Original Article

Access to Quality Education among Students with Special Needs amidst Covid-19: A Review on Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created chaos in education management systems as well as teaching and learning across the world. It led to limited global interactions, lockdowns and school closures, which transformed the routine face-to-face to an online mode of teaching and learning. Although all schools, teachers and students were affected, children with special needs suffered a lot in their continuing learning struggles. This systematic review explored 25 papers to create further understanding and interpretations across studies and countries on COVID-19 challenges and prospects for special needs education. The study found that access to education among students with special needs amid Covid 19 was challenging and demanding in terms of resources, teachers' innovation and creativity as well as community support. The pandemic disrupted normal learning leading to learning loss. Teachers, parents and students with special needs were found to be unprepared for learning continuity during emergencies. Although online learning turned to normal learning, it was insufficient due to technological disparities and the remoteness of some homes. Learning from home is evidenced to be ineffective in less developed areas as it leads to a digital divide among learners. The study has implications for creating awareness, preparedness and capacities for teachers and parents of children with special needs to be flexible, creative and ready to deliver quality teaching and learning during emergencies, bearing in mind that there is no single initiative that fits all emergencies.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 was first reported in Hubei Province in Wuhan City in Central China at the end of 2019 and developed into a major outbreak (Huang, 2020; Qi & Hu, 2020). It was later in January 2020 declared by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) a global pandemic and an International Health Emergency. The emergency disturbed the normal learning routine and led to the trauma of closing international borders and interactions, country lockdowns, and school and college closures (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozi, 2021). Education procedures, teaching and learning suddenly shifted from the routine of face-to-face to distance and online learning, as such teachers and students faced immense challenges and learning loss (Aizawa et al., 2021; Kritzer & Smith, 2020). Governments, schools, parents and students were all uncertain with the unprecedented closures of schools. Different bodies were not in a position to ensure learning continuity during emergencies.

The socioeconomic nature and status of countries had an impact on the way they responded to the pandemic eruption and school closures (Duby et al., 2022). However, in diverse cases, learners with disabilities and special needs were highly marginalized from the special treatment of their professional teachers. Mcclain-Nhlapo et al. (2020) ascertained that nearly 40% of low- and middle-income countries experienced high education exclusion, and failed to support children with special needs during school closures (Kubenz & Kiwan, 2021).

Even before Covid 19, children with disabilities have experienced and suffered a lot from education access inequities and learning outcomes (Smith et al., 2022). Although the pandemic affected the education system worldwide, teachers, parents and students, however, the impacts vary among students due to their natural setting, backgrounds and conditions (Masanyiwa, Mwamakula & Mhagama, 2023). Students with special needs suffered a lot in coping with homeschooling and difficult situations amid COVID-19. School closures denied these students their right to specialized care and individualized training from special education (SPED) teachers who are specialists. For example, from the USA experience, students with autism, emotional and behavioural disorders rely much on individualized face-to-face instruction which is unclear through online instruction with difficulties in monitoring students' progress (Cortes et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022). In 2020, 3.6 million US children aged 6-21 years were saved by professionals with skills in special needs education and disabilities.

