

**"A systematic review of the role of school leaders in supporting the learning of Special  
Need students in times of crisis"**

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## Table of content

<b>Page no.</b>	<b>Content</b>
3	1. Introduction
3	1.1 Background
3	1.2 Problem Statement
4	1.3 Purpose of the Study
4	1.4 Research Questions
5	1.5 Significance and relevance of the study
5	2. Methodology
5	2.1 Introduction & Research Strategy
5	2.2 Research Procedure
6	2.3 Type of Data /Data Collection
6	2.4 Data Analysis
7	3. Literature Review
9	4. Discussion
11	5. Conclusion
12	6. Recommendations
13	7. References

Abstract: The Corona pandemic has remarkably affected the educational process, making the continuity of education a problem that needs to be quickly resolved by school leaders. Perhaps the special needs students' education was one of the most prominent problems that faced teachers and parents. This is due to the special conditions of this group, which require the availability of many requirements and direct follow-up. A good example is autistic student who needs direct and a face-to-face follow-up. Here, the basic and effective role of school leaders appears to meet the needs of this group of students through this crisis. The school leaders should use the optimal method of leadership styles to achieve success in this task, which is what we are trying to highlight through this research.

In this study, the researcher will systematically review previous published works related to the topic of study to find out the effective role of school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs in crisis.

As a result of what was reached through this systematic review, the role of school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs revolves around providing individual support plans and involving parents in preparing these plans, in addition to working to improve the psychological aspect of students with special needs during their learning.

Keywords:

Corona pandemic; Special need students; school leadership; Distance learning; special educational needs.

# 1. Introduction:

## 1.1 Background

Since the start of the Corona pandemic in the spring of 2020, which caused the closure of most schools in all countries of the world, which forced the majority of countries to transfer education from direct education to a distance education system, there has become a great responsibility on school leaders to assume responsibility for providing adequate education for students in These difficult conditions. Moreover, Supporting the distance learning process requires providing an educational system that meets students' needs, technological support that improves the teaching process, and support for teachers to develop their performance (Myung et al. 2020 & Cottingham et al. 2020). One of the student groups that faced major problems with the onset of the Corona Virus crisis are students with special education needs defined as a person who unable to benefit from the school education provided to other children of the same age without additional help or modifications to the curriculum (OECD 2012), because their education requires the availability of special supplies that depend on the type of disability, in addition to the presence of special education specialists on an ongoing basis with the student inside the classroom. For this reason, the process of transforming the education of this group of students to the e-learning system was very difficult, and it needed to unify efforts by school leaders, special education specialists and parents. But the teachers' inability to get more practice in using technology reduced the quality of teaching for SEN students (Petretto et al. 2021). Which confirmed by Tech et al. (2020) that the necessity for teachers to receive professional training on the distance evaluation mechanism of student , noting that nearly half of teachers had not received such training before. Acree et al. (2017) believes that improving teachers' ability to utilize digital resources and optimal use of technology is a prerequisite for students' success in the learning process.

For that, the biggest role was for school leaders in terms of choosing the most appropriate style of leadership in this emergency phase and providing all educational supplies and resources that fit the e-learning needs of students with special needs.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

The role of school leaders in providing support to students with special educational needs during the distance learning period requires a lot of efforts, by assisting teachers, special education specialists and parents in setting future plans for success. Perhaps the most important concern of school leaders is how to provide effective support to this group of students who suffer from various disabilities and different needs. Therefore, school leaders should work on distributing roles well, following up on the implementation of plans, and ensuring that teachers specializing in special education receive the appropriate professional development that enables them to Provide effective support to their students with special needs.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study

