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TEACHING LEARNERS WITH AUTISM DURING THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Learners with autism are no exception to the new normal educational approach, as the education system has been disrupted due to the global outbreak of COVID-19. This qualitative phenomenological research was designed to investigate the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms that parents and teachers face when adopting modular distance learning for learners with autism. A purposive cluster sampling method was utilized to select the parents and teachers from the three different SPED centers in Cebu. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis, highlighting the diverse experiences, challenges, and strategies employed by parents of learners with autism and their special education teachers. The results showed that parents and teachers faced significant emotional and practical challenges in supporting children with autism, relying on modules, collaboration, and adaptive strategies to sustain learning and well-being. Despite connectivity, behavioral, and resource limitations, their resilience and creativity were crucial in overcoming these difficulties

KEYWORDS: Special Education, learners with autism, modular distance learning, COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenological research, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

The global spread of COVID-19 led to school closures worldwide, affecting the education of learners across more than 190 countries (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Beyond changing how children learned, it reshaped everyday life—heightening awareness of hygiene, enforcing social distancing, and moving classrooms into homes. While these changes were complex for many, they created even greater challenges for children with special educational needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), raising serious concerns about access, inclusion, and the kind of support these learners truly needed (Amorim et al., 2020).

Learners with ASD often encounter challenges in communication, social interactions, and adapting to changes in their routines (Lim et al., 2020). These difficulties made them especially vulnerable to the effects of school closures and the shift to a "new normal." The absence of structure, reduced physical activity, inconsistent eating and sleeping schedules, and limited access to specialized educational

resources led to declines in behavior, social skills, and overall development (McCoy & Morgan, 2020). The closure of schools also meant losing important support networks for parents, leaving them to shoulder the primary responsibility of educating their children at home (Garbe et al., 2020). Organizations like the National Disability Rights Network (2020) responded by providing online instructional strategies to assist families. Still, the effectiveness of home-based education during the pandemic depended heavily on parents' involvement, coping abilities, and available resources (Panaoura, 2021). For many families—particularly in developing countries—online learning was not possible due to economic hardships, lack of technology, and limited digital literacy among parents (Bhamani et al., 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Tay et al., 2021).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) responded to the challenges of the pandemic by launching the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP), which was designed to mitigate the impact of school closures and ensure that learning remained accessible and inclusive for all students. Among the various delivery options, Modular Distance Learning (MDL) has become the most widely used, relying on printed or digital self-learning modules that allow learners to study at home and progress at their own pace, as outlined in DepEd Orders Nos. 12 and 13, s. 2020. This approach aimed to maintain educational continuity while also prioritizing the health and well-being of students, including those with special educational needs (Abril & Callo, 2021; Adlit & Adlit, 2022; Manire, 2021).

Although numerous studies have examined distance learning and home education during the pandemic, there has been limited focus on the unique experiences of parents and teachers using MDL for children with autism. Prior research has investigated interventions for autistic learners through modular programs, parents' experiences with homeschooling, and the challenges teachers faced in remote teaching. A consistent finding across these studies is that students with special needs face greater challenges when they do not receive appropriate accommodations and personalized support.

In this context, SPED teachers from two public elementary schools in the Lapu-Lapu City Division and one elementary SPED center in Cebu Province's 6th District turned to MDL for support in educating learners with autism. These learners, who were among the most affected by isolation and disrupted developmental opportunities, relied heavily on the joint efforts of teachers and parents. Parents showed creativity by engaging their children in activities such as therapeutic massage and home-based enrichment tasks, while teachers provided consistent guidance, accommodations, and support. Together, despite the difficulties brought by the pandemic, they developed innovative ways to sustain both learning and development.

With the foregoing, this study aims to explore the challenges and collaborative experiences of teachers and parents in implementing Modular Distance Learning for learners with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how learners with autism were supported during the crisis and how collaboration between parents and teachers can be enhanced to advance inclusive education.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of parents and special education (SPED) teachers in implementing MDL for learners with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was conducted in three public elementary SPED centers in the Lapu-Lapu City Division, and one school in the Cebu Province Division (6th District). Participants were purposefully chosen through cluster sampling, resulting in a total of 22 respondents—seven SPED teachers and 15 parents of children with autism enrolled during the 2020–2021 school year.

