

Submission to the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact of remote learning on families of students with disability in Victoria



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Key Findings

1. Inconsistent messaging between government departments, local authorities, schools and families led to many families and carers of students with disability not accessing the support that was available.
2. There were incongruent provisions for access to education for students with disability made available between different schools.
3. Existing records and tools identifying student functional needs and level of learning, such as Individual Education Plans, were either unhelpful, not accessed, or out of date. As a result, students who did receive work were sometimes unable to benefit from it because it was not at an appropriate skill or knowledge level.
4. Technologies and education supports enhance learning if used correctly but many educators are not adequately trained or resourced to make use of these important tools.

Introduction

This submission forwards the case that more systematic responses and supports are required for families, carers and students with disability.

The findings of this submission are informed by the first stage of a longitudinal qualitative study analysing the real time experiences of families of students with disability during the COVID-19 response in Victoria. 12 families of students with disability from 9 local government areas across metropolitan Melbourne are represented with semi-structured interviews with 12 parents and 8 students. The students in the study were enrolled in primary and secondary mainstream or specialist schools at baseline between May and June 2020 during Term 2. Analysis of the data was done through N-Vivo coding and thematic analysis. The following sections provide an overview of the findings relevant to this inquiry. For each section, relevant statements from the data have been included to give voice to the participating families.

Issues identified

1. Communication was inconsistent

- Participants reported:
- mixed messages around school closures from media, government departments and school leadership;
- a lack of accessible and easy to understand information needed to prepare students with disability;
- inconsistent access to and unclear learning materials for home learning; and
- Individual Education Plans (also referred to as Individual Learning Plans) were often ineffective or not used.

"... the communication from the school has been very off-putting in the sense that only children whose parents work in essential services, or children who were disadvantaged, but they always qualified that and said it had to be child protection cases. She's not a child protection case but she is educationally disadvantaged". (Parent of student in primary mainstream with ASD and intellectual disability)

"I would say that if the school had done the things it needed to for him in the first place, so had an individual learning plan and shared that with me and we had a support group meeting when things shut down, I think that would have been a good start." (Parent of student in primary school in a dual enrolment with ASD and intellectual disability)

"And I'm doing your [teacher's] job for them. I was not that impressed. However, given that we're now back at school, I'm not going to raise this personally with the school because I think they'll be shocked that that was my point of view. And I don't want to upset my relationship with them." (Parent of student in secondary mainstream with ASD)

2. Impact on students with disability was not adequately mitigated

- For students in the study, the impacts of the event included:
- confusion and frustration with sudden changes to routine that were not explained or understood;
- loss of connection with peers and teachers when not invited or able to engage with online learning;
- lack of modification for individual functional needs leading to materials that were inaccessible or not appropriate with some reported skill and behavioural regression; and
- additional loss of the structure and support of non-educational therapies.

"... she's missed her friends a lot. Um, and she doesn't know...again without that physical context of school and without a group of people, she's lost that sense of what behavioural expectations are." (Parent of student in primary mainstream with Down Syndrome)

"he also has a visual impairment so that also...for example when we did the morning circle they didn't ever think about that and I was having to say to the teacher 'can you turn the light on in your room because he can't see you'..... he just doesn't engage with a screen that way. He recognises a person on the screen ... but because he doesn't mainly speak words you can't really have a conversation." (Parent of student in primary special school with complex disability)

"So, she actually gave up on the writing and the maths because it just didn't function through a screen, and the reading was the only thing. And that is also excruciating at times because L wont concentrate, she will be constantly playing with all the buttons on the laptop." (Parent of student in primary mainstream with Down Syndrome)

"school for a child with a disability is not just about learning and your times tables.... for T, school is not just about...it's about learning to interact with other people. It's about learning social norms. School's about learning to care for yourself in terms of taking yourself to the toilet, and in terms of integrating with other kids. That's actually our learning goal for T. So all of that was taken away." (Parent of student in primary special school with complex disability)

3. Routine and designation of responsibilities in families disrupted.

According to the mothers interviewed in this study:

- the burden of advocacy, education and adjustments largely fell on the mother even when both partners were in full time work;
- the lack of functionally appropriate materials and supports for learning lead to additional work to ensure engagement in learning for students with disability; and
- where there were siblings in the house also in remote learning, which resulted in reports of additional resentments and aggravations and concerns for mental wellbeing for all members of the family.

"I think our relationship probably could be a bit better.... A lot of that behaviour, I guess, to try and push her to work and learn from home, I think some of those behaviours have become a bit, like I am bit sad, I guess I feel like I am having to work a bit harder to have a positive mother daughter relationship with her." (Parent of 3 children with ASD in mainstream and special schools)

"I say in all sincerity, because you know parents who would you know, on A Current Affair talking about how, how great it is to be engaged with their kids and how lovely it is and all the things they're doing. That does not represent the experience of parents with children with disabilities. You're 24/7 just looking for the explosions or trying to keep the routine going to minimize them. And it's absolutely exhausting." (Parent of student in secondary special school with intellectual disability)

4. Use of NDIS and additional supports to enable learning

- Where families were aware of or able to advocate for supports available, they:
 - used NDIS funds to employ support workers and purchase resources to fill this gap*;
 - identified hurdles in accessing assistance;
 - raised concerns about future short falls in funding later in the year;
 - felt they would not have coped or would have had to give up work; and
 - identified that disability support workers did not adequately substitute for education supports.
- *Although the NDIA announced that NDIS plans could be used more flexibly, there was confusion about how NDIS funds could be used – NDIS has a policy of not funding education related supports as these are to be funded by education departments.