The effective role of school leaders in providing students with special needs with effective distance education that requires them to provide support to teachers to enable them to make the best use of technology, Meyer (2016) claims while some teachers are confident of their ability to use technology in teaching students with special needs, many needs training in how to properly use accessible assistive technology to help their students. On the other hand, the leader's choice of the leadership style that fits the current situation is important, and previous studies have shown some types of leadership theories whose application is commensurate with the existence of crises, such as distributed leadership theory, transformational leadership theory and contingency leadership theory. Harris (2011) argues that the leader relinquishing some powers to other members of the school through the use of distributed leadership provides an opportunity to bring about an organizational improvement in performance. While, Jovanovic & Ciric (2016) assert that the transformational leadership approach is most suited for leading pupils in educational settings. Leadership effectiveness, according to contingency theories, is linked to the interaction of a leader's attributes or actions with situational conditions (Seyranian 2009).

The aim of this study is to examine the role of school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs in times of crisis, as is the case now in distance education due to the Corona pandemic and the inability of students to attend schools to receive direct education, and to meet the educational needs of students with special educational needs. Providing support to teachers and activating the role of parents in their children's learning.

### 1.4 Research Questions

In this study, the researcher will systematically review previous published works related to the subject of the study to reach an answer to the following questions:

- 1) To what extent school leaders can enable special needs students to learn during the distance learning process during the Corona pandemic?
- 2) To what extent teachers can assist school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs in times of crisis.
- 3) To what extent parents can help school leaders support the learning of their children with special needs in times of crisis.

## 1.5 Significance and relevance of the study

School leaders always strive to plan well to achieve the set goals by exploiting the abilities and skills of the school personnel. Therefore, the researcher hopes, through this study, to reach some suggestions and recommendations for school leaders to enable them to reach the best way to support the learning of students with special educational needs, as well as the best leadership style that they can use in these exceptional circumstances.

## **2. Methodology:**

### 2.1 Introduction & Research Strategy

In this study, the researcher relied on the method of systematic review of the current literature, in order to reach clear answers to the study questions. Many researchers have emphasized the quality of this approach of research as Okoli & Schabram (2010) emphasized that the systematic review of the literature is objective and comprehensive and allows for the collection of the best evidence related to the topic of the study to reach appropriate conclusions and recommendations. Liberati et al. (2009) emphasized that Systematic review is based on answering a specific question by collecting empirical evidence in a systematic and unbiased way to reach reliable results. Therefore, the researcher will rely on a systematic review of the current literature to arrive at convincing answers to the study questions that school leaders can benefit from in supporting their future directions to support the learning of students with special needs.

### 2.2 Research Procedure

In this study, the researcher will follow the five procedures for systematic review which suggested by (Booth A. et al. 2016), which included:

1. Establishing the review's scope.
2. Looking up information about the subject of interest.
3. Examining the research' evidentiary foundation.
4. Reviewing and synthesizing the research that are the subject of the review.
5. Making a presentation and writing up the results

During this systematic review of the current literature, the researcher will define the scope of the research through the study variables, which are the role of school leaders, school improvement, and support for students with special educational needs. The appropriate studies for research will then be identified after all existing studies have been revised. The researcher then analyzes the selected studies to reach the common features

between their results and recommendations related to the research topic. In the end, the researcher presents the most important findings and recommendations of the research.

### 2.3 Type of Data /Data Collection

The researcher will use the secondary data in this study including quantitative and qualitative data. The presence of secondary data makes it easier for the researcher to reach new conclusions that are difficult to reach with the primary data related to the subject of the study (Families 2020). The researcher made sure that all secondary data used is directly related to the subject of the study, and the data were collected from digital libraries and some reliable websites such as Google Scholar , Eric and BUID library . Since the research is related to a topic directly related to the Covid-19 crisis, all the main studies selected for this research were within the past five years, and they contained both quantitative and qualitative data, in addition some international reports which published in trust research centers like PACE.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The researcher began the process of analyzing the 50 studies that were initially selected for this study, as 30 of them were rejected for reasons related to their departure from the study's objective. The researcher also relied on some international reports that were recently published on the subject of the study, due to the lack of previous literature in this field and to strengthen the findings of the study.

