

While all school-aged children have been affected by the pandemic, it hasn't been equal for everyone ^[1]

Researcher Kathryn Underwood offers insights on children's disrupted learning, especially those with disabilities

Author: Leach, Jessica

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EXCERPTS

There is no doubt that through the course of the pandemic learning experiences among children have been disrupted greatly. In fact, Ontario schools were closed longer than any other province. Students have had to shift from in-person and online learning several times in the past two years.

While experts are still exploring just how these disruptions are changing the learning landscape, Professor Kathryn Underwood, from Ryerson's School of Early Childhood Studies, notes that the pandemic experiences of disabled children have been mixed, with some children benefiting greatly from being at home and being online. But many children have also experienced extreme isolation, poor educational experiences, and a lack of access to services they are entitled to.

"The pandemic has illustrated inequality in a tangible way," she said. "Disabled people have been hard hit by the health effects of the pandemic, but also restrictions that do not take into account their lives."

For instance, school closures disrupted access to specialized educational services and programs for students with disabilities. In an article published in the *Journal of Childhood Studies*, Underwood and her colleagues from Ryerson, University of Guelph, McMaster University, York University, UBC and Brandon University show that the government response to learning during covid is rooted in ableism. They argue that "designating disability-specific services as nonessential is a reflection of the lack of value placed on disabled lives."

The research team, along with their partners who designed the study, has been studying the institutional organization of disabled children's lives and since March 2020, they have connected with 65 families across Canada. After examining the pandemic experiences of families whose children are disabled, who pre-pandemic were accessing special education services, Underwood says, "those children and their families have something to tell us about school disruption."

Disabled children experienced learning barriers before COVID-19

"Disabled people have been very clear that a lot of the [pandemic] accommodations that have been made for the whole society, were things that they've been asking for a very long time," Underwood said, referring to services provided to students during the pandemic.

For example, Underwood says that some families her team spoke to said their children were relieved by not having to engage in the social relations of school because of discrimination and barriers in the environment that existed before the pandemic.

Providing more than services

Underwood goes on to explain that the traditional model of care for children with disabilities is to offer more service.

"Access to services is important, but it is not the only experience. The lives of disabled people are not only valuable in relation to the services they get," she said.

So while educators and policymakers examine how to support children in a changed learning landscape, Underwood sees an opportunity for disabled children as well.

"We could be reorganizing, so that people don't have to be so tied to bureaucratic procedures, to diagnostic categories, and to special services," she said.

This reorganization could include not only the delivery of services that disabled children need, but also new ways of content delivery and relationship building.

"We often say that change is slow," Underwood said. "But we witnessed almost every school on the planet closing within a three week period of time. If we can do that, we can do a lot of other things."

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: inclusion ^[4]
disabled children ^[5]
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