The Roles and challenges of Non-Formal Education in the context of special education amid COVID-19

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The UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR 2020) addresses challenges of the education sector affected by the COVID-19 crisis. As of April 2020, 185 countries decided the closure of schools, and this led 91% of student populations to stay at home. Moreover, 40% of the low-income countries failed to support learners in need due to the pandemic. The resulting social and digital gap have put the vulnerable at risk of learning loss and dropout.

Education for people with disabilities, in particular, suffered more difficulties amidst the pandemic. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the limitations and potentials of distance learning for students with disabilities during the pandemic and explores lifelong learning opportunities from the level of school-age education to the non-formal education level, targeted to adults with disabilities. Furthermore, this paper suggests special education in Laos as an example of the Bridge project and examines the future possibility of supporting distance learning through the Bridge Programme.

1. Learning difficulties experienced by students with disabilities worldwide under the COVID-19

In a report *Inclusion Europe* published by the European Union in November 2021, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated, "the COVID-19 pandemic is intensifying inequalities experienced by the world's one billion people with disabilities already face." The report is of great significance as European Union member countries have paid attention not only to how COVID-19 impacted the lives of the general public but also to how it affected people with intellectual disabilities as well as their families, who demonstrate more vulnerability to the pandemic.

The report presents the cases of European countries on how well they respond to negligence, exclusion, and discrimination against people with disabilities in various fields such as education, employment, information, and counseling. Most people with intellectual disabilities could not benefit from continuing learning or development opportunities during the COVID-19 shutdown. Schools had to shut down and go online, and no available supports for online education resulted in limited access to learning materials for people with intellectual disabilities. Even after the school reopened, some people with disabilities were refrained from learning materials and resulted in well-founded fear of some children and families.

The report further concerned that in Italy, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities failed to participate in distance learning

due to inadequate supports, and this could have missed out on all academic achievements made before the pandemic. Nonetheless, Italy successfully created an online space to support students and teachers with easy-to-read and augmented communication version documents.

In France, online learning began but most children with developmental and intellectual disabilities were technically forced out of online classes due to the absence of required digital tools. To tackle this problem, organizations that support people with disabilities provided digital tools for students with developmental disabilities and served them with various educational materials, such as caregivers, educational games, children's songs, speech therapies, and daily learning plans.

2. Distance learning for students with disabilities to fight against education inequality under the COVID-19

As the pandemic drove life online, discourses around disparity, exclusion, and inequality in education have somewhat become today's norm. Most surveys and statistics expect that the gap will continue to grow. Therefore, digital transformation is believed as a reliable and influential measure to take up the challenges posed by COVID-19. Needless to say, the education sector today is implementing distance learning.

1) Distance learning for students with disabilities in other countries

COVID-19 crisis shut down the school and drove classes online.

Students with disabilities could not access learning materials due to the absence of digital support, which resulted in children with disabilities and their families fearing the current circumstances. The impact of COVID-19 – school closure and social distancing – posed significant challenges to students with disabilities, their families, and teachers. Schools, governments, and organizations across Europe turned their eyes to new learning methods, and several EU member countries implemented distance learning to ensure continuity of education.

Homeschooling, which requires at-home learning, can be challenging for many learners regardless of their disabilities, but it has become a bigger hurdle for students with intellectual disabilities. The lack of support derived from complicated or hard-to-reach technological issues is the main hurdle. Therefore, most people with intellectual disabilities were hindered from learning and development during the lockdown, which could have caused extreme consequences for the development of children with intellectual disabilities. Experts have continuously warned potential regression of children with disabilities as education has been discontinued.

Analysis of distance learning in other countries amid COVID-19 published by the Korean Educational Development Institute introduces survey results of 10 countries in Asia, Oceania, North America, and Europe on a case-by-case basis. Most countries have built digital-based educational systems and have operated real-time or non-real-time classes on education platforms through teachers who develop hands-on educational materials or different online contents applicable to the classes.

Many countries are providing internet access and learning equipment or device to the vulnerable population, care for students with financial needs, and a wide range of special supports for underachieved students.

In the case of Japan, the government has implemented various measures to support students during the school closure, from home-based learning as part of distance learning to general care, healthcare, and nutrition. For instance, children who cannot stay at home alone during the closure are protected in classrooms and benefit from lunch services at a school cafeteria on a request basis. Moreover, continuous care for students with special needs is being emphasized more than ever.