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using a three-part guide that explored participants' backgrounds, their experiences with MDL, the challenges they encountered, and the coping strategies they used. Before participating, participants provided their informed consent, and interviews were conducted either face-to-face, following strict health protocols, or through online platforms such as telephone and Messenger, depending on what was safest and most convenient. With permission, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any point. Trustworthiness of the findings was upheld through credibility, objectivity, and systematic analysis. The results were then synthesized to generate practical recommendations for strengthening educational interventions and support systems for learners with autism, as well as their parents and teachers, especially during times of educational disruption.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the narratives of the research participants regarding their experiences, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms in teaching learners with autism during the pandemic.

3.1 Experiences of the Parent Participants in Teaching Learners with Autism

The first question asked of the research participants was about their experiences in teaching learners with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically regarding the support and services for learners with autism.

1. **Trust the Teachers Regarding Modules.** It was revealed that the participants rely more on the teachers' prepared modules for learners with autism. The parents greatly affect the learning ability of these learners with autism. DepEd has implemented the distance modular teaching approach; these children were even more helpless since their parents cannot teach them at home.

The modules are an excellent resource for learners with autism if properly implemented and used by parents at home. Each child is diverse. These modules offer detailed, step-by-step strategies for implementation, along with a variety of ideas and considerations to encourage experimentation. The included scenarios and resources serve as excellent supplementary support.

Participant 1 revealed this undesirable situation regarding the learners and stated that they trusted the modules provided by the teachers. Participants 2 and 4 added that they

rely on the module that we get from the school. While parent participants 3 and 5 said that Only modules for instructions were used.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, learning modules became crucial resources for parents of children with autism. When combined with parent support groups and training programs, these modules empowered families to use strategies typically provided by teachers in person. These support systems helped ensure ongoing instruction and made it easier to adapt learning to the home environment.

Families across the country were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused widespread anxiety and uncertainty. It also highlighted the importance of the Department of Education (DepEd) in supporting parents of children with autism and ensuring that learning continues even in the face of disruptions. About 1 in 88 children has autism, which necessitates reliable and continuous support. The psychological health of children with autism was also significantly impacted by the pandemic. According to Dargo and Dimas (2021), limiting exposure through modular learning strategies helped reduce health risks for students. To ensure that students with autism receive both educational and emotional support during and after emergencies, frameworks for readiness and preparedness must be strengthened.

In the second question, research participants were asked what kind of resources and support children with autism require.

2. ***Things Must Continue Despite the Pandemic.*** The pandemic has caused significant fear and uncertainty around the world and has had a significant adverse psychological impact. Children with autism are a particularly vulnerable population, impacted by stay-at-home orders, closures of nonessential services, and social distancing standards.

Autism is a developmental disability that influences how children interact with their environment, affecting their behavior, social skills, and communication. Because the disorder can present in many ways, each learner has unique strengths and challenges. Regardless of where a child falls on the spectrum, parents need to collaborate closely with schools to ensure that every student receives the education and support they need to thrive.

According to Participant 1, the modules and cellphones. Since the pandemic began, she has been unable to avail herself of OT and PT due to COVID-19. Someone told her that she has tele-rehab, but she never avails herself of it. Participant 2 added that the teachers are providing the modules. There is Tele-Rehab according to DSWD, but her child cannot focus on using the cellphones. Also, Participant 3 mentioned that only the modules. Someone says that Telerehab, but then they never avail. It has been a long time since her child had a checkup on the PT. She stopped it because it is costly. However, Participant 5 stated that during the pandemic, OT/PT services ceased.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought fear, uncertainty, and disruption to daily life, creating unique challenges for families of children with autism. Autistic individuals are particularly vulnerable to sudden changes, health risks, and reduced access to essential services (Cassidy et al., 2020). However, the crisis has also prompted long-overdue innovations, such as online therapies and remote consultations, which may help reduce barriers to inclusion. Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's development. To support their children's development, parents are crucial. To mitigate the risks of inactivity during lockdowns, it has been especially crucial to encourage physical activity at home (Esentürk, 2021). About 1 in 54 children in the US suffer from autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by restricted and repetitive behaviors, as well as difficulties with social interaction and communication. Caring for these children can be stressful, as parents often navigate the intensity of their child's symptoms, manage co-occurring conditions, and meet the demands of intensive interventions (Manning et al., 2021).

