

Regression in Isolation: On the Quality of Education Received by Learners With Disabilities During the Lockdown

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INTRODUCTION

First published by Southeast Asian-centric online news portal, *New Naratif* last April 13, 2022 under the title “*Learning in Lockdown*” (<https://newnaratif.com/learning-in-lockdown>), this piece examines the quality of education received by Persons With Disabilities during the lockdown period brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our son, who is on the Autism Spectrum, lost the in-person social and emotional support he was receiving from his teachers when the pandemic forced a shift towards remote learning. As parents, we worked to mitigate its effects—but not all families in the Philippines can afford to do the same for children with disabilities.

TERMS

- Neurodivergent: People whose brains function differently from what is considered normal or standard, such as people living with autism or ADHD
- Neurotypical: Person with no developmental issues

- Self-regulation: When a person can manage their emotions on their own and keep inappropriate behavior in check
- Sound sensitivities: Aversion to loud or sudden noises

NOTES

- For communities and advocates, a more person-centered term is preferred, but for the education sector, Special Education is the term currently being used. However, following passage of the Law for Inclusive Education (RA 11650) last March, there may soon be a change in terminologies. The law mandates that Special Education Centers become Inclusive Learning Resource Centers, for example. However, as of writing, the Implementing Rules and Regulations for RA 11650 have yet to be crafted, and seeing as the Marcos Administration has allotted zero budget towards Special Education, it is yet to be seen how effective this law will be in addressing deficits being experienced by LWDs (Learners With Disabilities.)
- Some interview dialogues have been edited for length and clarity.



ANNIVERSARIES ARE
USUALLY A CAUSE
FOR CELEBRATION.
BUT NOT THIS ONE.

MARCH 2022 MARKED TWO YEARS OF LOCKDOWN DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE PHILIPPINES AND MUCH OF THE WORLD.

DURING MOST OF THESE PAST TWO YEARS, CHILDREN IN MANILA AND OTHER HIGH-RISK AREAS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO SPEND ANY TIME OUTDOORS AT ALL.

WHEN THE PANDEMIC STARTED, MY SON WAS IN THE 4TH GRADE. NOW HE IS IN THE 6TH GRADE AND IS SET TO GRADUATE FROM THE GRADE SCHOOL LEVEL. HE HAS MISSED NOT JUST THE USUAL CHRISTMAS AND YEAR-END SCHOOL PARTIES, BUT ALSO TAEKWONDO MEETS, VOLUNTEER EVENTS AND WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HIS FIRST SOLO KEYBOARD RECITAL.

IN DECEMBER 2021, THERE WAS A DOWNTREND IN THE NUMBER OF REPORTED COVID-19 CASES. THE GOVERNMENT LIFTED RESTRICTIONS ON SOCIAL GATHERINGS. I BEGAN TO HAVE HOPE THAT MY SON COULD AT LEAST EXPERIENCE A GRADUATION CEREMONY FIRSTHAND. BUT THE OMICRON WAVE CAME AND CRUSHED THAT HOPE.



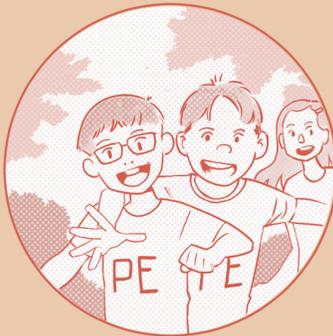
ANOTHER EXPERIENCE MISSED DUE TO COVID.

MY SON IS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM. HE STRUGGLES WITH SOCIALISATION AND MANAGING HIS EMOTIONS.

BUT WHEN WE ENROLLED HIM AT A SCHOOL WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORT, HE SLOWLY BUT SURELY BROKE OUT OF HIS SHELL.



PERFORMED BEFORE A CROWD. DID NOT SUFFER ANXIETY OR STAGE FRIGHT.



MADE A BEST FRIEND.

MINGLED WITH OTHER CHILDREN. WAS NOT BOTHERED BY THE NOISE!



WHEN THE PANDEMIC HIT, FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES WERE BANNED. LIKE OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOLS—WHICH TYPICALLY HAVE A SMALLER STUDENT-TO-TEACHER RATIO THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS—MY SON'S SCHOOL SHIFTED TO ONLINE CLASSES.

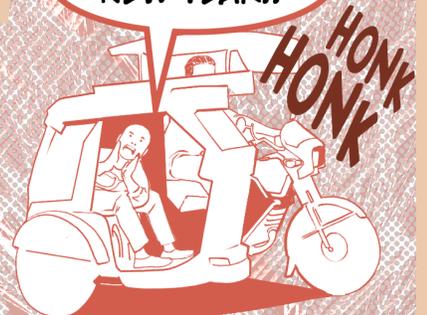


WAAH!

