Chapter 2
Teaching Students With Learning Disabilities in a Virtual Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 brought unprecedented changes in the education sector at all levels globally. These rapid changes have transformed the way teachers are transacting the curriculum in K-12 classrooms. Teachers have had to adapt and depend on a virtual mode to reach students and facilitate student engagement and subsequent learning. In the absence of professional development support, such overnight changes and giant leaps from traditional face-to-face interaction with students have been extremely challenging for teachers and equally stressful for students and their parents. Many teachers describe their helplessness with growing absenteeism and delayed submission of student assignments. It is even more difficult for students with a learning disability to engage virtually for a longer time in front of a computer screen. They often need intensive, one-on-one support from the parent. This chapter aims to highlight the challenges faced by professionals to teach students with specific learning disabilities effectively in a virtual learning environment and identify effective solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Since the onset in the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in complete or partial lockdowns, social distancing, and social isolation to curb the virus or at least keep it at bay. As reported by John Hopkins University (2021), globally, COVID-19 has infected more than 111 million people worldwide and has led to almost 2.5 million deaths. In the United States, the pandemic situation is quite grim, with more than 33 million people infected and 605,000 lives lost forever (John Hopkins University, 2021). Disasters create havoc in the lives of people (Di Pietro, 2017). The pandemic has disrupted lives at every level - economically, financially, and socially. The temporary school closures may have a psychological impact on students' health and may worsen the wellbeing of the most vulnerable student populations, such as students with disabilities (Colao et al., 2020).

The field of education is equally impacted by the pandemic and has witnessed drastic measures. Millions of students at the primary, middle, and high school levels got affected due to the pandemic causing worldwide school closures over health and safety uncertainty (Quezada et al., 2020). With these COVID-related school closures, many countries have turned to online instruction to ensure continuity of learning. However, online learning focuses on how many learners with disabilities are left behind as social distancing is not conducive to learning. Many students with disabilities require the exact opposite: face-to-face teaching, and a strong, close-knit network of educators, parents, and significant others, often supporting complex and multiple learning needs. Viewing the pandemic's current scenario and no sight of its ending soon, most of the student population had shifted to remote/virtual learning to maintain their continuity of education.

The transition to remote teaching-learning has been smooth for students with access to technology and internet at home. However, the lack of support and no accessibility to the internet, software, and learning materials, may leave some students no choice but to rely on a paper-pencil mode of learning. The new way of schooling restricted to the home environment has created a burden for students, families, and schools. Many students and teachers would probably face psychological problems during these times - like stress, fear, anxiety, depression, and insomnia, leading to a lack of focus and concentration. Therefore, in the time of COVID-19 crisis, implementing educational practices that promote Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills in classrooms are crucial. Students with SEL skills are more likely to manage stress and anxiety, make appropriate decisions, and are more likely to succeed in life (Khazanchi et al., 2021).

Working parents need to adapt and plan to adequately meet the SEL and other educational needs of their children during unprecedented time. Most of the parents face concerns with the education of their children due to unavailability of insufficient/updated devices and a fast-speed internet. Parents' responsibilities have increased manifold, especially for those with children at the elementary school level or those with special needs children. Also, students taking advanced placement courses at high school often find it difficult to manage their studies when learning is restricted to an online mode only. Both students with and without disabilities are struggling in an online virtual environment. Regardless of age and ability levels, all students deserve equal access to learning opportunities, both in a face-to-face and virtual classroom environment.

Students with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) show difficulties with learning problems, such as acquisition, retention, and organization of skills and poor comprehension of directions, even though they have an average to above-average intelligence quotient (Dominguez, 2020). There is a high prevalence of SLDs in school-going students diagnosed with learning problems in elementary schools. It is

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