



International Journal of Educational Methodology

Volume 10, Issue 4, 645 – 654.

ISSN: 2469-9632

<https://www.ijem.com/>

Partnership with Families of Students with Disabilities during the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Lesson Learned for the Future

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Received: March 19, 2024 • Revised: June 2, 2024 • Accepted: October 15, 2024

Abstract: The global COVID-19 pandemic has changed human lives in myriad ways and one of its impacts has been the significant transition to distance learning that has occurred at all levels of education around the world. In this emerging system, teachers and parents have proved ill-equipped for the sudden changes involved, and a number of critical difficulties and issues pertaining to increased parental involvement have been exposed. Parents have been called upon to engage more effectively with the education of their children and to support them in various types and levels of distance learning. Parents have always formed a critical link between children and schools; however, alongside teachers, they have recently been required to assume new and unfamiliar roles and responsibilities, working together within an online educational environment. This study investigates the extent to which the transition to distance learning has affected the partnership between schools and families of students with disabilities. A qualitative research approach has been adopted, using semi-structured interviews with special education teachers. The findings are predominantly positive, with teachers believing that distance learning creates opportunities for developing stronger connections between schools and families, enabling more personalised communication, greater capacity and confidence within families, as well as opportunities for enhancing connections with the wider community.

Keywords: COVID-19, distant learning, parents, partnership, students with disabilities.

To cite this article: Alshahrani, B. F. (2024). Partnership with families of students with disabilities during the Coronavirus Pandemic: A lesson learned for the future. *International Journal of Educational Methodology*, 10(4), 645-654. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ijem.10.4.645>

Introduction

The United Nations has noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and across all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94% of the world's student population. In dealing with the emerging challenges to learning within the context of the pandemic and associated lockdown measures, governments, and educational systems have increasingly developed nascent new methods of educating pupils, many of which have involved the deployment of digital technologies. The result of these innovations is that approximately half a billion students have begun to be taught virtually (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020).

As is the case in other countries around the world, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) announced the temporary suspension of formal, face-to-face education across all regions of the country at the beginning of the pandemic. This policy was initiated on March 9, 2020 and was to be implemented until further notice. On August 15, 2020, the Minister of Education, Dr. Hamad Al-Sheikh, announced that studies for the new academic year would be continued but would be conducted through distance education programmes established by the Ministry of Education. This new system was organised around a platform called the 'My School's Platform' (MSP). MSP is an online education system designed to facilitate learning at primary, intermediate, and secondary school stages during the pandemic. Students with disabilities are integrated within the standard virtual teaching and learning system. This emerging system required parents and caregivers to provide substantial proportions of the learning tuition for children, and they were tasked to steer the educational development of children under their care. Lacking the physical presence of teachers, and with the classroom now confined to the home, this approach has produced critical challenges for parents and teachers.

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The parents and teachers tasked to engage children in online learning programmes encountered significant problems. In seeking to facilitate student learning, parents faced a number of crucial issues in enacting their new roles. Even in conventional classroom settings in schools, parents and families were crucial drivers of learning, with effective parental encouragement having a positive impact on learning outcomes. However, in virtual learning contexts, this role has increased significantly (Makrooni, 2019; Woofter, 2019). Parents personify the connection between the home life and the school life of children, and it is important to maintain strong relations between schools and parents for effective student engagement in learning. The emerging virtual learning system has amplified the importance of parental responsibilities, and parents and teachers alike have been called upon to assume unfamiliar roles in ensuring children learn effectively (Batshon & Shahzadeh, 2020; Liu et al., 2010). The present study investigates the extent to which the pandemic and the associated transition to distance learning have affected the partnership between schools and families of students with disabilities. The study seeks to answer the following core research question: has the increased deployment of distant learning platforms in home-based learning environments led to closer collaboration between schools and families?

