

## The Impact of Schools' Closure on the Vulnerable to Learn and Study Remotely

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### Abstract

*In searching the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on children's education very little attention has been given to the effect of schools-closure on children with special educational needs (SEN). Supporting SEN children during such difficult times is clearly important but the best way of achieving this is currently unclear. In fact, the support available falls short to meet the educational needs of those capable to learn, let alone those who find it difficult to learn. In response to the needs for education, all developed countries made sure that learning fully continued taking place online as schools provided remote schooling, however the same cannot be found in developing countries e.g. Libya and consequently children with SEN have suffered the most. Currently, all the burden is placed on parents to support children at home during such challenging time. Thus, the intention in this study is to gain a better understanding of how children are supported at home during the closure of schools with special reference to those who have already found it difficult to learn. 49 parents agree to take part in online survey concerned with SEN children learning at home and the challenges experienced. The results of this study suggested online learning is not straightforward and in particular with SEN children. The majority of parents in this study found it extremely hard to respond to the needs of SEN children at home without the support and advice of school's professionals. There is certainly a need for more educational resources and effective online learning strategies to support both children and parents.*

### Keywords

children; special education; Covid-19 pandemic; online learning



## I. Introduction

Globally there is a growing concern with the impact of COVID-19 on children's education at all levels; however very little attention is given to the affect of schools-closure on children with special educational needs (SEN) who are more likely to face additional barriers. Millions of children in the Middle East and North Africa have suffered as a result of the spread of pandemic closure of schools and restrictions on movement have negatively affected children's psychological wellbeing and education (UNICEF, 2020). In line with this, Asbury et al. (2020) found school closures on the long run not only agitate learning and competence development of SEN children, but also their mental health.

Like many other countries in the world, Libya has decided to close all schools to reduce the spread of COVID-19, leaving 1.3 million students without education for almost a year. In contrast with other countries the situation in Libya is getting worse because of ongoing war and political conflicts, and as such children are for so many months of home confinement often than not without electricity. In relation to COVID-19 Integrated Education Response in North Africa, the UNICEF 2020 initiated an emergency response programme in Libya under “Education Cannot Wait” to support children. Yet the support available falls short to meet the educational needs of those capable to learn, let alone those who find it difficult to learn. Indeed, SEN children have suffered most during the lockdown. In response to the needs for education, all developed countries made sure that learning fully continues taking place online as schools provided remote schooling, however the same cannot be found in developing and underdeveloped countries and consequently children with SEN have suffered the most. Supporting SEN children all over the world during such difficult time is clearly important but the best way of achieving this is currently unclear.

Although the Ministry of Education of Libya has announced in April 2020 special educational programmes in support of distance learning for school children (UNICEF, 2020) e.g. filming model teachers delivering key core subjects such as mathematics, Arabic language, and science for (grades 1-9), the provision has failed to provide meaningful education for SEN children, and hence children's education remains significantly disrupted due to COVID-19 and as such their future is on hold. Indeed, meeting the need of SEN children beyond schools' boundaries prove to be challenging all over the world. In Libya, the educational authorities recommended learning is home-based depending heavily on the support of parents and availability of technological devices. In fact, the educational authorities failed to recognise that there is a great number of children without internet access and adult supervision, besides other marginalised difficulties due to their SEN. Indeed, children with SEN could not continue education without special support from school professionals e.g. specialised teachers, educators and psychologists. They certainly need a learning platform and other accessible learning materials which cannot be found away from schools.

The idea of distance learning is relatively new in Libya and no routines concerning homeschooling have yet been developed within the Libyan school system. Hence, there is a growing need for teachers to modify their instruction and parents to pay a huge amount of attention to their children's SEN and expand their support to their children regarding school work within the “Distance learning” modality. This is with the aim to identify effective ways of interactive remote learning and the factors that influence and restrict remote learning. Thus, for quality distance learning provisions to take place, it is imperative to recognise children's educational needs and identify the essential tools to address those needs.

In Libya, 23% of the school-aged population have experienced special educational needs in one way or another (see Gadour, 2007), though their specific learning needs may vary from one child to another depending on the severity of their educational needs. Equally some may require individual education plan and relying on school-based services including engagement with specialised educators and structured learning environments, consequently school closure means loss of critical resources for children with SEN. It is widely known that SEN children required a stable learning environment to continue

educational attainment, however we know very little if at all about how SEN children are educated at home. Currently, all the burden is placed on parents and older siblings to support children at home during such challenging time. Thus, it is essential to explore how parents are ready to maintain remote learning and support their children, particularly in the absence of having resources to support expansion of assistive technologies for home-based learning for SEN children. The intention in this study is to gain a better understanding of how the closure of schools may have affected children's learning with special reference to those who have already found it difficult to learn. This is with the aim to offset the risk for educational losses among SEN children and widening educational disparities.