The researcher evaluated the quality of the scientific journals used in this systematic research through the Sage International website according to the following table:

No	Journal Title	Type	Year	Ranking/source	Database/Publisher
1	European Journal of Special Needs Education	Journal article	2021	Q1 journal	Routledge
2	International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning	Journal article	2021	Q2 journal	Kassel University Press
3	International Journal of Special Education	Journal article	2019	Q3 journal	International Journal of Special Education
4	Education Sciences	Journal article	2021	Q2 journal	MDPI AG
5	Pedagogical Research	Research article	2021		MODESTUM
6	Journal of Adolescent Health	Journal article	2021	Q1 journal	Elsevier USA
7	Journal of the British Academy	Journal article	2020		The British Academy
8	Systematic Reviews	Journal article	2016	Q1 journal	BioMed Central Ltd
9	Systematic approaches to a successful literature review	Book	2016		Sage

10	Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs	Journal article	2021	Q2 journal	Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd
11	Frontiers in Psychology	Journal article	2021	Q2 journal	Frontiers Media S.A.

Based on a review of the studies selected for the research, the researcher found some common themes that have been linked to the role of school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs during the distance learning period. These themes were represented by Individual support plans, Parents' role, Efficiency of teachers and social isolation. In the next section, the researcher will discuss these themes in detail.

### **3. Literature review:**

Through a systematic review of the previous literature, the researcher reached several main themes that discuss the role of school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs in times of crisis.

#### **❖ Individual support plans**

In his detailed report, which was based on some official surveys in the United States, Tech et al. (2020) concluded that more than 50% of children who need individual learning programs did not receive adequate assistance from their schools during the distance learning period. This was confirmed by Yazcayir & Gurgur (2021) during his pilot study on 15 parents of students with special needs, where the study concluded that the students did not receive individual support commensurate with their needs during the distance learning period. Through this, it becomes clear that there must be an active role for school leaders in ensuring that students with special needs receive education commensurate with their mental and physical abilities through individual support plans. In a qualitative study conducted by Karasel Ayda et al. (2020) with the participation of 10 teachers for special education from public primary schools, 85% of teachers confirmed that students with disabilities cannot adequately benefit from distance education. The study also emphasized the need to develop individual learning programs with the help of students' parents, with the need to include their important role by school leaders in the school's distance education policy.

#### **❖ Parents' role**

Many studies such as Tech et al. (2020) & Karasel Ayda et al. (2020) stressed the great role of parents of students with special educational needs in supporting their children's learning, and this was represented in following up their children's education at home and spending long hours during the day in pursuing their education, as many parents stressed that they spend long hours a day in order to help their children because of the lack of support from teachers and the lack of appropriate educational activities. On the other hand, Tech et al. (2020) & Karasel Ayda et al. (2020) stressed the need for parents to contribute to the development of



appropriate individual learning plans for their children in cooperation with school teachers and under the direct supervision of school leaders. In addition, (Qaralleh 2021) stressed the need for school leaders to involve parents in developing school plans and to form committees for them to help develop the educational process.

#### ❖ **Efficiency of teachers**

The success of learning for students with special educational needs can only be achieved through the effectiveness of the role played by teachers. School leaders must be keen on activating the role of teachers by motivating them to develop individual plans that are appropriate for students and to cooperate with each other by preparing appropriate educational aids. Petretto et al. (2021) emphasized that special education teachers did not find enough time for training, which affected the level and quality of their work during the distance learning period. On the other hand, Yazcayir & Gurgur (2021) confirmed that the majority of teachers did not provide appropriate feedback to parents about the level of performance of their children. Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen & Skogen (2019) confirmed through his qualitative study that school leaders demanded the need to raise the professional competence of teachers so that they can provide appropriate support to students with special needs during the distance learning period. Rodríguez-Oramas et al. (2021) in their study on the impact of special education teachers receiving two training programs on the effectiveness of integrating students with disabilities into education, the researcher concluded that teachers receiving this type of training increases their efficiency in improving students' integration by providing interactive learning environments.