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the learning environments of many students, and the roles of parents have been subjected to extensive scrutiny, with educationalists emphasising that parents can play a crucial role in fostering student learning both in privileged and marginalised communities. In conventional school settings, strong ties between teachers and parents and healthy connections with the wider society within which they operate have been identified as crucial drivers of the effective inclusion and engagement of students with disabilities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009; Tutt & Williams, 2015). The crucial role of parents in ensuring that inclusion policies are effective has long been recognised by educational scholars, as shown by McDermott-Fasy (2009). Pomerantz et al. (2007) also emphasised that increased parental engagement in the student's learning, underpinned by a strong and supportive learning environment at home, are factors that improve learning outcomes. A large-scale, long-term study conducted in the USA also found that learning outcomes are significantly improved when parents are closely involved in encouraging children with disabilities to engage in learning (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Furthermore, Cox (2005) and Pomerantz et al. (2007) confirm through evidence reviews that children perform far better academically when their parents encourage their learning and provide supportive home spaces conducive to learning. Christenson (2004) also found that student attitudes, attendance rates, and behavioural standards are significantly enhanced when parents are highly engaged with their child's schooling. Increased parental engagement in the learning of their children can also substantially enhance relations between the school, teaching staff, and parents. School learning cultures and teacher enthusiasm have also been found to be positively influenced by increased parental involvement.

By being more engaged in their children's learning, parents of students with disabilities often become more confident participants in the education of their children and also gain confidence in their own academic abilities (de Boer & Munde, 2015). Much of the literature to date has supported this notion, arguing that parental involvement in a child's education and learning can enhance parent confidence and capacity in a variety of ways (Al-Kahtani, 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). A number of previous studies have articulated precisely how parents can be more involved (Driessen et al., 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Wanat, 2010) and other research has identified measurable improvement in student performance resulting from increased parent participation (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mislan et al., 2009; Wanat, 2010). Since parental engagement in the learning process is so vital, the links between parents, teachers, and schools have been a major focus of much regulatory, policy, and practice guidance to date. Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) emphasises that parental involvement in student learning is a critical enabler of ongoing educational success. The notion underpinning much of the legislation and policy programmes is based on the evidence that children can participate in their own education more meaningfully when parents are highly engaged and proactive in the children's learning. This, in turn, implies that the links between the schools that teach children with disabilities and the parents who care for them have to be strengthened and maintained (Javier, 2005).

The relationship between parents of students with disabilities, their schools, and teachers is regulated in legislation more extensively than the equivalent relationships in respect of children without disabilities (Taylor et al., 2009). This is evident in the role of parents of students with disabilities outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). According to these rules, parents of students with disabilities are able to participate in the decision-making of any organization that affects the child's education, including their individual educational plan (IEP) (Javier, 2005). The IEP consists of the records of a child's current developmental stage and educational attainment, as well as clarifying the objectives of the school for the child's learning while identifying their specific learning needs. IEPs are developed through parent meetings with professionals from a broad range of disciplines (Javier, 2005). In the KSA, a policy guidance called The Roles and Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutions (RSEPI) stipulates that parents must be highly engaged in the child's learning and may participate in all professionally-led decision-making processes (Al-Kahtani, 2015). To date, studies have focused on conventional schooling and physically proximate learning environments when it comes to parent-teacher relationships and participation, but the conditions of such a learning environment differ distinctly from those of the online learning environment (Liu et al., 2010). It is imperative to conduct more research into

parent participation and parent-teacher relationships in online learning contexts, not least because of the proliferation of online learning arising from the COVID-19 pandemic (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Rice, 2009). Parental needs and challenges must be better understood in the context of online learning, especially as learning is increasingly being shifted to remote settings in a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study constitutes the first attempt to explore the effects on school-parent relations as a result of the inception of online learning in Saudi Arabia, from the perspectives of special education teachers.

The literature reveals that when parents are more involved and engaged in the education and development of their children, parent-school collaboration and cooperation are significantly improved, and this has a positive impact on student achievement. The present study thus focuses on teacher perspectives on the aspects of their relationships with parents in the light of the new educational reality. Specifically, it aims to investigate the possible impact of the introduction of online learning formats in the KSA, seeking to answer the following core research questions:

- To what extent has the partnership between parents of children with disabilities and schools been affected by the distance education system?
- What are the major factors that affect the partnership between the school and the family?
- What are the challenges faced by teachers when maintaining partnerships with families of children with disabilities in the context of distance education?

