

How Filipino parents home educate their children with autism during COVID-19 period

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This short article describes how Filipino parents home educate their children with autism during the COVID-19 period. Employing a mainly qualitative research approach, five parents who have children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were interviewed online. The data were subjected to thematic analysis. The results highlight the following themes: (1) many are better than one in home education during isolation; (2) from struggles with the transition to cultivation of new activities; (3) new social reality in preparation for the post-pandemic period; (4) all forms of home education are essential; and (5) families encouraging families in these tough times. This paper provides insights as regards the home education of children with autism amid the current global emergency.

Keywords: home education, special education, parents, children with autism, COVID-19

Introduction

Because of the COVID-19, most educational systems worldwide have temporarily closed. The United Nations Human Rights (2020) has expressed concern that while the crisis has threatened access of learners to education, persons with disabilities, including those with autism, are disproportionately affected due to ecological constraints that are replicated in the pandemic reaction. As such, efforts to improve home education modalities for children with disabilities have been exerted. For example, the National Disability Rights Network (2020) has compiled accessible resources of online instructional strategies amid school interruptions. It is hoped to assist parents as they educate their children with disabilities while safely staying at home.

Home education, also known as homeschooling, is an educational reform around the world, in which parents educate their children at home and various places. There are many reasons why parents prefer home education. Some are not satisfied with the current educational opportunities while others believe that children are not gaining an advantage with the traditional school arrangement (Martin 2020). Ray (2015) observed home education as one of the emerging modalities of instructional implementation today. It has also been adopted by parents who have children with disabilities. The number of children with disabilities undergoing alternative instruction at home has significantly increased

since the emergence of home education (Cook *et al.* 2013).

In the Philippines, while there is a challenge to the provision of a structured home education program for around five million children with disabilities, Calica (2020) reported efforts of various organizations and individuals to highlight the condition of a vulnerable group of children with disabilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a call to curb the impacts of school disruption through home school methods such as online learning. However, such an approach would have serious implications for some parents whose skills in home education need to be further improved. It should be noted that structured home education programs for children with disabilities are just being developed in the country and mostly by private institutions.

The effectiveness of home education for children with disabilities has been relatively provided attention in research (Harding 2003, Simmons 2016, Mendoza *et al.* 2019). Moreover, past studies on structured home education for children with disabilities, mostly autism, concentrated on parental roles (Reilly *et al.* 2002, Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010, Parsons and Lewis 2010, Hurlbutt 2011, Jolly *et al.* 2013). One report is currently being developed, underscoring the experience of families that have a member with developmental disabilities during this crisis (Rose *et al.* 2020). Drawing ideas from the mentioned scholarly works, however, experiences on informal type of home education practiced by parents for children with autism during an

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Table 1 Demographic qualities of participants

Parents				Children		Family	
Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Age	Gender	Size	Perceived Income
A	41	Female	Nurse	14	Male	3 members	Upper
B	42	Female	Entrepreneur	14	Male	4 members	Upper
C	45	Female	Bookkeeper	16	Male	4 members	Middle
D	43	Female	Accountant	15	Male	4 members	Upper
E	48	Female	Entrepreneur	21	Male	4 members	Upper

unprecedented pandemic like COVID-19 has not been explored.

Thus, this paper describes how parents home educate their children with autism during the COVID-19 period specifically in the Philippines. This work is hoped to provide insights on the opportunities and challenges for parents as they home educate their children with autism amid the global health emergency.

Methods

This work entailed a qualitative research design. Creswell (1994) defined qualitative research as ‘an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting’ (p.15). This research design is found appropriate to attain the purpose of the current paper which is to describe the home education of children with autism.

Furthermore, this research involved five Filipino parents as participants. They were selected through a combination of purposeful and convenient sampling techniques. The main criterion considered for the selection is that parents must have at least a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Nine parents were initially contacted. However, only five of them positively responded to participate. The demographic qualities of the participants are described in Table 1.

The researcher gained insight into how parents home educate their child with autism through interview procedures. Because of the restrictions of the current COVID-19 situation, personal interviews were not possible, thus an augmented form called online interview was individually conducted with the participants. An online interview is a research method conducted using communication mediated by computers. Just like the personal interview, online interview typically asks participants to describe what they think or feel about an aspect (Salmons 2014).

Two stages of online interviews were performed for this study. The first stage involved an interview guide containing questions sent to the participants either through online chat or email. The questions were answered offline for a week, providing the participants enough time amid their busy schedule. The second stage involved the researcher arranging a time with each participant to be interviewed live through online

chat to illuminate some responses gathered in the first stage.

The data obtained from the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic process of coding, examining meaning, and provision of a description of the social reality through the creation of theme (Berg and Latin 2008). The researcher in this study examined the codes and interpreted them into concepts. The similar concepts were then grouped into themes, structuring the results to answer the stated purpose of this research. The theme is the main product of this data analysis (Green *et al.* 2007).

Results

Based on the analysis of codes and concepts drawn from the interviews, the following themes on how parents home educate their children with autism emerged. These themes are described and discussed as follows.