Teachers' unpreparedness for online teaching and limited access to technology from low-income families amounted to other challenges even in developed countries like the USA (Cousik, 2022; Kaur, 2020). Changes in instructional nature and supervision affected the delivery of subject matter and students' learning and participation. In Polland and Philippines for example, Parczewska (2020) and Talidong and Toquero (2020) respectively report that teachers, students and parents faced anxiety, unpreparedness and fewer competencies in dealing with online homeschooling. This had psychological and pedagogical impacts on students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in their learning and achieving the educational objectives.
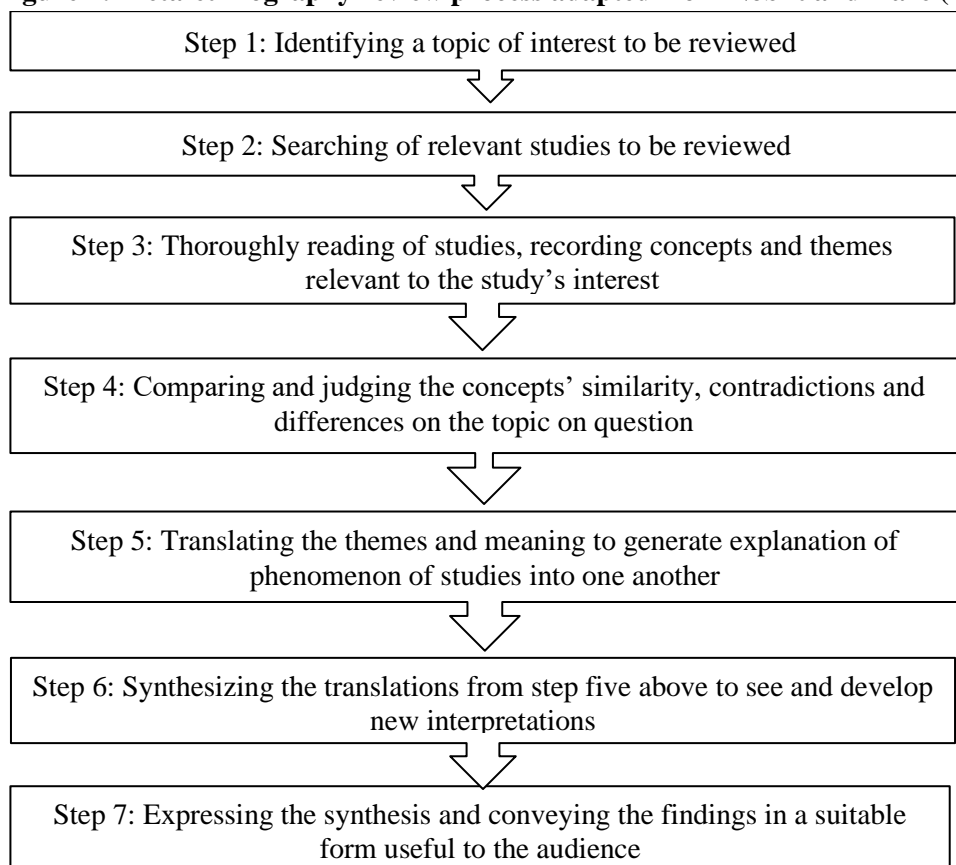
Long-term inefficiency in dealing with education during prolonged emergencies and crises has been evidenced globally. Schools and universities made diverse efforts to support learning continuity through the pandemic including home online schooling (Daniel, 2020). Following school closures, parents reported dissatisfaction with fewer capabilities to assist learners and limited contact with schools and teachers amid the pandemic. Students with disabilities spent little time learning without proper assistance which accelerated mental health problems (Kubenz & Kiwan, 2021; Singal et al., 2021). Poor preparation for education during emergencies keeps repeating, for example, Africa experienced it during school shut-downs amid the prolonged Ebola crisis in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in 2014–2016, in a similar way to the recent

COVID-19 pandemic. In all these scenarios, children with special needs are the most vulnerable. However, limited studies have set an eye on the crisis impacts on students with special needs, and accommodated and addressed the specific learning needs of students with special needs (Cortes et al., 2021). Most of the available studies dealt with the broader impact of the crisis on inclusive mass, with less consideration of learners with disabilities (Mcclain-Nhlapo et al., 2020). It is from such a perspective; that this study reviews the challenges encountered amid COVID-19 and calls for prospects of emergency education and strategies for learners with special needs in future.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review of studies adopted a "meta-ethnography" approach, which is an interpretive strategy aimed at synthesising qualitative Data (SQD) in the field of education (Noblit & Hare, 1988). In the meta-ethnography approach of review, the key task of a researcher is to make comparisons and analyses of studies to create new understandings and interpretations across reviewed studies (Atkins et al., 2008). The study followed the 7 steps of the meta-ethnography approach developed by Noblit and Hare (1988) illustrated below:

Figure 1: Meta-ethnography review process adapted from Noblit and Hare (1988)

Step 1: Identifying a topic of interest to be reviewed

Step 2: Searching of relevant studies to be reviewed

Step 3: Thoroughly reading of studies, recording concepts and themes relevant to the study's interest

Step 4: Comparing and judging the concepts' similarity, contradictions and differences on the topic on question

Step 5: Translating the themes and meaning to generate explanation of phenomenon of studies into one another