Methodology

Research Design

The research methodology was based on a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews as the primary method for collecting data on teacher perceptions, opinions, and experiences. The adoption of a qualitative approach was due to the researcher's belief that it provides a deep insight into the underlying rationale behind participants' responses. Qualitative approaches also allow the researcher to ask questions and clarify responses as they seek to find out why and how certain issues arise (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This is particularly important in the present research, as they allow for a comprehensive account from the participants about their experiences in maintaining the partnership with parents of students with disabilities during the COVID-19 period. Interviews were also valuable in collecting the data and probing deeper into the emerging issues. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used because they allowed both the researcher and the participants to elaborate on issues, modify answers, probe more deeply into matters of importance, and clarify misunderstandings (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Thomas, 2017). They also enable researchers to unearth the perceptions and meanings of importance to the participants (Gill et al., 2008; Robson & McCartan, 2016; Thomas, 2017).

In connection with the research objectives and questions, the main interview questions focused on asking the participants about their experiences in communicating with parents of students with disabilities, as well as seeking to maintain a partnership with them during school closure due to COVID-19. The interview protocol consisted of five main questions:

1. How would you describe the partnership between the school and parents of students with disabilities during the distance education period?
2. How did the distance education provision that was introduced during COVID-19 time impact the partnership between the school and parents of students with disabilities?
3. What factors do you think contribute to parents' involvement, or the lack of it, in distance education?
4. What are the challenges you face in maintaining this relationship effectively?
5. What lessons have you learned to enable you to maintain effective partnerships with parents in case of similar scenarios in the future?

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data and establish whether the questioning style and the questions themselves were appropriate for the current research, issues such as credibility, dependability, and transferability turned out to be critical parts of the study. Credibility can only be objectively evaluated by respondents and outsiders to the research. Consequently, the researcher provided completed interview transcripts to the respondents and asked them for confirmation that the transcripts correctly reflected their opinions: a process referred to as 'member checking' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This was done in the pilot stage, where I interviewed two mothers whose children were studying through the MSP, after obtaining their consent. Each interview took 15-20 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the full knowledge of the interviewees. The interviews were then transcribed, and a copy of the transcript was sent to the interviewees in order to allow them to confirm, correct, or reject the accuracy of the transcription and indicate whether the transcripts reflected their opinions accurately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Determining dependability requires a close understanding of the research methodology (Hammersley, 2007). The researcher addressed this issue by keeping a thorough log of the data collection process, thereby enabling future researchers to check through the interview transcripts and determining the extent to which an appropriate methodology was employed (Bryman, 2015).

In addition, the researcher took into consideration ethical aspects of conducting that scientific research, while following the accepted strict ethical protocols. These include confidentiality, anonymity, access to participants, and secure storage of data (Thomas, 2017). Consent forms were obtained before starting the study and every participant was made aware that the data would be totally anonymous and that they had the absolute right to withdraw for any reason. Participant privacy was also considered, and none of the instruments included questions regarding personally sensitive or private information.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to determine the study sample. The sample consisted of nine special education teachers. Some of the teachers were interviewed by phone, and others were interviewed face-to-face. Special education teachers were deemed to be critical stakeholders in the parent-school relationship. These teachers manage and implement the MSP and are well-qualified to elaborate on the challenges and opportunities that the MSP presents. The teachers were briefed on the study's objectives, the means of protecting their identities, the utilisation of their data, and their right to withdraw from the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant by the researcher thereafter. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Qualification	Years of experience
T1	Bachelor	12 years
T2	Bachelor	10 years
T3	Masters	17 years
T4	Bachelor	10 years
T5	Bachelor	10 years
T6	Bachelor	10 years
T7	Bachelor	14 years
T8	Bachelor	15 years
T9	Bachelor	10 years

Procedure

The procedure for conducting the interviews was as follows: Firstly, teachers were contacted in advance and asked about their willingness to participate in the research by being interviewed. Once the initial agreement had been obtained, the consent form was sent to the participating teachers to confirm their acceptance and consent. Secondly, participants were contacted by phone, with each interview lasting 20–30 minutes. They were first given a full explanation of the research, including the aims and objectives, and were then assured that participation was totally voluntary and that they had an absolute right to withdraw at any time if they wished.