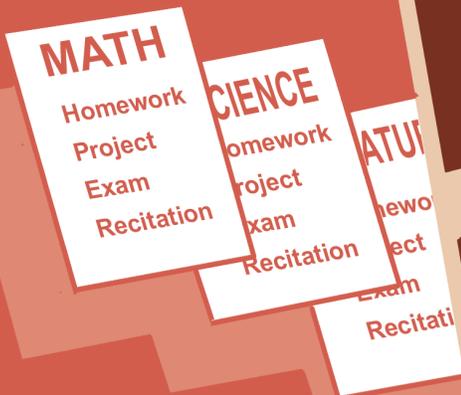
Too loud! Everything's TOO LOUD!



HAPPY NEW YEAR!!



SUDDENLY, THE IN-PERSON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT HE WAS GETTING FROM TEACHERS WAS CUT OFF. WE EXPERIENCED SOME REGRESSION WITH HIS BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES.



WE LIVE IN MANILA. IN MORE REMOTE AREAS, EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES ARE HARDER TO COME BY. INTERNET CONNECTIONS, WHICH ARE VITAL TO REMOTE LEARNING, RANGE FROM SPOTTY TO NONE.



IMPOVERISHED FAMILIES CAN'T AFFORD COMPUTERS OR TABLETS FOR ONLINE CLASSES.

Only a few pupils join online classes due to poor internet connections or no connection at all. This causes stress to parents and pupils who cannot attend online.



Someone's building a house next door. The non-stop noise from the construction is very disruptive to my classes.



GEMMA TORRES, grade 2 teacher at San Antonio Elementary School, a public school in Parañaque City

MEET ONE OF MS. TORRES' STUDENTS. JOHN FRANCIS SORIA IS A SECOND-GRADER AT A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN PARAÑAQUE CITY.

JOHN FRANCIS

IS IT OKAY IF I INTERVIEW YOU ABOUT SCHOOL?

But I can't read!

JUST TELL ME YOUR ANSWERS AND I'LL BE THE ONE TO WRITE THEM DOWN.

NOD

WAIT, IF YOU CAN'T READ, HOW DO YOU ANSWER YOUR MODULES?

Papa helps when he's at home.

AND YOUR KUYA?

Sometimes. When he is not busy with his cell phone.

I SEE. SO BEFORE COVID, YOU WERE ABLE TO ATTEND CLASS IN SCHOOL, RIGHT?

Yes! Face-to-face!

WHICH DO YOU LIKE MORE, FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES OR STUDYING AT HOME?

Face-to-face.

REALLY? IS IT BECAUSE YOU MISS YOUR FRIENDS FROM SCHOOL?

Yes, but also because I understand better, 'cause teacher is there to explain.

JOHN FRANCIS STILL STRUGGLES TO READ. HE DOESN'T HAVE A DIAGNOSIS AND SO IS UNABLE TO RECEIVE EXTRA HELP AT SCHOOL TO OVERCOME THIS DIFFICULTY.

Public schools tried to offer online support to students with special needs in real time, but because of very slow internet speeds, and some families not being able to afford devices, they had to abandon it.



INSTEAD, STUDENTS IN MOST PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE SENT PRINTED WORKSHEETS TO COMPLETE AND RETURN AT THE END OF THE YEAR. THE MODULES ARE GRADED, BUT NO PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK IS GIVEN. NO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT NOR BEHAVIOURAL ACCOMMODATIONS ARE GIVEN TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.



LUTZE-SOL VIDAL, assistant professor of education at the University of the Philippines

What state could the sibling's mental health be in, then? Doubling the workload, having to accomplish not just their own modules, but their sibling's as well?

WORSE, IF THE CHILD IS UNABLE TO COMPLETE THE MODULES, THEIR PARENT OR A NEUROTYPICAL* SIBLING WILL ANSWER FOR THEM JUST TO COMPLY WITH THE SCHOOL'S REQUIREMENTS.

PROFESSOR VIDAL, WHO ALSO ASSESSES CHILDREN SUSPECTED OF HAVING LEARNING DISABILITIES, HAS BEEN RECEIVING REPORTS OF FAMILIES EXPERIENCING REGRESSION WITH THEIR NEURODIVERGENT* KIDS.

The goal is always towards self-regulation*.



Even for private school students attending online classes, progress towards self-regulation has slowed down.

For example, sound sensitivities* may seem to have lessened, but that's only because they are wearing headphones. What will happen if you put the students back in an environment with sound stimuli?



Teachers also are not emotionally and socially prepared for this pandemic set-up, and their skills are sorely lacking.

ALTHOUGH MS. TORRES RECEIVED TRAINING ON THE USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES AND CONDUCTING ONLINE CLASSES, IT IS STILL A CHALLENGE.