The third question asked the research participants about the ways their parents provided systematic instruction for their child with autism.

3. *Swinging Moods.* Learners with autism can have more frequent or more severe mood changes. It can sometimes be hard to work out whether your autistic child's behavior is happening because of autism.

The child's moods might seem random—problem behaviour like emotional upsets, violence, or aggression that might start or get worse. The child might seem more irritable or cranky, cry, scream, fidget, or seem restless. Alternatively, the child may struggle to adapt to change or have difficulty concentrating.

According to Participant 1, before the pandemic started, she established a routine for her child's module. She also searched the Internet for information on how to progress his development, but in the long run, she was discouraged because she had never seen any progress. Participant 2 added that she never had that routine; she directly taught her child by getting the module to answer it.

Learners with autism face complex developmental challenges that can make communication, form relationships, and responding to their surroundings especially difficult. Often described as being "locked in their own world," they may struggle to understand their own emotions and the feelings of others, making social interactions particularly challenging. Because each child with autism is unique, individualized instruction is essential to meet their needs alongside those of neurotypical learners. Children with autism commonly have difficulties in areas such as communication, social interaction, sensory processing, repetitive or restricted behaviors, and information processing or learning styles (Hilton & Ratcliff, 2022; Khaledi et al., 2022; Zulkifli & Rahman, 2021). As Sefotho and Onyishi

(2021) highlight, successfully navigating primary school depends on gradually developing both academic and social skills, which build the foundation for future learning and independent living. However, learners with autism and their families often face significant barriers during these transitions, emphasizing the importance of providing targeted support at each stage of education.

The fourth question posed to research participants focused on the types of support and resources used to provide the system. Learners with autism face complex developmental challenges that can make communication, forming relationships, and responding to their surroundings particularly difficult. They are frequently characterized as being "locked in their own world," which makes social interactions especially challenging for them because they may struggle to comprehend both their own and others' feelings. Since every autistic child is different, tailored education is necessary to address both their needs and those of neurotypical students. Communication, social interaction, sensory processing, repetitive or restricted behaviors, information processing, and learning styles are among the areas in which children with autism frequently struggle (Hilton & Ratcliff, 2022; Khaledi et al., 2022; Zulkifli & Rahman, 2021). As Sefotho and Onyishi (2021) highlight, successfully navigating primary school relies on gradually acquiring both academic and social skills, which form the foundation for future learning and independent living. Nevertheless, learners with autism and their families often encounter significant barriers during these transitions, underscoring the importance of providing targeted support at each stage of education. The fourth question posed to research participants focused on the types of support and resources used to provide systematic instruction for students with autism (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2021).

1. **Timing is of the essence.** It is common for parents to try to explain, or verbally teach, the importance of being patient. Similarly, parents tend to use words to comfort and reassure a child who is feeling impatient. Although learners with autism often have trouble following verbal explanations. An autism-related challenge is the strong need for routine. Learners with autism feel incredibly anxious when things do not happen when and how they expect. Thus, the change in routine can prove upsetting to someone who has autism.

Parents shared varied approaches in teaching their children with autism at home, often influenced by mood, preference, and available resources. Participant 1 admitted that routines were no longer followed, as he would only teach when he felt like it, and sometimes resorted to using a stick to gain cooperation. Similarly, Participant 3 stated that instruction depended mainly on the child's mood, while Participant 4 emphasized that it simply "depends on his likes." Participant 5 noted that although a routine and schedule were previously maintained, these were eventually abandoned, leaving only the modules as a guide. On the other hand, Participant 2 highlighted the use of modules, cellphones, and even television—especially when the child was engaged alongside younger relatives—as alternative means to sustain learning and attention.