The participants were asked to provide information about whether or not their collaborations and partnerships with parents of students with disabilities had been affected by distance learning and in what ways. The points discussed included the extent to which parents had communicated, collaborated, liaised with the schools, and had been involved in their children's education. The nature and frequency of this communication and how useful it had been were also addressed. Participants were asked to identify what underlying factors had influenced the collaboration and involvement of the parents. The approach to addressing any obstacles, such as lack of parental involvement and negative attitudes, was also explored. Each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview and was subsequently reviewed with the interviewee to ensure the accuracy of the transcription.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data (the interview transcripts), as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013). Several core themes emerged from the interviews. The predominant examples included opportunities to develop stronger connections between schools and families, opportunities for more personalized communication, opportunities for families to strengthen their tutoring capacity and confidence, opportunities for achieving better connections with the wider community, and finally, factors affecting the partnership between teachers and parents of students with disabilities.

Several measures were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected in this study. To confirm the credibility of the data, the researcher engaged in a process known as "member checking", where completed interview transcripts were presented to the respondents for review and confirmation that the transcripts accurately reflected their

opinions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process was carried out during the pilot stage with the consent of two teachers, whose interviews were recorded and transcribed. Both participants agreed on the accuracy of the recorded responses. To ensure the dependability of the research methodology, the researcher kept a thorough log of the data collection process, allowing future researchers to verify the appropriateness of the methodology used (Thomas, 2017). Additionally, all ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, participant access, and secure data storage, were taken into account during the research. Consent forms were obtained, and participants were assured that their data would be kept anonymous and that they would have the right to withdraw at any time. The instruments used in the study did not ask for personally sensitive or private information, and participant privacy was respected at all stages of the study.

Findings

The interviews with special education teachers in this study revealed that the relationships with parents were stronger and more positive when implementing the MSP programme than in face-to-face classroom settings. As mentioned earlier, the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts has resulted in several key themes that arose from the study, which are presented and discussed as follows:

- Distance learning creates opportunities to develop stronger connections between schools and families.
- Distance learning creates opportunities for more personalised communication.
- Distance learning creates opportunities for families to strengthen their tutoring capacity and confidence.
- Distance learning creates opportunities for achieving better connections with the wider community.

Discussion

Strengthening Relationships with Parents

According to the teachers in this study, it was found that following the decision about school closures, which came as a result of the outbreak of the epidemic, parents were very concerned about the education of their children with disability. Thus, they became very eager for their children to attend MSP. Teachers reported that parents became very communicative with them regarding their children's education. Through this closer involvement in the student's learning, parents could enable teachers to concentrate more on critical expert pedagogical activities. Due to the enhanced parent-teacher dialogue, teachers were also able to develop a better understanding of the homes within which these children were learning and, consequently, the nature of the most effective teacher interventions to serve the children's learning needs. Similar findings were reported in a study by Suryandai et al. (2022), who found that the involvement of parents, teachers, and school committees in the learning process was shown to positively impact the scientific attitudes of elementary school students. Furthermore, Guan and Benavides (2021) found, in their survey of parents undertaking online teaching of their children, that the vast majority of them had experienced significantly increased engagement with teachers since online learning had been initiated. In addition, the participants in the present study noted that the MSP had enabled them to design different means of engaging parents and reporting on students' progress. This approach helped to eradicate conventional modes, such as report cards and parent-teacher meetings, and design more appropriate and regular means of conducting dialogue with parents. An important implication of this issue is that educational authorities should consider the importance of distance education in fostering the school-family partnership. The findings of this study can be used now and in the future to implement the positive aspects of distance and blended education in schools, which would strengthen the relationship between schools and families and enhance students' learning.