#### ❖ **Social isolation**

The stay of students with special needs at home during the distance learning period has led to some psychological problems for them, as many of them have suffered from social isolation due to their distance from meeting their colleagues and teachers directly (Swanwick et al. 2020). This was confirmed by Page et al. (2021) during his qualitative study that despite the efforts of teachers to provide support to students during the distance learning period, many students suffered from a loss of academic and emotional contact, which led to their feeling of social isolation. It appears here that school leaders need to intervene in providing some solutions to reduce this social isolation. One of these solutions may be to provide some group activities for them with virtual trips or virtual meetings by making use of the technology available to schools and students.

#### ❖ **Student learning support**

Everyone agrees that students with special educational needs always need different learning supports than regular students. Nusser (2021) confirmed during a quantitative study conducted on 1452 students, 5% of the sample (approximately 70 students) have special educational needs, that the students' parents are not satisfied with the support provided to their children during the distance education period, and that teachers

are unable to provide educational materials and tasks suitable for their children's learning. On the contrary, Yazcayir & Gurgur (2021) confirmed, through their qualitative study, in which 15 parents participated, that the students continued their education from home through television and the Ministry of Education website. On the other hand, Cusick et al. (2021) claimed in their quantitative study of 238 high school students with ADHD that parents have little confidence in the ability of school leaders to provide quality learning for their children during the distance learning period, and they also struggled a lot in communicating with School administrations during the distance learning period. Moreover, In a study conducted by Gavronskaya et al. (2021) on supporting the learning of students with auditory, visual and kinetic disabilities through virtual laboratories in physics and chemistry, the study concluded that virtual laboratories based on simulation are among the best options for learning with special needs, with the necessity to provide all requirements for the type of disability such as amplifiers. Pictures and audio reading of texts for the visually impaired.

#### **4. Discussion:**

Herburger (2020) confirmed, through a special report, the most important considerations for school officials during the distance learning period for the learning of students with special needs. The report included directing several questions to school leaders, most notably:

- 1.The mechanism for Professional support for teachers.
2. The mechanism for supporting students with special needs from their teachers.
3. How to help families in educating their children with special needs.
- 4 . The need to modify individual learning plans for students.

Families (2020) claims that in order for the intervention to be of value and benefit, school leaders must collect and analyze data. Therefore, Families (2020) recommended school leaders to take some measures that ensure facilitating the return of students with special needs to schools after the end of this pandemic or the start of the gradual return to schools, which included the following main proposals :

- 1) Develop a plan for students to return to school that includes all possible options.
- 2) Ensure that parents and students understand this plan to facilitate the process of its implementation.
- 3) Determining clear and easy ways for parents and students to communicate with teachers and support specialists within the school.

In addition, through his qualitative study in which 275 school principals and 10 leaders in special education services in Canada participated on the basic experiences that school leaders use to support the learning of students with special needs, Sider et al. (2021) recommended school leaders to focus on the following matters:

- 1) Building trust between the student and the administrator makes it easier for the student to communicate his needs without fear or hesitation
- 2) Building trust with the people responsible for student learning, such as teachers and specialized assistants, and providing them with the necessary resources, which raises the efficiency of the work they do and makes them able to overcome daily fatigue and pressure. In addition to carrying out regular visits to classrooms to provide support and ensure that students receive an effective education.
- 3) Supporting parents by listening to their needs and involving them in their children's learning by giving them the opportunity to participate with teachers in developing their children's learning plans.
- 4) School leaders' use of collaborative leadership, which would bring school principals out of isolation by informing them about the experiences of other schools that have similar problems, in addition to cooperating with parents and benefiting from their abilities.
- 5) Supporting school leaders with appropriate professional development that enables them to improve their abilities to support the learning of students with special needs, especially principals who do not have a good background in the learning of this group of students.