The usefulness of integrating instructional techniques into parents' everyday routines for autistic children was examined by Stenhoff et al. (2020). The article highlights how the delivery of instruction had to shift from teachers to caregivers at home due to school closures during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. Since many parents had limited experience in delivering educational programs, teachers were required to prepare individualized materials and train parents to use instructional, communication, and behavioral supports effectively. This included modeling, caregiver practice, and feedback to ensure strategies were implemented correctly in natural home environments. Similarly, Sandjojo et al. (2020) demonstrated that structured activity schedules are highly effective in enhancing independence and self-management skills among individuals with intellectual disabilities. The findings suggest that training can promote self-management in people with ID.

The fifth question asked the research participants about the ways they provided a comprehensive and/or structured environment for their child with autism.

2. ***Anywhere as long as it is Comfortable.*** Learners with autism learn best when they are allowed to engage with material through their preferred style. Understanding the learning style of a learner with autism can help teachers customize lessons accordingly to support the learning process with the aid of the parents who are parateachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The participants shared that the location of learning at home varied depending on convenience and the child's mood. Participant 1 explained that they usually studied inside their room. At the same time, Participant 2 mentioned that the child answered modules in different areas of the house—sometimes in the room, sometimes in the living room, and other times at the kitchen table. Similarly, Participants 3 to 5 shared that learning could happen anywhere in the home, depending on what worked best for the child. Participant 3 noted that it often depended on the child's mood. Participant 4 preferred using the bedroom, while Participant 5 alternated between the bedroom and the dining area to suit their child's needs.

Parents are essential partners in their children's education, and their active involvement can significantly improve learning outcomes. Yet, research shows that engagement and confidence may be lower among parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) compared to those whose children do not face such difficulties. This study highlights research on a model called "structured conversations with parents," which was introduced as part of a broader intervention aimed at strengthening home-school relationships and ultimately supporting better outcomes for learners with SEND. The study by Lendrum et al. (2015) suggests that structured conversations with parents were successful in achieving their intended outcomes, albeit with important caveats regarding individual differences, implementation fidelity/adherence, and sustainability.

Said et al. (2021) noted that in home education, parents—most often mothers—assume primary responsibility for their child's learning from a home base, regardless of their varied economic or educational backgrounds. Collaborations with parents are important because positive behavior support (PBS) has gained recognition for addressing problem behaviors in family contexts. Applying these techniques successfully at home requires an understanding of family perspectives on problem behaviors and PBS interventions (Hayward et al., 2021).

3.2 Challenges of the Parent Participants in Handling Learners with Autism

The first question asked of the research participants was about the challenges they faced in handling learners with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically regarding the ways they addressed the problem behaviors of learners with autism.

1. ***Always Have Tantrums.*** Many parents have seen the intense anger and emotions of a child with autism, which can often look just like the tantrums of typical young children. Although the outward behavior may appear similar, it is essential to understand the distinction. A tantrum in young children is usually willful and can often be shaped through rewards and guidance, gradually decreasing as the child grows. In contrast, meltdowns in children with autism can happen at any age and are not influenced by rewards—they are often triggered by being overwhelmed, such as by sensory input. While children with autism can also have regular temper tantrums, responding to a meltdown as if it were a tantrum can make the situation worse. Understanding this distinction helps parents respond in ways that truly support their child.

The participants shared different ways of handling a child's tantrums. Participant 1 explained that when the child throws tantrums, they just let him cry until he finishes, then give him what he wants. Similarly, Participant 2 shared that when the child cries over unmet wants, they immediately hug and comfort him until he calms down. Participant 3 emphasized letting the child be until he quiets down on his own. Meanwhile, Participant 4 observed that tantrums typically occur when the child cannot eat their preferred food, leading to crying and biting. They eventually give them the desired food, but not right away. Lastly, Participant 5 stated that he and his wife allow the child to cry until he stops, after which they comfort him.

The study of Øzerk et al. (2021) determined the efficacy of a social story intervention implemented in a home setting to decrease precursors to tantrum behavior, and without support. The study evaluated the effectiveness of a social story intervention implemented in a home setting in reducing precursors to tantrum behavior. Without supports and effective interventions to improve social skills, children with autism often struggle to develop social competence and may face challenges in school, at home, and in the community. With proper interventions, children with autism can learn essential social skills and competence, and may experience challenges in the school, home, and community settings. With

effective interventions, children with autism can learn essential social skills that can help to mitigate deficits and strengthen social competence.