Step 6: Synthesizing the translations from step five above to see and develop new interpretations

Step 7: Expressing the synthesis and conveying the findings in a suitable form useful to the audience

Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria

In scanning the articles to be reviewed, inclusion and exclusion criteria were considered based on Weed's *Methodological Guidelines for Review Papers* (1997). The inclusion criterion was used to search journals, download and review English peer-reviewed articles from databases like Web of Science, Google Scholar, EBSCO, ERIC, SCOPUS, Springer Link and SAGE online journals based on issues related to special needs education during Covid 19 were included in the study. Searching words and concepts included: inclusion or inclusive education, special needs education, COVID-19 19 and education. The

studies are from 2020 to 2023, the period that has experienced the pandemic impacts worldwide. Exclusion criterion was used to screen and eliminate articles published in non-English, non-peer-reviewed journals, PhD and Master's theses, book chapters and reports.

Review Process

Initially, the search generated 287 articles whereas 55 duplicates were removed. However, in

responding to the study's purpose, papers' titles and abstract readings of the remaining 232 articles 143 were removed, and 89 papers were identified as potential for the study. Then 64 papers were further excluded because had no defined research methodology, while others did not cover issues related to SPED and COVID-19. Finally, 25 studies were selected and read thoroughly after undergoing inclusion-exclusion criteria as shown in *Figure 2* below:

Figure 2: Systematic review flow chart
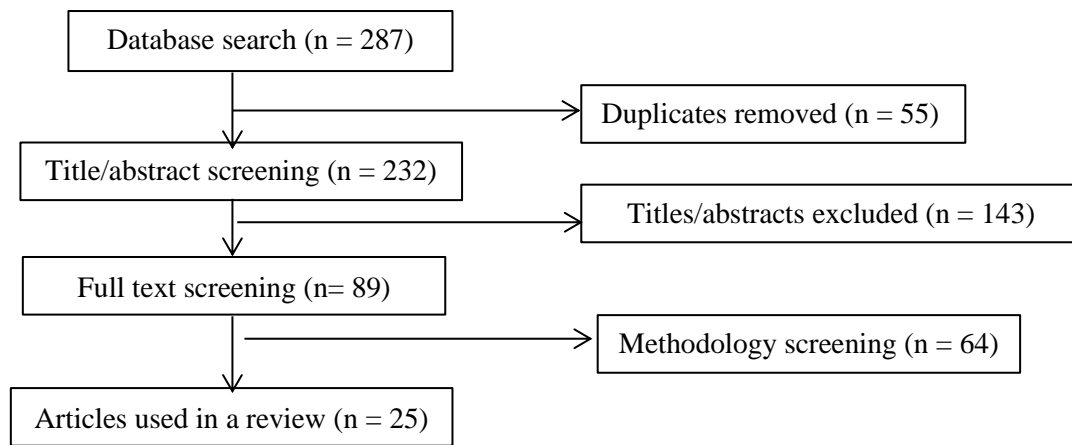
The 25 articles were also assessed using the adapted version of CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 1988) by Atkins et al (2008). This step guided the criteria for observing the quality and some gaps in the reported results of

the studies in question. The 25 studies were then thoroughly studied and analysed to provide answers to the review questions. *Table 1* below shows the geographical distribution, and Table 2 shows the summary of the reviewed articles.

Table 1: Geographical distribution of reviewed articles

Location	Country	No. of articles
Africa	South Africa	4
	Zambia	1
	Malawi	2
	Kenya	1
	Tanzania	1
North America	USA	2
	Canada	1
Europe	Poland	1
Asia	China	1
	Philippines	4
	India	1
	Pakistan	1
	Malaysia	1
Australia	Australia	1
Cross border studies	Turkey & India	1
	Case studies from 31 countries	1
8 Low- and middle-income countrie (Bangladesh, Brazil, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, and Zambia).		1
Total		**25**

