

Chapter 11

Understanding the Andragogical Learning Experiences of High School Students With Severe Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the virtual learning experiences of high school students with severe autism spectrum disorder (ASD) during the COVID-19 pandemic-mandated stay-at-home order. This research seeks to strengthen the existing literature regarding best practices for andragogical learning for students with ASD. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique learning challenges for students with severe ASD, including limited ability to meet individualized educational program (IEP) goals and access to essential services. This chapter illuminates the connection between suboptimal virtual learning practices for high school students with severe ASD and declines in mental health and both developmental and educational outcomes. As virtual learning is increasingly utilized and embedded into andragogical education, centering the experiences of students with severe ASD is essential. With this in mind, the chapter conveys the vision necessary for improving the best practices for virtual learning for students with severe ASD.

INTRODUCTION

For students who live with Autism, and severe disabilities, immense barriers to receiving an equitable education are prevalent, especially when students are removed from their typical in-person settings

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(Türkoğlu et al., 2020). Special Education departments in most schools are staffed by specialized employees, including special education teachers, therapists, teachers' aides, nurses, behaviorists, and psychiatrists. When students with autism are included in a neurotypical learning setting all special education practitioners and support staff can still be present and provide the essential support they would if the student were in a self-contained neurodivergent developmental classroom. When a student has severe developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these essential individuals, and the assistance and support services they provide, are vital to the student's receipt of an accessible and appropriate education; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act legally requires that all students with a disability "are provided with a Free Appropriate Public Education that is tailored to their individual needs" (IDEA, 1997).

Ultimately, the quality and quantity of essential services for autistic students is diminished in virtual learning (Pellicano et al., 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic required, in order to protect the health of students, teachers, and society more largely, a rapid and emergency shift to virtual learning; the nature of this abrupt shift, in a time of crisis, produced diminished learning experiences for students living with severe ASD, principally because parents, teachers, and administrators were poorly equipped and inexperienced, in both technology and virtual education practices, to sufficiently provide essential services for students with severe autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Altable, 2020). The diminishment in educational quality was primarily due to waning access to occupational and physical therapy, social skills groups, and behavior modification programming. This study demonstrates that students with Autism require role-models for socialization, and spaces to adequately practice socialization, for a comprehensive academic and developmental education. Inclusion in class in-person is the ideal setting for students living with autism. This young and vulnerable population is at risk of enduring devastating damage to their social, emotional, and academic growth and development, due to the rapid, unplanned, and inadequate shift to virtual learning (Eshraghi et al., 2020).

It is important to highlight the main challenges that students with ASD face while learning virtually and explore how best practices can be put in place to offer the best educational experience for them online. The detrimental, albeit necessary, shift to virtual learning has been a key issue for students with severe autism, and other key stakeholders in special education since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents, teachers, and administrators were ill-prepared and poorly equipped, in both skill and technology access, to provide essential services for their students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) during COVID-19 stay-home orders (Altable, 2020). Further, older students with autism were also denied their rightful workplace experiences during the pandemic; As the Autism Society explains:

Employment...is a valued activity for both individuals and society...Employment helps people achieve independence and economic self-sufficiency. Employment also gives people purpose, dignity, self-esteem, and a sense of accomplishment and pride...All individuals, including individuals with the most significant disabilities, should enjoy every opportunity to be employed in the workforce, pursue careers, advance professionally, and engage actively in the economic marketplace (Autism Society, n.d.).

Moreover, the urgency of the transition and lack of preparedness in shifting from historically developed and researched in-person core curriculum, for special needs students, to insufficient virtual instruction has prevented students from meeting the goals outlined in their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (Jenkins & Walker, 2021). The consequences of virtual learning have been documented across many school districts through academic research (Chung, 2020; White et al., 2021) and is further illustrated by the

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