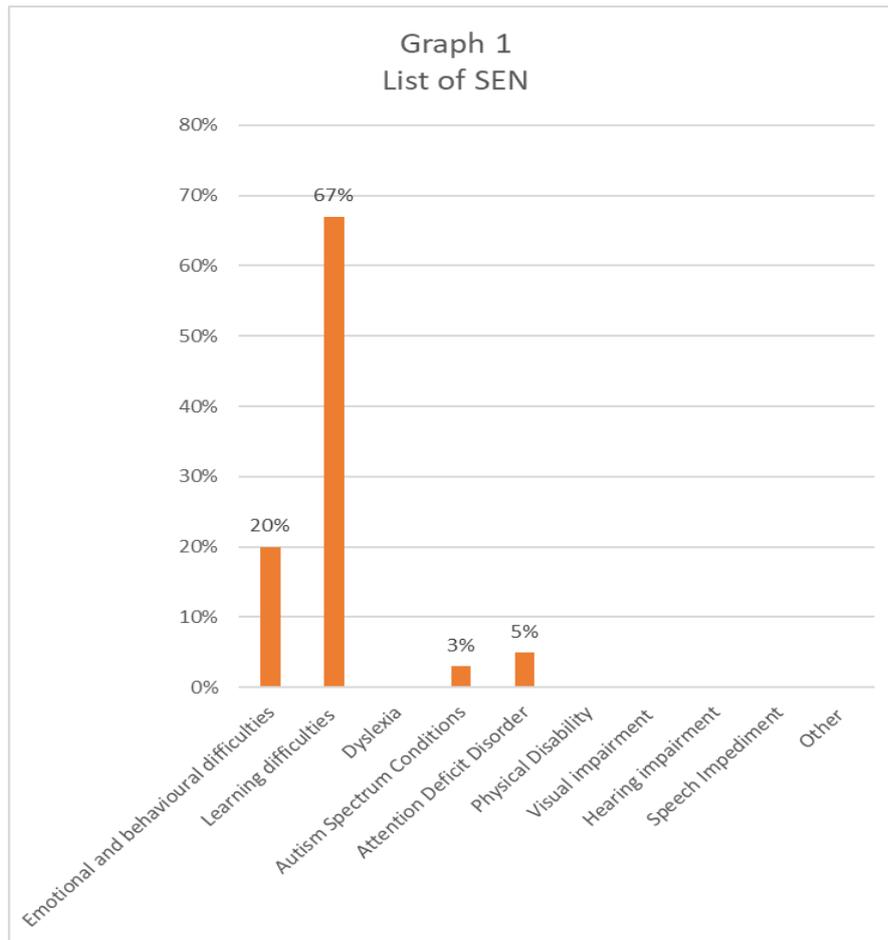
## **II. Research Methods**

Because of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were conducted via an existing group email to complete online survey. I had to approach the parents of 27 children of whom they were selected by their mainstream teachers in a previous study (see Gadour, 2021) as having SEN to take part in this present study. All parents of SEN children (both mothers and fathers) agreed to participate in this study except five parents making a total number of 49 participants. By the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 2020 all participants completed the survey. The survey incorporated questions concerned with the nature of SEN, school support, parental involvement, challenges with respect to learning at home, and the support required by parents with SEN children.

## **III. Discussion**

Parents were asked to select all that applied to their children from a list of special educational needs (SEN) in order to identify the nature and severity of those needs. Graph 1 shows the types of SEN that were endorsed by parents, besides the percentage of most common ones are:

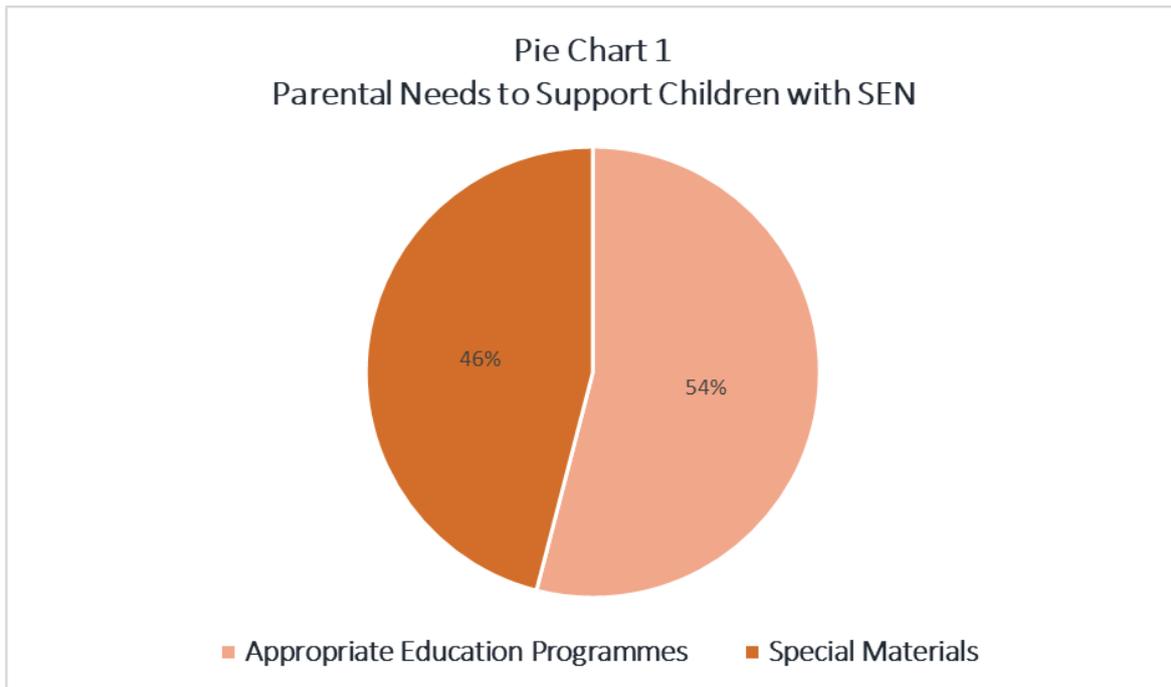
- Emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Learning difficulties
- Dyslexia
- Autism Spectrum Conditions
- Attention Deficit Disorder
- Physical Disability
- Visual impairment
- Hearing impairment
- Speech Impediment
- Other



**Figure 1. List of SEN**

Two third of parents 67% reported predominantly learning difficulties to describe their children’s SEN compare with 20% of parents reported Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Only in 5% of parents reported Attention Deficit Disorder, while 3% described their children as experiencing Autism Spectrum Conditions.

Using Likert scale parents were asked how satisfied they were with the level of school’s support that was provided during the school closures (poorly supported to very well-supported). Not surprisingly 95% of parents were dissatisfied with school effort to support their children, though this comes out clearly from parents of children with learning difficulties. Generally, the findings of this study suggested that all parents were challenged to meet their children’s SEN at home, regardless to the parents’ background and level of education. In response to how parents of children with SEN want to be supported during schools’ closure in order to help their children – 75% parents reported that they could not help their children at home without professional advice e.g. special educational needs teachers, school psychologists and social workers. In a similar way, they required support that specifically focus on their children’s learning difficulties; this is with the aim to offer parents some reassurance to cope with the pressure to educate children at home. Hence, 54% highlighted the needs for appropriate educational activities sent by schools to home e.g. educational plan to address children’s specific learning needs. Other parents 46% underlined the growing need for up to date special materials: physical equipment, iPhone or smart phone applications to help with their children’s education at home, besides quality access to the internet (see Pie Chart 1).



**Figure 2.** *Parental Needs to Support Children with SEN*

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This study presents findings using an online survey on the situation of parents in Libya, focusing on children's learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation of SEN children is described as reported by their parents in line with challenges experienced due to learning at home. Arguably this is the first study in Libya addressing SEN children's difficulties to learn at home amid COVID-19. Due to schools' closure, parents were called on to provide support and assistance at home for their SEN children. Yet all parents of SEN children in this study feel challenged by the demand of home learning; they found the sudden change from face-to-face-instruction by school professionals at schools to distance learning at home very challenging. In a similar way, parents were dissatisfied with the support from the schools and consequently felt exposed due to their inability to educate their children at home. It appears that parents are left to their own devices struggling to motivate their children to learn at home; this is clear from parents of children with learning difficulties compared with parents of those experiencing other forms of SEN. This may reflect in turn the findings of Letzel, Pozas, and Schneider (2020) in that they highlighted schools' inability to provide children with learning difficulties with adequate teaching material and tasks. In line with previous studies concerned with educating SEN children at home (e.g. Gadour, 2008; Patall, Cooper, and Robinson 2008; Domina 2005) parents of SEN children appeared willing to help but don't know how and consequently they require enough resources, training and preparation by schools' professionals to be able to provide the right support for children. Although the results of the present study do not reveal substantially different information to that documented in the literature concerning the gap between school and home in supporting SEN children (see Gadour, 2006), parents felt too stressed during the time of school closures to address the learning needs of their children. The implication of this study suggests that there is a need for straightforward effective online learning strategies designed by schools' professionals for parents to follow with SEN children at home. This is with the aim to provide parents with educational plan, learning materials and other resources to improve

the quality of home learning while at the same time prevent the increase of educational inequality and worsening of learning difficulties. Finally, it is essential to stress that the sample recruited here may not represent a wide range of parents of children with SEN, and therefore further studies are needed to explore the impact of home learning on SEN children across the board, besides investigating parents' educational and social background.

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