Importantly, teachers were able to elaborate on issues pertinent to the parents, and parents were able to make regular queries about any challenges they encountered while teaching the students. This was because the parents were much more involved and able to meet regularly with the teachers through digital means. The teachers also reported that they had received more meaningful and immediate feedback from parents regarding their children. One teacher stated, 'I used to contact the mother via the student's notebook, and I never heard back from her, whereas now I receive immediate feedback from the mother via the MSP' (T1). Participants reported that the frequency of communication with parents had increased and that its quality had improved: '... we are in continuous contact' (T4) '... we chat a lot about their children before and after each lesson ...' (T5). They claimed that the parents had become more engaged in the children's learning as a result of the relationships they had developed with the teachers. One teacher stated, 'Parental duty used to end once they dropped off their kids by the school door ... now they are in contact all the time on the MSP and even after lessons' (T1). This increased communication between the teachers and parents served to benefit all parties, including the children. It can, therefore, be concluded that increased parental engagement in student learning can also substantially enhance relations between the school, the teaching staff, and parents. The school learning culture also improved, and teacher enthusiasm increased as a result of the improved parental involvement. This is confirmed by Cox (2005) and Pomerantz et al. (2007) who confirm from evidence reviews those children performed far better academically when their parents encouraged their learning and provided supportive home spaces conducive to learning.

Building Parents' Tutoring Capacity and Confidence

Teachers in this study also reported that they were more able to build on family and parent capability and confidence to support the child's learning as a result of the closer interaction with teachers and the observation of the learning process of their children. For example, T6 claimed that 'parents used to be totally dependent on teachers now they share the responsibility in maintaining their children's progress because they witness (their learning) and see the progress when they monitor the child's learning'. T7 also stated that 'parents are now more confident in their ability to help their children', and T2 asserted that 'distance learning ... has allowed parents to discover themselves as teachers. Similar findings were reported in an earlier study by Selwyn et al. (2011), who found that parents may feel more engaged in their children's learning processes because they see the children in their learning setting far more frequently and, therefore, are more able to discuss with their children the topics they are studying in greater detail. Sorenson (2012) conducted an exploration of the challenges and opportunities experienced by parents when helping their children learn online and found that parents felt they were better able to keep their children on track with their coursework because they were present much more. Conversely, some recent studies, including Spinelli et al. (2021), have found that parents may become extremely stressed when encouraging and facilitating student learning, such as during the pandemic, because they do not necessarily have the pedagogical skills needed. Spinelli et al. (2021) argue that online learning can be very stressful for parents, because, suddenly, they find themselves operating in an unfamiliar environment. Lau et al. (2021), however, found little evidence of any notable increase in parental stress arising from a new, remote learning environment being imposed as part of the pandemic response. They found that parents expressed broad concerns about their children's learning due to their being away from normal classrooms, but that the parents were determined to do their best to enable their children's learning and that this determination significantly improved effective parental support.

Personalised Connection with Parents

In this study, online learning was also found to create new opportunities for parents to develop personalised connections with teachers, with the interviewees claiming that the more personal nature of their communication with the parents had meant that parents were better able to support their children and that a greater sense of trust had been established between parents and teachers. This is especially important in the context of IEPs, which showed an increased trust and connectedness as a positive phenomenon. According to Taylor et al. (2009), parental involvement in their children's learning is supported by legislation and policy, which is especially well-articulated in the IDEA (2004), whereby parents are able to participate in any decision-making processes that pertain to their children's education. As mentioned before, the KSA's RSEPI makes it clear that parents are to be integrally involved with all professionals working with their children (Al-Kahtani, 2015). Some studies have found weak parental involvement in the establishment of IEPs (Aldosari & Pufpaff, 2014; Al-Kahtani, 2015), but according to the teachers sampled in the present study, distance learning has changed this. T3, for example, stated that 'mothers never even know the agendas of the IEP or its purpose, but now they are fully engaged in it'. Through access to more personalised information and more personal relationships with teachers, the emerging distance learning system is proving capable of enhancing parental engagement. As T1 stated, 'they now know they are a very important part of the process ... they discuss more and negotiate different matters that they never used to negotiate before'. It appears that when teachers are proactive in giving parents clear and detailed guidance on how to undertake effective teaching for their children, parents experience significantly less stress than when teachers fail to do this. In addition, parents who collaborated with teaching staff who offered a broad range of support services, including pastoral support advice on maintaining children's concentration, and information about what usually goes on in classrooms, were found to be more engaged in student learning and to experience lower levels of stress in their new and unfamiliar roles as quasi-teachers. A practical implication of these findings gives academia a chance to evaluate the effectiveness of different educational approaches that can help in effectively engaging parents in their children's education and, therefore, enhancing the students' learning in any circumstance.