I am not computer literate. My mind is still adjusting from traditional teaching to teaching online.



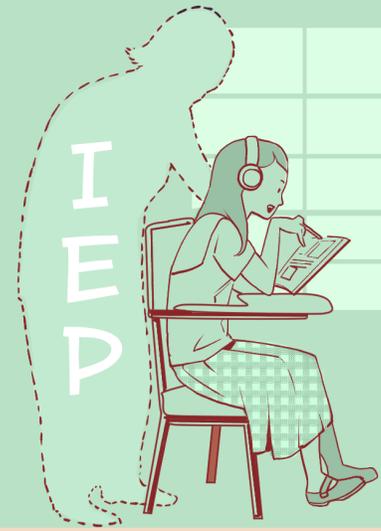
If I do online classes, I need the assistance of my daughter, who has online classes of her own.



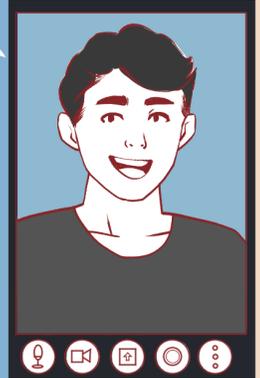


With the remote set-up, the special education curriculum is hard to implement.

Individualised assistance and intervention (known as individualised education plans) became difficult to execute for teachers.



JEAN DE GUZMAN ZURBANO, school head of Learning Garden Montessori School, a private school in Parañaque City

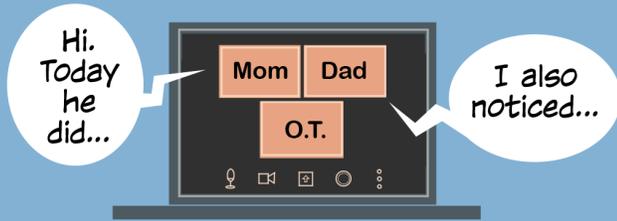


There are advantages to the remote set-up. We were able to finally target goals and address problems [for neurodivergent students] occurring at their home that were not observed during face-to-face sessions.

Part of the strategy to address deficiencies is making sure to keep constant communication with the parents.

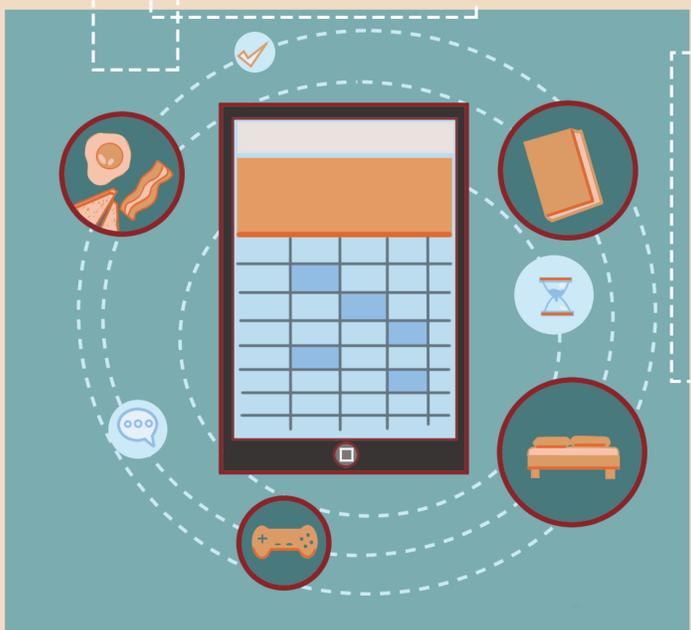
RICKIE MOLINAR, occupational therapist at Kids' SPOT Learning and Therapy Center in Parañaque City

IF ALL WE CAN DO IS HUNKER DOWN AT HOME AND WAIT UNTIL IN-PERSON CLASSES RESUME, THEN HOME IS WHERE WE'LL FIND THE SOLUTION. THE ANSWER MAY LIE WITH FAMILIES.



Hi. Today he did...

I also noticed...



Building a routine [with caregivers] would really help in providing consistent progress.

Positive results both in school and children's behaviour are best achieved with the assistance of parents providing neurodivergent students with scheduled routines.



AS OF WRITING, THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HAS BEGUN TRIALLING FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES IN SELECT PUBLIC SCHOOLS, WITH THE GOAL OF REOPENING ALL SCHOOLS WHEN THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS, THOUGH THE DATE HAS STILL NOT BEEN ANNOUNCED.

