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**POST-COVID-19 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE
EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES, LEARNING
PREFERENCES, AND PARTICIPATION OF MAINSTREAM STUDENTS
AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought substantial changes to educational systems and transformed the ways in which students accessed teaching, learning, assessment, and social interaction. The rapid transition from face-to-face education to online and remote learning created new opportunities for flexible education but also intensified existing inequalities, particularly for students with disabilities. The present study focuses on post-COVID-19 inclusive education by comparatively examining the experiences, learning preferences, and participation of mainstream students and students with disabilities. The study recognizes that meaningful inclusion extends beyond the physical placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and requires accessible learning resources, supportive teachers, appropriate assistive technologies, flexible instructional methods, positive peer relationships, and opportunities for active participation. Particular attention is given to students' experiences with face-to-face, online, and hybrid learning environments and their preferences regarding different modes of instruction. The study also considers barriers related to digital accessibility, individualized educational support, teacher preparedness, classroom participation, social interaction, and psychological adjustment.

A comparative empirical approach can provide valuable evidence regarding similarities and differences between mainstream students and students with disabilities in the post-pandemic educational environment. The study emphasizes the importance of student-centred and flexible approaches that respond to diverse educational requirements. It further suggests that accessible digital technologies, Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, teacher professional development, individualized support, peer mentoring, and parent–teacher collaboration can strengthen inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; COVID-19 Pandemic; Students with Disabilities; Learning Preferences; Student Participation

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented disruption in education and significantly transformed the experiences of students across different educational settings. The closure of schools and educational institutions resulted in the rapid adoption of online and remote learning, forcing teachers and students to adjust to unfamiliar forms of teaching and learning. Although digital education helped maintain educational continuity during the pandemic, it also exposed inequalities related to technology access, digital literacy, learning environments, and educational support. These challenges were particularly significant for students with disabilities, who often require individualized instruction, accessible educational materials, assistive technologies, specialized support, and continuous interaction with teachers and peers. Inclusive education aims to ensure that students with and without disabilities have equitable opportunities to participate in mainstream educational environments and achieve their academic and social potential.

The pandemic affected the implementation of inclusive education because many support systems traditionally available in physical classrooms were disrupted. Students with visual impairments could experience difficulties accessing digital documents and online platforms that were incompatible with screen readers. Students with hearing impairments could face challenges when online classes lacked captions, transcripts, or sign-language interpretation. Students with physical disabilities could experience difficulties using digital interfaces or accessing appropriate devices. Similarly, students with learning, intellectual, or developmental disabilities could

struggle with independent online learning because they often benefit from structured classroom routines, direct teacher guidance, repeated explanations, and peer interaction. Consequently, the shift towards remote education did not affect all learners equally and highlighted the need to make both physical and digital learning environments more accessible.

The post-COVID-19 period has created an opportunity to reconsider how inclusive education should be organized. Although many educational institutions have returned to face-to-face instruction, digital technologies and hybrid learning practices continue to influence teaching and learning. Students may now encounter a combination of classroom teaching, online resources, recorded lessons, digital assignments, and technology-supported assessments. This changing environment makes it important to understand students' experiences and preferences regarding different learning modes. It is particularly important to compare mainstream students and students with disabilities because their educational requirements, experiences, and preferred learning arrangements may differ considerably.

Meaningful inclusion involves more than placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. It requires their active participation in classroom discussions, group activities, academic tasks, extracurricular programmes, and social relationships. Teacher attitudes and preparedness, peer acceptance, accessible infrastructure, assistive technology, individualized accommodations, and flexible assessment practices can significantly influence participation. Therefore, student participation should be understood as an important indicator of the effectiveness of inclusive education.

The present study focuses on three major dimensions: students' experiences, learning preferences, and participation. Examining these dimensions comparatively can help identify the strengths and weaknesses of current post-COVID-19 inclusive educational practices. It can also provide evidence for developing educational strategies that respond to the diverse needs of students. The study is particularly relevant because the post-pandemic educational environment is continuing to evolve, requiring institutions to balance the benefits of face-to-face interaction with the flexibility offered by digital and hybrid learning.

II. 2. STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING PREFERENCES IN POST-COVID-19 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The educational experiences of students changed considerably during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For mainstream students, the transition to online education was influenced by internet connectivity, availability of devices, teacher support, family circumstances, and digital skills. For students with disabilities, these challenges were often accompanied by additional accessibility requirements. Consequently, the same learning environment could produce substantially different experiences for different groups of students.

Students with disabilities may experience greater difficulty when learning materials are not available in accessible formats. For example, students with visual impairments may require screen readers, magnification software, or alternative text. Students with hearing impairments may depend on captions and transcripts. Students with physical disabilities may require alternative input devices or voice-recognition technology. Students with learning disabilities may benefit from simplified instructions, multimedia resources, additional time, repetition, and individualized teacher support. These requirements demonstrate that inclusive education must accommodate diversity rather than assume that all learners can benefit equally from a standardized approach.