Although the use of paraprofessionals in the education of young learners with autism is a common practice, research on effective training procedures is scarce. Results revealed that, although the paraprofessionals demonstrated skills in using behavioral strategies at the workshop, there was either no transfer or generalization to the preschool or home environments where they worked, or their use of these skills decreased over time (Reddy et al., 2021).

Cahapay (2020) explores how Filipino parents managed home education for their children with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlighted several key themes: the value of collaboration—"many are better than one"—in supporting learning during isolation; the shift from struggling with the transition to creating new activities; adapting to a new social reality in preparation for life after the pandemic; the importance of all forms of home education; and families supporting one another through these challenging times. While the pandemic has accelerated online learning for learners with autism, social distancing measures have also disrupted the continuation of essential educational services. Since autism typically appears in early childhood, these interruptions can affect critical areas of daily development and learning.

The second question asked the research participants about the challenges they faced in handling learners with autism.

2. Mixed Emotions of Parents. The COVID-19 pandemic has spread rapidly worldwide, causing significant stress and uncertainty for everyone. While experts and many others work tirelessly to find an end to COVID-19, the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic for specific populations, such as those living with physical or mental disabilities, seem somewhat overlooked.

Autism is the medical term used to describe common neurodevelopmental conditions characterized by chronic social communication challenges and restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. Because of this pandemic, little is known about the repercussions of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown for children diagnosed with autism. Already experiencing significant deficits in social-communicative behaviors, the resultant lockdown and change to routine may have imparted unique difficulties for autistic learners.

The participants shared challenges they faced in caring for their children. Participant 1 mentioned struggling with depression and financial difficulties. At the same time, Participant 2 expressed sadness that the child is always at home, only occasionally playing with visiting cousins, but is unable to go out as they used to. Similarly, Participant 4 noted that the child can only stay within the gate and can no longer visit malls or school. Participant 3 highlighted the difficulty of teaching modules due to being very busy, and Participant 5 added that their time and attention are divided, with the child also unable to go outside the house.

Parents of children with autism sometimes face high levels of stress and emotional strain, challenges that have likely been intensified by the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes to the routines and schedules of learners with autism have added to parents' burdens, affecting their overall well-being. Alhuzimi (2021) found that having a child with autism significantly influences parental stress and emotional health. Furthermore, the study showed that both the frequency and perceived usefulness of autism-related support during the pandemic played a key role in either alleviating or worsening these stresses. These were also adversely impacted by the change in the severity of autism behaviors of the learners with autism. Finally, parental stress was found to harm the emotional well-being of parents. Overall, the study found that the COVID-19 pandemic had unfavorably impacted the parental stress and emotional well-being of parents of learners with autism.

Tokatly Latzer et al. (2021) note that government-imposed lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic included strict measures such as home confinement and the suspension of special education services. The study identified key themes related to parental experiences, including the challenges they encountered, the impact on their children's functioning, social interactions, and behavior, as well as the ways parents adapted, showcasing resilience and resourcefulness. These insights highlight both the difficulties and unexpected benefits faced by children with autism and their families during major disruptions, emphasizing the need for programs that support and guide parents in building stronger coping strategies.

3.3 Coping -Up of the Parent Participants in Teaching Learners with Autism

The question asked of the parent participants concerned coping strategies for handling learners with autism.

As the spread of COVID-19 continues, governments worldwide have implemented policies to impose exceptional quarantine measures. Those who were not infected or ill were required to isolate themselves under strict conditions that forbade leaving home and gathering in groups. While coping with this situation with a typically developed child is challenging enough, it presented additional distinctive forms of difficulties for learners with special needs.

During the lockdown, all educational systems were shut down, and no services were offered, resulting in the loss of a support network. Without sufficient tools and lacking the option of recruiting family help, parents had to take the role of being both caregivers and teachers, all this while trying to manage their own jobs from home, dealing with potential health threats, and, for some, coping with mounting financial pressures.