Through this systematic review of the current literature, the researcher was able to arrive at specific answers to the study questions. Regarding the first question, “To what extent school leaders can enable special needs students to learn during the distance learning process during the Corona pandemic?”, the information collected confirmed the need for school leaders to ensure that there are individual support plans for students with special needs that are commensurate with their abilities and the nature of their disability, which was confirmed by (Tech et al. 2020 ; Yazcayir & Gurgur 2021) . On the other hand, many studies have agreed on the need for special education teachers to receive appropriate professional development that enables them to be able to support students with special educational needs during the distance learning period, which was confirmed by (Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen & Skogen 2019 ; Petretto et al. 2021).

Regarding to the second question in this study which is “To what extent teachers can assist school leaders in supporting the learning of students with special needs in times of crisis?”, The current literature, as found in Yazcayir & Gurgur (2021), has shown the need for school leaders to have highly qualified teachers who are able to use technology and provide appropriate educational activities for students with special educational needs. Therefore, school leaders should work on developing the capabilities of teachers as soon as possible and

follow up on this themselves or through their assistant principals. As for school leaders, they tend to the individual direction of work and do not follow up the work of teachers directly, but they resort to using other people to do this task without follow-up or accountability from them. On the other hand, school leaders stressed the need for individual support plans for students with special needs commensurate with their abilities, with an emphasis on the need to raise the professional competence of teachers. School leaders should also urge teachers to work collectively during the reintroduction of individual learning plans and educational activities for distance learning. In a qualitative study conducted by Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen & Skogen (2019) ,with the participation of 4 school principals and 16 teachers, including 8 special education teachers, the study concluded that the majority of teachers resort to individual planning.

Regarding to the third question in this study which is “To what extent parents can help school leaders support the learning of their children with special needs in times of crisis?”. The current literature, as found in Tech et al. (2020) ; Karasel Ayda et al. (2020), emphasized the great role that parents play in the education of their children with special needs. Parents can contribute to the school's future plans in addition to their participation in the development of individual plans for their children. On the other hand, they have an active role in helping and motivating their children to learn at home. In his detailed report, which was based on some official surveys in the United States, Tech et al. (2020) concluded that more than 50% of children who need individual learning programs did not receive adequate assistance from their schools during the distance learning period, and only 39% of the families of students with Special needs were contacted by their children's schools. Accordingly, the researcher recommended that school leaders should play their effective role through direct communication with parents and involving them in developing appropriate plans that ensure their children receive appropriate learning during the distance learning period.

## **5. Conclusion:**

As a result of what has been reached through this systematic review, the process of school improvement by school leaders with regard to supporting learning for students with special needs in times of crisis must revolve around the existence of individual support plans appropriate to the needs of students, with the participation of parents in preparing them. These plans are developed by qualified teachers collaboratively and under the direct supervision of school leaders. Also, improving the psychological aspect of students with special needs during distance learning should be a priority for the future plans of school leaders because of its positive impact on improving their level of learning. On the other hand, the issue of choosing the best leadership style in times of crisis remains stuck and needs more research in the future to reach a clear vision about the best leadership style

in distance learning conditions. “Closing the disadvantage gap means finding better ways to support pupils with SEND” (Cowne, Frankl & Gerschel 2019).

## **6. Recommendations:**

Through the findings of the study, the researcher recommends that school leaders identify the needs of students with special needs according to the type of disability they have in order to reach an individual support plan that suits their needs. In addition to the need to pay attention to the psychological and emotional side of these students because of its importance in increasing their motivation to learn. On the other hand, school leaders must work to involve parents in developing school plans and urge teachers to communicate effectively with parents and provide them with appropriate feedback on their children's learning. The researcher also recommends the need for specialized research in the optimal leadership style to support the learning of students with special needs in times of crisis, as is the case now with the presence of the Corona pandemic, which forced most of the world to switch to distance learning.

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