Table 2: Summary of reviewed articles

Author	Area of Study	Data collection methods
Angode & Ressa (2021)	Kenya	Questionnaire
Bozkurt & Sharma (2020)	Turkey & India	Questionnaire and Interview
Bozkurt et al. (2020)	31 countries	Online Questionnaire and Interview
Cortes et al. (2021)	Philippines	Interview
Daniel (2020)	Canada	Survey
Duby et al. (2022)	South Africa	Questionnaire and interview
Garbe et al. (2020)	USA	Online survey
Kaur (2020)	India	Interview
Kombe & Mtonga (2021)	Zambia	Online Questionnaire and Interview
Kritzer & Smith (2020)	USA	National survey
Kubenz & Kiwan (2021)	8 countries	Articles' review
Makuyana (2022)	South Africa	Interview
Mwakyusa & Ng'webeya (2022)	Tanzania	Interview and documentary review
Manase (2021)	South Africa	Interview
Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozi (2021)	Malawi	Interview
Page et al. (2021)	Australia	Interview
Paramasivam et al. (2022)	Malaysia	Semi-structured interview
Parczewska (2020)	Poland	Survey
Qi & Hu (2020)	China	Articles' review
Singal et al. (2021)	Malawi	Telephone survey
Sonn et al. (2021)	South Africa	Articles' review
Talidong & Toquero (2020)	Philippines	Survey
Toquero (2020a)	Philippines	Online survey
Toquero (2020b)	Philippines	Analysis of government laws
Zaheer & Munir (2020)	Pakistan	Semi-structured interview

Online interviews, questionnaires and analysis/review of studies dominated the methods used in collecting the data in the reviewed articles. This implies that not only education access and learning but also research shifted from physical contact to online or virtual data collection methods as an emergency issue amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINDINGS

COVID-19 Eruption and Schools' Closure

COVID-19 was first reported in Hubei Province in Wuhan City in China in December 2019, it was later in January 2020 declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) a global pandemic and an International Health Emergency (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Paramasivam et al., 2022; WHO, 2020). The emergence led to school closures in March 2020 in many countries worldwide, hence home schooling emerged. The pandemic interrupted normal life leading to social distancing restrictions, suspending face-to-face teaching and learning which affected more than 94% learning population (Angode & Ressa, 2021; Kritzer & Smith, 2020). 1.5 billion learners were reported to be affected due to university and school closures (UNESCO, 2020). Although homeschooling was is for all students, students with special needs require distinct attention.

Challenges Faced in SPED amidst Covid 19

Amidst COVID-19, teachers faced heavy workloads, multiplicity of roles, limited technology, poor collaboration with parents and students, mental health, and student and teacher health concerns. Teachers who are also parents face overlapping roles (teaching and parenting) of taking care and teaching their children at home as well as students from their schools (Garbe et al.,

2020). Thus, teachers were multitasked with home chores, parenting, and monitoring their children's homeschooling while at the same time teaching online classes. Parents in the same line, regardless of their limited professional teaching skills, were now transformed to '*home teaching*' by assisting and promoting homeschooling as remote learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). With online distance learning, students and teachers face irregular contacts, interactions and mentorships leading to learning inefficiency (Zaheer & Munir, 2020).

The shift in instructional approaches and strategies was confronted by limited time to plan and develop effective curricula for emergency situations (Cousik, 2022). Learning resources were limitedly in place to enable off-campus or online learning (Kombe & Mtonga, 2021). Assessment strategies and monitoring of students' learning were also not efficiently done to develop the three major domains; cognitive, psychomotor and affective domain. Only the cognitive domain was highly the target of remote learning and assessment contrary to what is directed in curricula. Through distant remote communication between students and learners, it was hard to assess the psychomotor and affective domains (Cortes et al., 2021; Daniel, 2020; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozi, 2021). Assessment became inflexible in addressing students' contexts and interests in repairing the damages caused by COVID-19 disruptions.

Deficiency in government's and teachers' preparedness to work on challenging emergencies was highly observed across the globe. Both teachers and students with special needs in education felt abruptly dragged into the transition from physical to virtual or remote learning out of their understanding, readiness and awareness (Page et al., 2021). They were not readily prepared to accommodate the new learning pace and challenging move (Toquero, 2020a). Learners with special needs, experienced loneliness, isolation and less attachment from their former and routine friendships in inclusive and mainstreamed schools, hence increased anxiety