The participants described various ways they managed life as parents of children with special needs. Participant 1 expressed a growing acceptance of their child's condition, choosing not to focus on future anxieties. Participant 2 shared how their child experienced happiness when allowed into the mall, despite restrictions, after negotiating with the guard. Participant 3 highlighted the effort to find time to assist their child with learning modules, even with a hectic schedule. Participant 4 stressed the importance of providing proper care. At the same time, Participant 5 explained how they and their spouse take turns teaching their child and caring for their younger sibling, ensuring both receive attention.

Lockdown affected the sleep of children with autism, showing an increase in difficulty in falling asleep, anxiety at bedtime, sleep terrors, and daytime sleepiness. The outbreak of COVID-19 significantly worsened the sleep disturbances of learners with autism (Bruni et al., 2022).

The study by Canning and Robinson (2021) explores the experiences of families and learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), particularly those with autism, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the government encouraged staying home to stay safe. For these families, the home became a place where kids could be themselves, free from outside influences, and continue with their daily routines. The home, which was intended to be a haven, was increasingly influenced by external expectations, according to a thematic analysis. Once distinct from home life, school activities and agency meetings began to blur the lines between home and other settings. To help families understand that learning and development can arise from ordinary experiences that align with children's interests and engagement, the study emphasizes the importance of preserving the home as a safe and unique space (Canning & Robinson, 2021).

3.4 Experiences of the Teacher Participant in Teaching Learners with Autism

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes to the daily lives of children and families, creating challenges for learners with autism who depend on consistency, structure, and routine. These learners often struggle with comprehension, communication, understanding abstract language, and a strong insistence on sameness, making them more prone to anxiety and depression—difficulties that have been heightened during this stressful period.

Despite the lack of in-person interactions during the pandemic, which made it more challenging to observe and respond to children's behaviors immediately, teachers discussed their efforts to support students with autism. Given their limited resources, they primarily relied on reading materials and modules, acknowledging the lack of essential services such as physical and occupational therapy. Teachers maintained contact through phone calls and online chats to monitor progress and address any issues. They also provided parents with instructions on how to utilize these resources at home to support ongoing learning. They did, however, note that parents were primarily responsible for establishing a disciplined and encouraging atmosphere, emphasizing the transition in behavioral support and instruction from the school to the home at this time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted children and families worldwide, with learners with autism facing some of the most significant challenges. Autism, a developmental disorder marked by difficulties in communication, social interaction, and rigid behaviors, makes adapting to change particularly difficult.

According to Smith and Lim (2020), a lot of autistic children suffered from extreme anxiety during the pandemic. Their caregivers were worn out and under stress, frequently putting their own health last as they juggled work-from-home duties and parenting. For some families, social isolation made loneliness much worse. Due to their inability to watch and assist pupils in person, teachers of autistic children also reported feeling more stressed as a result of the abrupt switch to remote learning. As a result, numerous special education teachers created lesson plans, provided resources, and communicated with families via a variety of platforms (Simó-Pinella & Carvalho, 2021). Despite efforts to support learners with autism during the pandemic, challenges such as limited resources and unclear government guidance persisted. In the study by Crane et al. (2021), there is an urgent demand for policies and practices that recognize the unique needs of special education, ensuring ongoing support for both students and teachers (Smith & Lim, 2020; Crane et al., 2021; Simó-Pinatella & Carvalho, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on children and families worldwide, with learners with autism facing some of the greatest difficulties. Autism, characterized by challenges in communication, social interaction, and rigid behaviors, makes adapting to change particularly hard. According to Smith and Lim (2020), during the pandemic, many children with autism faced increased anxiety, while their caregivers often struggled with fatigue and stress, sometimes putting their own well-being aside as they tried to juggle parenting and work-from-home responsibilities. Social isolation only added to feelings of loneliness for these families. Teachers of students with autism also reported increased stress due to the sudden shift to remote learning, which limited their ability to observe and support students in person. In response, many special education teachers created learning modules, delivered materials, and maintained regular communication with families through calls, video chats, and other channels (Simó-Pinatella & Carvalho, 2021).

3.5 Challenges of the Teacher Participant in Teaching Learners with Autism

Teachers handling LSENs often carry a heavy emotional load, especially when faced with disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Outbursts like tantrums, self-harm, aggression, or even damaging property can be overwhelming, affecting not only the teacher's well-being but also their ability to perform effectively. Finding ways to manage this stress is vital, as these behaviors do more than disrupt learning—they can limit a child's chances to grow socially and put them at risk of being excluded from family, school, and community life.

