

Chapter 3

Measures of Education and Training to Support the Long-Term Skills of Teachers After the COVID-19 Crisis: It Is Imperative to Leave No Student With Special Needs Behind

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ABSTRACT

School closures and the wider social constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the difficulty of attaining educational goals and affected students with special needs. Education and training systems have responded and demonstrated a great ability to innovate and adopt new approaches, but also shown significant shortcomings due to teachers' being unwilling to make use of different environments and learning tools. The chapter reflects on the immediate response to the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, looking at the systems of teacher support available, including the successful and safe uses of technology for learning that help education systems become more equitable and inclusive and more effective in fulfilling their mission, more efficient in their operation and use of resources, and thus, better equipped to serve the needs of their communities and society at large. Appropriate teacher training and teacher competencies are fundamental to ensuring teachers are adequately skilled, remunerated, and ready to implement equitable and inclusive learning.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 caused major disruptions in education, and further destabilized the mental and physical well-being of students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020; Cerdan Chiscano, 2021; Kim & Rose, 2020). There is growing evidence that students with disabilities have been significantly less engaged in distance learning than their peers due to digital exclusion, absence of appropriate assistive equipment, and teachers' inexperience (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff & Margetts, 2020). Teachers need to be trained and actively involved in reorganizing and implementing educational programmes for new technologies to be successfully integrated in schools. Research shows that innovation programs that have not allowed teachers to participate in all stages of their implementation have not succeeded (Clarke, 2007; Deglau & O'Sullivan, 2006). Inclusion in education has not proven to be a satisfactory educational transformation. In the absence of reforms, several factors, such as standard curricula, large numbers of students, educational materials, material infrastructure of schools, and conventional educational methods, continue to remain the same (Efthymiou, in press). In many families and learning situations, distance learning was challenging, especially for students with special needs. Among the major concerns have been the absence of targeted learning support at school, financial support, and access to a variety of extracurricular activities (Hamilton & Ercikan, 2022). Many schools and teachers were not prepared for such a change in both digital capacity and resources, including connectivity and infrastructure. Some primary and secondary school teachers reported that they did not have clear guidance and communication with public authorities. They also reported a lack of support and training in learning planning for periods during which all, or most, students would learn remotely (Aiano et al., 2021).

Inclusive education is a process that contributes to the achievement of social inclusion. Inclusion is a series of actions that embrace diversity and foster a sense of belonging. This view is based on the belief that all people have their own individual value and potential, and should be respected regardless of their background, abilities, or identities (Santamaría Graff et al., 2020). The quest for better education and training that includes diversity is not unique to COVID-19. Planning for education and training continues to present challenges, including the need to create meaningful learning experiences for learners of various ages, backgrounds, and abilities (Simamora, 2020). Teachers and schools need support in adapting and improving their own pedagogical and organizational styles to benefit every student. It is imperative that the education and training system adopt a coherent, continuous improvement-oriented approach to address these challenges and improve capacity in distance education (Ehren & Baxter, 2020).

Distance education could be synchronous, asynchronous, and blended. In synchronous education, learners are connected to the network and communicate in real time, thus simulating traditional learning remotely. In the asynchronous mode of learning, learners work with the educational material at any time and place, without teacher's presence, while blended learning integrates the two previous learning modalities (Moorhouse & Wong, 2021). Synchronous and asynchronous learning is implemented through Learning Management Systems (DMS) that contribute to the development of virtual learning experiences (Diep et al., 2021). In 2008, Siemens and Downes (as cited in Rennie & Smyth, 2019) referred to digital learners as having the skills to navigate through a set of nodes that include wide-ranging information sources, such as websites, articles, videos, databases, and books. Thus, a personal learning network is created, one that grows and enriches over time. Therefore, according to connectivism (Siemens, 2004), learning is a process of connecting information nodes and can be acquired by interacting with others and by employing any source of information. Proponents of this theory emphasize that learning cannot consist of instructor-to-learner transfer of knowledge but learning results from participation and inter-

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