Focusing on the Students' Learning

The teachers interviewed in this study claimed that distance learning had enabled parents to learn more about what motivates their children to learn and how their children learn. Specifically, they stated that parents had become more involved in assessing children's weaknesses and strengths, and in evaluating their performance. The teachers claimed that parents had been far more involved in instructing children during lessons, helping them acquire knowledge, sustaining their ongoing progress, and engaging teachers in their children's learning. For example, T9 claimed that 'if the student didn't understand what I required her to do via the MSP, the mother helped in explaining the task to her daughter'. Because the parents were simply more present throughout the lessons and the learning process, they developed a greater appreciation of their children as students. This is clearly evident, as reported by T1, in that 'parents stay with their children on the computer screen all the time'. This, in turn, enabled them to ensure that the child was progressing through the lesson, whereas prior to the pandemic, parents had had little knowledge of how to do this. According to Bauman (1966), parents and schools are usually considered distinct institutions with clearly differentiated roles; yet the reality is that their roles complement and overlap one another. T7 reflected this in their observation that, because of the unusual conditions during the pandemic, 'we work as a team'.

Connecting with the Wider Community

The current study found that the teachers considered the new distance learning system to have encouraged parents and schools to become more integrated into and engaged with the wider community. The teachers in this study reported that the MSP had provided a platform—not only for teachers and students but also for parents of students—where they could ask questions, share opinions, and exchange information. Participants also stated that when parent communities supported one another, including guidance regarding how to maintain an overview of the children's learning, parents had a substantially more positive impact on student learning. This, in turn, allowed them to connect with the wider community more easily and beneficially: 'MSP becomes like one meeting room in which we are all one family' (T9). Some former studies have arrived at similar conclusions, such as Ömeroğulları and Gläser-Zikuda (2022).

One of the ways in which communities have worked together to support both parents and teachers in delivering online learning to children is the development of social media support groups. Abuhammad (2020) studied the use of local parent-support Facebook groups and how they were utilised to provide peer-to-peer support to parents. Abuhammad (op cit.) found that a large number of parents reported personal challenges in delivering remote learning, partly due to a lack of support from schools, but often due to a lack of technological skill on the parents' part. According to Abuhammad' study, the Facebook groups he studied were used by the community of parents to offer advice and exchange ideas, and these were found to be helpful by the parents. Certain technological barriers were also discussed on the Facebook groups, including a lack of adequate devices and poor or inconsistent internet connectivity. These issues, as well as the financial issues arising from the high costs of devices, were often resolved via community support on social media threads.

It can be argued that strong collaborative networks of schools, parents, community leaders, and institutions can help to make remote learning more effective for pupils and less stressful for families. Guan and Benavides (2021) assert that a range of community organisations, from youth workers to digital skills providers, should participate in ongoing collective support for parents to facilitate their children's learning during lockdowns. Local businesses could also play an active and beneficial role. By engaging with such a wide range of stakeholders, parents feel more supported and capable of implementing their new roles as learning facilitators (United Nations, 2020).

Factors Affecting the Partnership between Teachers and Parents of Students with Disabilities

The present study concludes that parents played a more proactive role in their children's learning as a result of the new distance learning system. This, in turn, helped the children to understand the content of lessons and encouraged them to remain emotionally motivated and intellectually engaged. However, the teacher participants confirmed that they had faced certain obstacles to effective parental engagement. One of the major hindrances was, in the case of working parents, the need to balance the demands of their formal employment with the learning demands of their children. In the study by Garbe et al. (2020), it was found that a large majority of parents claimed that their work had constrained their capacity to provide high-quality teaching to their children during the pandemic. Parents stated that they had often assigned work to their children and had then left them to their own devices, because the parent(s), although working at home due to the pandemic, needed to focus on their own work.