Theme 1: many are better than one in home education during isolation

The current public emergency brought family members together at home for a considerable long period. Hence, in the process of home education of children with autism, most of the family members were involved (‘His father usually takes good care of him while his brother sometimes intervenes. On the other hand, my involvement as a mother made the situations calmer during the episodes of tantrums’ – Parent C). While therapy services are also almost inaccessible, the parents took advantage of the online modality of intervention (‘The traditional school might resume in quite a while. So, my child is having occupational therapy via online now’ – Parent A).

Cook *et al.* (2013) emphasized the importance of the role of the families and professional consultants in the home education of children with autism. However, amid the COVID-19 crisis, Rose *et al.* (2020) expressed concerns about the unavoidable stress that families of children with autism may experience. When most social services are under significant demand at these moments, there is also a challenge for the collective effort of families to home educate children with autism.

Theme 2: from struggles with the transition to cultivation of new activities

The disruptions brought by the public health crisis caused drastic changes in the routines of children with autism. Consequently, they had to struggle until they find and get used to new activities at home ('He has a structured program for summer, but it was not followed because of the pandemic condition. He struggled to cope up. But luckily, he now has a routine of new activities and without computer' – Parent D). The parents also involved their children with autism in different activities at home ('We make sure that he is participating in all the activities in our house. We recently improved our garden. He helped by arranging the indoor bricks' – Parent E).

Hurlbutt (2011) noted that parents employ different and personalized home education activities. She cited that parents take extra effort in developing activities which they think are best for their children. Within the context of the global outbreak of COVID-19, Yarımkaya and Esentürk (2020) offered a guide to promote activities for families and their children with autism. They discussed possible benefits and strategies specifically of physical activities. Some examples of physical activities that can be performed are meditation, online exercise class, educational games, and functional exercises.

Theme 3: new social reality in preparation for the post-pandemic period

The pandemic brought many social implications to families that have children with autism. They had to teach new social insights ('They cannot easily comprehend new normal, so I take extra effort to let them understand the situation. One day, I allowed him to drive around the city and told him that almost all establishments are close because of a disease' – Parent E). As a safety measure, parents also taught the children new social behaviors ('I tried to orient him why we need to wear a mask. I modelled it to him and trained him how to wear one when going out' – Parent C).

The home is the place where socialization begins and especially during this pandemic period. Though there is a general concern about home education restricting social interactions, most parents are satisfied with the social opportunities afforded their children from home education services (e.g. Parsons and Lewis 2010). Considering the current COVID-19 social impacts, Narzisi (2020) offered tips on how to teach new social realities for children with autism. For example, as children with autism exhibit a range of perceptual skills as regards phenomenon, he suggested that parents with the help of therapists need to concretely explain the new situations through appropriate strategies such as concept maps.

Theme 4: all forms of home education are essential

The global outbreak also has serious impacts on the decisions of parents as regards the options of educational modalities for their children with autism. It appeared that home education is one of these most probable options ('We have no definite plans as of now. We are certain though that we will not send him to regular school or online classes. We are looking at homeschooling' – Parent B). Though structured home education is difficult in this transition period, parents collectively voiced out that any form of education transpiring within their homes is important for the development of their children ('With a child with autism in your home, patience is a virtue. I teach my child basic things like cooking rice, washing dishes, and sweeping the floor. This is the right time to learn the essentials of life' – Parent C).

Gusman (2006) offered motivations for why home education is good for children with autism. One of these motivations is that home education provides for optimal learning. Given the inevitable social distancing practice as a new normal in the near post-COVID-19 period, Feeney (2020) reported that many parents of children with disabilities are looking into home education as an alternative mode of education. Despite the many challenges, the parents are positive that with support, they can help their children reach their full potentials.

Theme 5: families encouraging families in these tough times

A family that has a child with autism is a part of a larger family of children with autism. Parents express concern about the services for other children with autism ('I just called his occupational therapist because I was concerned about other children with autism who may not have access because of the lockdown' – Parent A). Other parents offer tips on how to teach their children with autism adapt to the new situation ('Let us teach our children to sanitize their hands often, avoid crowded places, and drink plenty of water. Let us accept the new situation and make the most out of it' – Parent E).

All types of encouragement from other families and the community are essential in the home education for children with autism. Arora (2006) expressed that when there is a presence of encouragement among families, it was more likely to be from other families who have the same experiences. However, due to restrictions brought by the COVID-19 situation, families may be alone in managing their children with autism. Thus, Narzisi (2020) suggested maintaining online contact with the therapists, teachers, caregivers, and other parents to share and gain different types of support needed for the continued education of children with autism at home.

Conclusion

This paper describes how Filipino parents home educate their children with autism amid the COVID-19 situation. The results underscore the following themes: (1) many are better than one in home education during isolation; (2) from struggles with the transition to cultivation of new activities; (3) new social reality in preparation for the post-pandemic period; (4) all forms of home education are essential; and (5) families encouraging families in these tough times. Though restricted within a certain context and small sample, this work presents a glimpse into the home education of children with autism amid the impacts of the current global crisis.

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