a conflict between their role as an ASD child's parent and their role as a parent for their other children since all of their children needed their support at the same time. The parents referred to a substantial issue that is the social aspect, which ASD learners intensely needs to improve, and it was neglected in the DL. The parents also stated that they felt they do not have the required experience to deal with the communication issues they face during DL classes.

Therefore, more interventions and strategies should be taken to facilitate these barriers for achieving better learning which is students' right (Bartholomew, 2015). Some of these difficulties mentioned in this research related to the child itself whereas some related to the online learning process and others related to the parents themselves. Previous studies shared similar concerns (Lassoud, Alhendawi, & Bashitialshaer, 2020).

There were several suggestions and recommendation from the parents to improve the DL experience. Among others they suggested that a more flexible class schedule will help avoid the conflicts between the ASD learners class time and their parents' work time.

Other suggestions were to conduct training courses for both the special teachers and the ASD learners' parents as they stated that DL is a parent-teacher-ASD learners' relationship and hence there are a strong need to figure out how to have better communication between all parties. Some of the parents suggested to disburse financial support for the low income ASD learners' families to support them during the DL process. The parents also suggested to establish a discussion platform for the ASD families to share their experiences with other families in the same situations. This can help the parents to overcome their stress and anxiety and benefit from others' positive experiences.

6. Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is the small number of parents participated in the semi-structured interviews. A larger sample will provide more accurate data. Additionally, involving parents of children with other educational needs (dyslexia, ADHD) wider areas, can give a comprehensive overview about the DL process. Combining the interviews with quantitative assessments (for example: questionnaires) may emphasis on the findings' reliability. Future research with quantitative and qualitative data is needed to address these limitations.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. The study has not received any grant or financial support. All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards. Informed consents were obtained from all patients for being included in the study

About the Author(s)

Dr. Maria A. Efstratopoulou is an Associate Professor in Special Education at UAEU University in UAE. She holds a PhD in Biomedical Sciences from KULeuven, Belgium and she has many years of experience working in both educational and clinical settings with children and families. Her research interests are on Assessment and Diagnostic Procedures for Children with Emotional, Behavioural and Developmental Disabilities. She is an active researcher and author of several books and articles in the field.

Mrs Vasiliki- Sylvia Delligianidou, holds a MA in Adult Education and a M.Sc in Environmental Research. She has many years of experience working as a Head Teacher in Special and Mainstream schools in Greece mainly with children with Autism and Intellectual Disabilities.

Dr. Maria Sofologi is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Ioannina Greece. She is a Cognitive Psychologist holding a number of International Publications in Special Education.

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