The researchers asked the teacher participants about the challenges they encountered in teaching learners with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One teacher shared that when parents raised concerns about their child's behavioral problems, she would try to give them advice and guidance on how to handle the situation. Another teacher explained that there were many difficulties, such as the lack of direct interaction with the child, incomplete or even damaged modules, and parents who sometimes delayed in collecting the learning materials. These challenges made the teaching and learning process more demanding for both teachers and families, underscoring the strain imposed by remote learning during the pandemic.

Students with ASD often exhibit challenging behaviors that pose significant challenges in group settings, particularly in mainstream preschool inclusive environments. Difficulty with change and transition, as well as challenges in social and peer interactions, were the most pressing concerns across all settings. Teachers most frequently reported these issues during "lesson time" and "circle time," which are everyday activities in early childhood education (Nah & Siau, 2020).

Mastering distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult for many teachers. They faced medium to high levels of stress. Over 50 percent of them spent more than four hours a day on remote teaching, with secondary grammar school teachers experiencing significantly more stress and working longer hours daily than special education teachers. Most faced technical barriers, but most felt capable of managing the stress effectively. Female teachers experienced significantly more stress but handled it more effectively; they employed more effective coping strategies when they anticipated external factors would pose barriers to distance teaching. Further research is needed to understand the psychological factors that influence teachers' readiness to use technology for remote instruction during and after the pandemic, according to the findings. These findings also suggest that schools require improved access to computers and relevant software, and teachers need to develop enhanced digital skills (Klapproth et al., 2020).

3.6 Coping–Up of the Teacher Participants in Teaching Learners with Autism

The teacher participant shared that coping with the challenges of teaching learners with autism during the pandemic meant learning to adapt and fully accept the "new normal." She made it a point to let go of negative thoughts and feelings, believing that maintaining a positive outlook would help her uplift both parents and learners during such an uncertain time. She also emphasized the value of occupational and physical therapy in managing children's tantrums and supporting their fine motor development. However, she recognized the reality that many parents struggled to access these services during the pandemic, which made an already difficult situation even harder for families.

Learners with autism faced significant challenges when education shifted from face-to-face to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers also struggled to adapt lessons to meet the diverse needs of students with LSEns. Toquero (2021) points out that during this period, teachers experienced

educational anxiety, limited social interaction in virtual settings, and psychological stress. Notwithstanding these difficulties, educators played a vital role in helping parents by teaching them how to supervise their children, establish effective homeschooling schedules, and compassionately interact with others. The study also emphasized the need for more inclusive school policies and government-led emergency measures to better support individuals with developmental disabilities.

Technology-mediated approaches offer students unique opportunities to communicate and collaborate in language and culturally diverse settings. These technologies also help to acquire the necessary digital literacies needed for efficient communication in today's technologically advanced societies. Cummings et al. (2021) illustrate the importance of excellent technology-mediated language teacher education in furthering this strategy.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings show that parents of children with autism faced both struggles and adjustments while guiding their children's learning during the pandemic. Many leaned on teachers' support with the modules, learned to keep education going despite challenging circumstances, and navigated their children's shifting moods. Factors like timing and creating a comfortable learning environment were crucial. Parents often encountered difficulties such as tantrums and mixed emotions, but they found ways to cope, especially by adapting to the realities of lockdown.

For teachers, the move to Modular Distance Learning (MDL) required both dedication and perseverance. They collaborated closely with parents, provided learning materials, updated individualized learning plans, and encouraged parents to take on the role of co-teachers. At the same time, they faced challenges such as poor internet connectivity, limited access to devices, behavioral issues, low parental involvement, and the stress of adapting to new educational norms. Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated tremendous resilience by embracing the changes, supporting both parents and students, providing creative additional activities, and maintaining open contact through phone calls, video meetings, and home visits.

5. Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest among the researchers from the conceptualization until the completion of this research.

6. Acknowledgment

The researchers would like to emphasize that this study is not funded. This paper is the final output of their thesis.

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