The teachers in this study claimed that parents with lower levels of education had not provided as much assistance to their children compared to parents with higher levels of education. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Bol (2020), who found that parents with lower levels of educational attainment themselves valued learning less than more highly educated parents, perhaps lacking understanding or appreciation of the critical value of educational learning for their children. The extent of parental education and knowledge has been shown to affect parents' perceptions of the value of their relationships with teachers; when parents have an inadequate level of knowledge and expertise in the curriculum content, they often find themselves unable to support their children's learning (Reich et al., 2020). Similarly, a paucity of technology in the home can also hinder parents' ability to support their children's learning. Some families have a shortage of appropriate digital devices, whilst others have slow broadband connections or no internet access at all. Technology issues affect poorer families even more extremely (Garbe et al., 2020). In this study, T3 stated that 'some mothers lack the required digital skills for using MSP...for example, they either keep the microphone open all the time and it becomes very noisy or they close it all the time and are never heard'. An important implication of these findings is that they can be used to construct anticipated scenarios for a post-pandemic future and plan early, appropriate support interventions. For example, training should be provided to parents to support them in using technology to effectively engage with their children's learning.

Conclusion

The substantial existing evidence in the literature to date and the findings of the current study all testify to the fact that when families are highly engaged in student learning, the effect on learning outcomes, student satisfaction, parent competency, and teacher experience are all shown to be highly positive. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a radical and large-scale shift to online distance learning for children when lockdown measures were imposed and schools closed. This increases the importance of parental engagement in children's learning and significantly improves the strength of the relationships between teachers, schools, and parents. The transition to online learning methods has been challenging and testing for families, students, and teachers, and a range of significant obstacles to effective

implementation pervades the new system. This study has explored the effects on teacher-parent relationships and collaboration of the new online teaching and learning system launched in Saudi Arabia. It has been revealed that the teachers sampled in this study believe the new system has had some markedly positive impacts on parental engagement. The participants noted how, with parents having to be present during learning and coursework processes, their confidence around engaging with their children's learning grew. They also observed a significant improvement in the relationships between teachers and parents. Whilst parents studied in previous research, have articulated a significant number of major difficulties in delivering teaching support to their children, and whilst the present study has encountered similar findings, the positive message emerging from this research is that the introduction of a new distance learning system has in fact served to strengthen parental involvement in a range of ways. Parental engagement with the wider community, including other parents, has also been shown to have improved. The hope is that the lessons learned from the initiation of large-scale online learning can be heeded and sustained as society emerges from the pandemic and associated lockdowns. The pandemic has, according to the findings of this study, reinforced the importance of parental involvement in children's learning and has provided a lesson for the future. The primary findings and their implications are as follows:

- Virtual learning creates opportunities to develop stronger connections between schools and families. The practical implication of this lesson is that educational authorities should consider the importance of virtual learning in fostering the school-family partnership. They should work on building and sustaining this strong and effective relationship.
- Virtual learning creates opportunities for more personalised communication. The practical implication of this lesson is that teachers should focus on personalising their communication with parents. This is because this approach has helped in building trust between parents and teachers and thus helped parents to be better able to support their children.
- Virtual learning creates opportunities for families to strengthen their capacity and confidence.
- Virtual learning creates opportunities for achieving better connections with the wider community.

An important implication of these findings is that they can be used to construct anticipated scenarios in case of any similar circumstances in the future and, therefore, plan early appropriate support interventions.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings of this study, it is recommended that educational authorities should consider the importance of distance education in fostering the school-family partnership. It is also recommended that future studies with a larger sample size to be conducted, as well as considering a longitudinal study approach.

For future research, it is recommended that:

- Further research is needed to consider the experiences of parents in educating their children with disabilities in an online environment. Importantly, they are on the other side of the partnership, and therefore, their views are critical to the early planning of appropriate support interventions for any similar circumstances in the future.
- Further, possibly longitudinal research, should be considered to investigate the online learning experience for students, especially those with disabilities. Such research will assist academics in designing appropriate support as this particular population of students continues to grow within distance education provision.

Limitations

A limitation of this study could be the use of a small study sample which may contribute to study bias regarding the results obtained in the experience of teachers in partnership with parents of students with disabilities during the pandemic.

Ethics Statements

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the King Khalid University. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Acknowledgement

The authors extend their appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at the King Khalid University for funding this work through the Group Research Project under grant number (RGP.1/108/45).

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