Learning preferences have also become increasingly important in the post-pandemic educational environment. Face-to-face learning provides direct communication with teachers and peers and can create structured routines. Online learning provides flexibility and allows students to access resources from home and review recorded materials. Hybrid learning combines these advantages and may be particularly beneficial for students who require flexible schedules or additional time to process information. However, hybrid learning can only promote inclusion when digital materials and platforms are fully accessible.

Teacher support remains a critical element of students' educational experiences. Teachers who understand disability-related learning requirements can modify instructional methods, provide accessible materials, offer individualized explanations, and encourage classroom participation. Professional development is therefore essential for preparing teachers to work effectively with

diverse learners. Teachers should also be trained in accessible digital education because post-COVID-19 classrooms increasingly combine physical and technology-mediated learning.

The experiences of students are also influenced by peer relationships. Supportive classmates can create a sense of belonging and encourage students with disabilities to participate in group activities and classroom discussions. Conversely, social isolation, stigma, bullying, or negative attitudes can reduce participation. Inclusive education should therefore address social inclusion alongside academic inclusion.

Understanding learning preferences can help educational institutions develop more responsive learning environments. Rather than adopting a single model of instruction, schools and colleges can provide students with multiple ways to access information, participate in learning, and demonstrate their knowledge. Such flexibility can benefit both mainstream students and students with disabilities.

III. 3. PARTICIPATION, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Student participation represents one of the most important indicators of successful inclusion. Physical presence in a mainstream classroom does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation. A student may be enrolled in a mainstream institution but remain excluded from classroom discussions, group activities, social interactions, or extracurricular programmes. Therefore, participation should be assessed through multiple dimensions, including classroom interaction, academic engagement, communication with teachers, peer relationships, attendance, collaborative learning, and involvement in institutional activities.

Students with disabilities may face several barriers that restrict participation. Physical accessibility remains an important issue in educational institutions where ramps, accessible toilets, elevators, appropriate seating, tactile facilities, or other accommodations are inadequate. Digital accessibility is equally important in the post-COVID-19 environment. Inaccessible websites, electronic documents, videos, assessments, and learning management systems can prevent students from participating independently.

Another major challenge is the availability of assistive technology. Appropriate technology can significantly increase independence and participation among students with disabilities. Screen readers, text-to-speech software, captioning, speech-to-text systems, alternative keyboards, and other assistive devices can enable students to access information and complete academic tasks. However, technology must be affordable, accessible, reliable, and supported by trained teachers.

Teacher training is another essential strategy. Teachers should be trained in differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, accessible digital content, classroom accommodations, inclusive assessment, and disability awareness. Such training can help teachers identify individual needs and create classrooms where students with disabilities can participate alongside their peers without unnecessary barriers.

Mental health and social adjustment should also receive attention. The prolonged isolation associated with the pandemic may have affected students' confidence, motivation, social relationships, and emotional well-being. Counselling services, peer mentoring, group activities, and social-emotional learning programmes can help students readjust to mainstream educational environments. Peer-support programmes can be particularly valuable in building friendships and promoting acceptance.

Parent–teacher collaboration can further strengthen inclusive education. Parents and caregivers possess valuable knowledge about students' strengths, challenges, communication methods, learning preferences, and support requirements. Regular communication between families and educational institutions can help teachers design more appropriate interventions and monitor student progress.

Flexible assessment is also important. Students with disabilities may require reasonable accommodations such as additional time, accessible examination formats, alternative response methods, or assistive technologies. Such accommodations should remove barriers without compromising the intended academic learning outcomes.

Finally, students themselves should be involved in decisions concerning inclusive education. Their experiences and preferences can provide valuable information about which educational

practices are effective and which barriers remain unresolved. Student feedback can therefore become an important component of institutional evaluation and inclusive education planning.

IV. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed educational practices and exposed significant inequalities within existing education systems. While the transition to online learning enabled educational continuity, it also created additional barriers for many students with disabilities, particularly in relation to digital accessibility, individualized support, assistive technologies, teacher interaction, and peer participation. The post-COVID-19 period therefore provides an important opportunity to rethink and strengthen inclusive education.

A comparative examination of mainstream students and students with disabilities can provide valuable insight into how different groups experience contemporary educational environments and how their learning preferences have evolved following the pandemic. Meaningful inclusion should not be limited to the physical placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Instead, it should involve active academic participation, social interaction, equal access to learning resources, appropriate accommodations, and a strong sense of belonging.

The development of inclusive post-COVID-19 education requires a combination of face-to-face and digital learning opportunities that are accessible to all learners. Hybrid learning, assistive technologies, Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, flexible assessment, teacher training, mental-health support, peer mentoring, and parent–teacher collaboration can collectively strengthen educational inclusion. Educational institutions should also regularly obtain feedback from students to ensure that policies and practices reflect their actual experiences and preferences.

Ultimately, inclusive education should recognize learner diversity as a normal and valuable feature of the educational environment. By removing physical, technological, instructional, social, and psychological barriers, educational institutions can create learning environments in which both mainstream students and students with disabilities are able to participate meaningfully and achieve their potential. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic can

therefore serve as a foundation for developing a more flexible, accessible, equitable, and resilient education system for the future.

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