and mental health problems among them (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Limited access to technology in middle and low-income communities and families, highly affected remote learning. Changes from on-campus to off-campus learning faced a lack of limited digital resources supply among teachers, parents and students (Duby et al., 2022; Garbe et al., 2020). This led to a digital divide and learning diversity among families with high and low incomes. Some parents, for example, lacked skills in how to operate computers, communicate and manage e-learning apps and platforms as well as provide sound attention to learners (Toquero, 2020b). In low and middle-income countries and especially in remote areas, educationists, parents and students experienced limited internet access to dominant e-learning platforms like Edutopia, television programs and social media podiums like YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Edmodo, Skype (Angode & Ressa, 2021; Makuyana, 2022; Manase, 2021; Paramasivam et al., 2022). Accessibility of learning materials was then diversified among learners pertaining to their location and network user-friendliness.

Quality of care and specialized treatment or social support for students with special needs were situated in an alarming inefficiency (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Kaur, 2020). This led to impacts on students' learning interactions, collaborations and engagement outcomes. Through homeschooling, it was difficult for parents who had limited teaching skills to create a conducive learning environment to ease students' learning and adaptability (Masanyiwa et al., 2023). Learners with learning difficulties and disabilities also faced inadequate development of practical or psychomotor skills and received improper handling of their learning environment and allocation of learning resources. Such students lacked support on vocational skills which would produce dormant and inactive individuals unable to cope with challenges and manage the knowledge application for the 21st digital era (Makono et al., 2023).

Students with special needs or disabilities were found to have been challenged by less attention, communication and behavioural problems, absenteeism in online classes, incomplete assignments, and difficulty in keeping documents/portfolios. Such students continued to face inequalities, marginalization and limited school and social support from families who are not professionals and specialists of SPED. This influenced negatively the learning engagement of such discriminated and marginalized students (Kubenz & Kiwan, 2021; Smith et al., 2022).

Re-thinking SPED during Emergencies

Education policies, legislative frameworks and teacher training policies are to accommodate education in emergencies. Many education policies remain implemented hence causing inadequacy of resource allocation, innovation and service provision (Sonn et al., 2021). The study makes a call for effective investment in and implementation of laws and policies that promote access to quality education among students with special needs. The policies must work in line with special needs education policies and laws. For example, "In the 1980s and later 2000s, Kenya enacted disability policies and laws (e.g., Persons with Disabilities Act 2003, the Constitution of Kenya 2010, the Children's Act 2001, and the Basic Education Act 2013) and signed international treaties (e.g., the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006) to promote rights of disabled people. Still, children and youth with special needs endure neglect that predisposes them to low academic performance and unsuccessful adulthood" (Angode & Ressa, 2021, p. 134). This alerts for active fulfilment of all enacted laws and policies to enhance access to education for children with special needs amidst and after emergencies.

Effective communication is required between teachers (schools), homes (parents) and teacher training institutions (Garbe et al., 2020). Students with special needs require enhanced social interaction accommodative to both verbal and non-verbal communication, including the use of participatory and attentive speech and gestures.

They need more learning by doing 'hands-on learning' to develop their psychomotor skills through identifying, classifying, labelling and manipulating objects. This develops their experiences to master their environment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and online/virtual learning denied the practical right of learning to students with disabilities. Therefore, educational institutions and administrative organs need planning that will bridge the existing gaps that arose due to school shuts (Manase, 2021).

Improved inclusion services to students with special needs must be developed to ensure that SPED students enjoy equity services. Nations are advised to ensure amendments to inclusive policies and legal frameworks on dealing with public health issues and services during emergencies (Qi & Hu, 2020). Educational institutions, community organisations and governments need to collaboratively sensitize the entire population on the importance of investing in resources and an inclusive accessible universal environment for learning and services to education (Mwakyusa & Ng'webeya, 2022). This will help SPED students to grab opportunities for education similar to non-disabled students. Positive culture of self and collaborative positive inclusive education will then be developed among communities (Makuyana, 2022; Manase, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The world is always dynamic and prone to emergencies which are unplanned crises that disrupt regular learning leading to learning loss. Emergencies such as COVID-19, wars and natural hazards affect teaching and learning. Education in emergencies (EIE) is crucial in ensuring the continuity of students' learning regardless of the interfering situations to prevent learning loss or crisis and enable children's right to education as stated in UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Studies show that online learning is one of the best approaches to continue learning during emergencies, as it was widely used amidst COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. However, the approach is ineffective in less

technologically developed areas with a prevalence of digital divide.