BY SOME—PERHAPS SERENDIPITOUS—COINCIDENCE, THE LAW FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION WAS SIGNED ON 15 MARCH 2022, WHICH IS THE TWO-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONWIDE LOCKDOWN. THE LAW AIMS TO "RECOGNIZE, PROTECT, AND PROMOTE THE RIGHTS OF ALL LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES...TO EDUCATION BASED ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY...ENSURING THAT NO LEARNER WITH DISABILITY IS DEPRIVED OF THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO AN INCLUSIVE, EQUI-TABLE, AND QUALITY EDUCATION."



R.A.11650

The law is a great win for all. Any move toward inclusive education would always be helpful in lessening the non-positive impact of remote learning, as long as there is individualisation and contextualisation in addressing needs of learners with disabilities.



HOWEVER, PUTTING THE LAW INTO PRACTICE WILL TAKE TIME, SO IT IS VITAL FOR PARENTS TO STEP UP.

BUT FOR THOSE WHO WORK ALMOST THE ENTIRE DAY TO MAKE ENDS MEET, OR WHO LACK ENOUGH EDUCATION TO PROPERLY GUIDE THEIR CHILD, THE CURRENT LACK OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT REMAINS AN OBSTACLE.



IT MAY STILL BE TOO EARLY TO UNDERSTAND THE EXACT REPERCUSSIONS OF TWO YEARS OF REMOTE LEARNING ON FILIPINO STUDENTS' PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, BUT EDUCATORS SAY WITH A SUPPORTIVE FAMILY, SOME DEFICITS WILL AT LEAST BE MITIGATED.

FOR JOHN FRANCIS' FAMILY, IT MEANS SETTING ASIDE A PORTION OF THEIR MODEST INCOME TO HIRE A TUTOR.

E-G-G.

Eeegg?

Yes!
Good
job!



FOR MY SON, SUPPORT CAN COME IN THE FORM OF SOMETHING AS SEEMINGLY MUNDANE AS A DAILY PLANNER.

So, you can put stuff in there, like this project is due on Monday.

Or even your cousin's birthday!



THIS HELPS HIM FOLLOW A ROUTINE AND GIVES HIM A SEMBLANCE OF CONTROL, EVEN DURING THESE UNPREDICTABLE TIMES.

- Page 3, panel 1 is based on the experiences of a 6-year-old student in Bohol province who has to walk 600 meters from his house to a hilltop to get decent mobile internet signals. (source: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1334660/glitches-bug-digital-learning?fbclid=IwAR2c1Vj9Xgr1mtbub1Y-bYDv5PhyR61SMc3ELtypP2C914ev-iU5WKedOR0>)
- Page 4, panel 2 shows a group of schoolchildren helping each other answer printed modules provided by the Department of Education. (source: https://international.thenewslens.com/article/142537?fbclid=IwAR2iZIWf9xrz3AzIB9L2wln3WYckpeW4S23m4xaHI98GyLd5ipS_Tir3UhU)

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DECLARATION ON CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author and artist declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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INTERVIEW RESOURCE PERSONS

- Gemma Torres, Grade 2 teacher at San Antonio Elementary School, a public school in Parañaque City
- John Francis Soria, Grade 2 student at San Antonio Elementary School
- Lutze-Sol Vidal, PhD, Assistant Professor at the College of Education at the University of the Philippines Diliman
- Jean De Guzman Zurbano, School Head of Learning Garden Montessori School, a private school in Parañaque City
- Rickie Molinar, Occupational Therapist at Kids' SPOT Learning and Therapy Center, Parañaque City

AUTHOR AND ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Included among the Philippine Star Life's list of women who changed local komiks for the better, writer **Bambi Eloriaga-Amago** is also a Journalism graduate (cum laude) from the University of the Philippines Diliman. She has worked on the editorial staff of various ABS-CBN publications and sat as Editor-in-Chief of *Questor: The Ultimate Anime Magazine*. Currently working as a full-time freelance writer, she adapts scripts of English language-licensed manga such as *ToraDora* and *It Started With a Kiss*, and has written original works that are internationally published including *Moonlight Meow* and the *Carnal* series of comics. Her current collaboration with artist-husband Roland Amago is the well-received *Doobiedoo Asks*, a graphic novel which chronicles their family's autism journey. The book is an Official Selection of the first-ever Philippine International Comics Festival (PICOFF), a Finalist for Graphic Literature at the 39th National Book Awards (NBA), a Readers' Choice Awardee at the 7th National Children's Book Awards (NCBA), and the Best Media Pitch Winner at the 2021 Asian Festival of Children's Content (AFCC) in Singapore.

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Roland Amago is an award-winning illustrator starting to make waves in the Filipino comics scene. He is known for his work on the supernatural comic series *Carnal Tales* which was been nominated for the 2020 Komiket (indie comic) Awards in the Philippines. Roland graduated from the University of Santo Tomas with a degree in Architecture.



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