"We have a support worker that we had prior to COVID that stopped and then she resumed. And we employed her, or NDIS employed her, under in-home respite. It was really education, but NDIS don't fund education. So, we just, you know, did what we need to do." (Parent of student in secondary special school with ASD and intellectual disability)

"I rang up the LAC [Local Area Coordinator] and she just said do what you like. And I was like ok, because I was going to chew through [student]'s plan like nothing on earth if I've got to have support workers for the days I work. And she [LAC] was like 'well everything is going to change because of COVID so just do what you like and then when it's over we will figure it out'." (Parent of student in secondary special school with ASD and Down syndrome)

"He was happy at home because we had [NDIS funded] support workers coming in. They were babysitting. They couldn't do what they do at school, they're not trained to do that." (Parent of student in primary special school with complex disability)

5. Families also identified important insights that could further inform future learning interventions.

The data indicated that:

- There was an opportunity for parents to identify further insights into the strengths and challenges of the student's learning that could further inform teachers and IEPs'
- There were benefits in the experience of less rushed morning routines and busy schedules of therapy appointments and additional activities.
- Some students with disability thrive in digital spaces and for them, remote learning was an easy transition.
- Lower levels of stimulation and fewer distractions at home than in the classroom benefited some students, especially those with autism.
- Access to new technologies that had not been available at school increased accessibility for some students to certain aspects of learning.

"It has given me a window to what is happening in her education that has horrified me in many ways, but I think I have moved past that to seeing it as a gift. If this hadn't happened, I wouldn't have known and there would have been no reason for me to question. But I have had this window into what is happening, and I have asked questions, and I won't be going away now." (Parent of student in secondary mainstream with ASD and intellectual disability)

"Oh, I think it [remote learning] is pretty easy. At least you don't have to keep going to the classroom like when you are actually going to school. I feel like using the iPad is slightly easier for me in particular, doing it all online it saves, um, it takes the hassle out of I guess normal schoolwork as it would be." (Student with a physical disability in mainstream secondary school)

"I've generally been more productive mainly because I don't have the distractions, the distractions of 'oh what's happening over there?' at home. Because I'm there. I've got it all in front of me. Where at school, there'll be somebody being a pain in the ass, or there will be this happening and I'll be going, 'oh what's happening over there?' So there's less distraction that's for certain." (Student with intellectual disability in specialist secondary school)

"The education perfect tasks with the icon that you can use to read the text out has been great. They use these tasks in school, but they are not allowed to make a noise with their computer, so she hasn't used this function before, but it is something for me to follow up because it has been hugely beneficial for her." (Parent of student in secondary mainstream with ASD)

Conclusions

As with many issues of inequity, the COVID-19 Pandemic and resultant school closures highlighted the problems of inclusion that exist in meeting the functional and social needs of students. While the pandemic response revealed gaps in meeting the needs of students with disability in remote learning, it also exacerbated existing systemic issues for the inclusion and participation of students with disability in education.

The findings of this study identify that the result of inconsistent communication between government and providers of education and other care services resulted in inequities beyond just a lack of service. Even some students in specialist school settings were left for weeks without support, contact or anything other than the general messaging that schools had moved to remote learning while what that meant for this group was unclear. Analysis indicates that those who have the resources to leverage the system and persist in the face of misinformation were able to achieve much better outcomes for the students in their care. The labour and emotional work that accompanies it was largely done by women who report that this took a toll on their own wellbeing and ability to perform in their paid employment. The partnerships and communication between the schools and families that are particularly important for informing how the functional needs of these students are met in education were exposed to be the responsibility of the home to maintain. The tools that should define some of this work, like Individual Education Plans, were not useful or used, and funded educational assistance was not always allocated to the continuing support of access to education for these students. Families have ended up using additional NDIS funds to fill the gaps to support their child's learning and cope at the household level.

Findings from this study highlight the pre-existing systemic challenges around communication and partnership between schools and families and the need for acknowledging that students with disability have diverse needs for learning according to their individual functional capabilities. We acknowledge that this study could not capture the voices of schools and staff. This study is an attempt to document experiences of families of students with disability in Victoria that can support and inform evidence-based future responses that are inclusive of students with disability. Advocacy from the last round of remote learning experiences has resulted in some changes during the remote learning period in Term 3, including allowing students enrolled in specialist schools to return to school as normal.

Key implications and recommendations

- Individual Education Plans and educational supports should be developed in partnership with families and carers.
- Remote learning activities and learning to be adapted according to student's individual functioning needs.
- Additional support from schools through education support staff.
- Consistency in communication between government, department and schools.
- Mechanisms to ensure timely two-way communication between parents and teachers.
- Co-ordinated policies and practices between government agencies to support educational needs of students with disabilities.

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