COVID-19 is an evident global crisis in this century which has affected socio-economic, health, communication and interaction patterns - all spheres of human life (Duby et al., 2022). School closures for roughly four months in early 2020 acted as an immediate mitigation measure for the pandemic, although it impacted over 24 million students worldwide ((UNESCO, 2021). Homeschooling, online or remote learning replaced the normal in-school learning (Kritzer & Smith, 2020), hence causing a lot of learning loss to the majority of children from poor families and countries. The unstable transition affected both the delivery of content, students' well-being and emotional health. Teachers, parents and students from different angles faced incapacities in interactive online tools for teaching and learning due to low literacy, comfort and usability of ICT tools. In remote areas, limited internet access and insufficient technical technological support accelerated learning loss to marginalized learners and parents (Kombe & Mtonga, 2021).

The social impact of COVID-19 is massive inequalities among students, making those with special needs more vulnerable based on their natural characteristics. The students with special needs include those who are partially blind, fully blind, learning disabled, mildly intellectually disabled, slow learners or achievers, hyperactive, hearing impaired and intellectually gifted (Andrew et al., 2020). Children with special needs require intensive engagement, individual attention and support from and with teachers, resources and learning environments which are realized to be limited and impossible through remote online learning (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Kaur, 2020; Makuyana, 2022; Paramasivam et al., 2022). The review experience evidence that, parents with students with special needs felt helpless and unprepared to care for and fulfil the exceptional educational and life needs and necessities of students with special needs.

COVID-19 challenges worsen UNESCO's "sustainable development goal number four (4: Quality education) on initiatives to achieve universal primary education for all children by 2030 (Sonn et al., 2021). It is the target of any country and society working towards inclusive education which should be available to all children without any inequity to ensure citizen's well-being. However, the actual experience is the exclusion of children with special needs as eighty percent (80%) of disability population lives in developing or under-developing countries where access to quality education by children with special needs is still a big challenge (Kaur, 2020, p. 32;).

Scholars argue for collective measures to ensure preparedness for learning continuity during emergencies. Long-term initiatives are to be instituted to ensure quality education continues even in emergency disruptions. Teachers are to be well prepared with e-learning mode capabilities and flexible enough to face any future shocks or learning disruptions (Kombe & Mtonga, 2021). Teacher education training and professional development require special attention in addressing, targeting and developing flexible skills towards enhanced education in emergencies (EIE). Current studies call for the effective development of a blended mode of instruction (a combination of face-to-face and online), to enable flexibility whenever needed (Daniel, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the study is a crucial input on training and professional development of teachers' preparedness and skills for SPED during emergencies. It equips teachers with an understanding of the challenges encountered during emergencies and suggests to them innovative pedagogical and technological skills and experiences for education progression during emergencies. Online learning which was highly adapted as an alternative means of teaching and learning continuity amidst COVID-19, calls for a shift from traditional teacher-centred and localized formats of instruction to more flexible, collaborative, student-centred and digital pedagogies. However, remote learning is supported to help engage learners with disabilities

only if it considers social and emotional learning and the availability of effective digital resources and assistance which to most ordinary families is problematic. Hence, there is a need for adequate social interaction and resources supply which provide room for an enhanced sense of belonging and minimize disparity between urban and rural schools.

Recommendations

Although SPED teachers are trained to deal with students with special needs, when it comes to emergencies like COVID-19 and online or homeschooling, teaching and learning their control over learners with special needs becomes limited. This calls for parents of such children to also be trained and guided on how to offer quality education to their children at home during emergencies like that of the COVID-19 pandemic and overcome learning loss among this vulnerable group. Thus, teacher education and professional development are to ensure quality learning is continuous despite natural emergencies or crises and prepare teachers to be innovative to facilitate it. Teacher training and teacher educators are to perceive EIE as a multifaceted concept that does not imply only pandemics such as COVID-19 but should consider any emergency that disrupts the normal learning process leading to learning loss. With this understanding, initiatives to train student teachers should be broad but succinct enough depending on the nature of disruption and learning context, considering that no one initiative fits all emergencies.

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