2) Supporting Distance learning for students with disabilities in Korea and its obstacles

How is educating people with disabilities in Korea under the COVID-19? Korea provided customized support for students with disabilities including a) supporting distance learning through 'Online Classroom for Students with disabilities, depending on students' types and degrees of disability in deafness, blindness, intellectual disability, or developmental disability; b) conducting home visits; c) providing learning materials, and d) lending out textbooks and learning kits. A student with disabilities assigned to schools with limited special education services can use assistive technology devices or smart gadgets for special education, which is essential for participating in

distance learning.

However, distance learning for students with disabilities has inherent challenges in that the nature of online learning prevents students from receiving 'customized education' catered to their characteristics, and parental support is a must for online learning since the students feel difficulties in concentration. This leads to learning loss. It is far from fair to apply the same education methods for students without disabilities to those with disabilities, who even struggle to turn on the computer.

Students with disabilities have a hard time participating in an online class for a long time due to their limited attention span. Specifically, they have issues with physical disabilities which hamper their access to a computer; their types of disability such as visual impairment; cognitive problems; and other challenging behaviors. These challenges hinder disabled students from attending online classes, resulting in learning loss and a burden on their parents.

Special education teachers can typically interact with students and adjust the contents and methods of the class to teach, but online classes only allow them to deliver information in one-way. Interaction between teachers and students barely happens online, which may leave students with no independence and social skills.

One of the strategies to assist students with disabilities who find it challenging to adapt to changes flexibly is a user-friendly gadget. For example, if a student with a cognitive disability goes online with his

open profile, then all languages and learning materials in the online class can be converted into easy-to-understand languages and shapes.

It is also necessary to strive to entertain learners with the support of easy-to-read texts, such as clear explanations on Chinese characters or technical terms. For a student with visual impairment, texts could be read aloud, or the size or background color of the letter may be adjusted accordingly.

3) Areas to improve distance learning for students with disabilities under the COVID-19

The pandemic urges education to focus on translating students' autonomy into productive activities. For greater student autonomy, the relationship between students and teachers should move away from control and monitoring to productive activities from an educational point of view.

Smooth interaction between teachers and students is also necessary as teachers and students attending an online class share class materials online and communicate with voice, chatting via texts, and gestures of video chat.

The most urgent task to improve distance learning for a student with disabilities under the COVID-19 is developing learning content and improving the quality of classes. This will realize the true meaning of the online class environment; where teachers and students could study together with the same material through remote control enabled by a

tablet PC or PC with built-in Windows.

With COVID-19, a new educational environment should be devised to enable students to learn together, regardless of their disabilities. There are endless ways to create accessible apps and apply for programs. Specifically, students with autism need an app to prevent a repeating timed section of videos, and students with developmental disabilities need VR learning content to make the best use of the learning content.

Digital devices should be supported with sign languages, subtitles, and assistive technology devices, according to the types and characteristics of students with disabilities. Supporting facilities and environments designed to establish distance learning of special education in the long term is also essential in case another pandemic or disastrous crisis occurs.

Moreover, students with disabilities require support from personal care attendants, who can physically provide help nearby the learners. Given that the ecological framework has been highlighted as an ideal teaching-learning approach for students with developmental disabilities and intellectual disabilities, it is necessary to reconsider the objective of educating students with disabilities when face-to-face learning is impossible.

3. Lifelong education for post-school-age people with disabilities

While COVID-19 is continuously driving education online, access to online learning is fairly restricted to people with disabilities. Hence, countries have developed an online and offline platform for marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, to ensure their access to online education content.

People with disabilities generally demonstrate lower efficiency in learning than those without disabilities, struggle to retain the knowledge gained during school age, and often fail to utilize the social skills acquired to adapt to society. Therefore, it is necessary to take the life-cycle approach and continuously provide educational services and practice to people with disabilities even after they leave school.

Lifelong education for people with disabilities should reflect the unique educational needs of adults with disabilities, which goes beyond curriculum-based learning, so-called independent living. (Lee & Park, 2018) In other words, lifelong education for adults with disabilities has to involve a distinct curriculum and approach that allows for the age and features of disabilities.

The purpose of lifelong education for people with disabilities is to enhance the quality of life and contribute to the social integration of people with disabilities by ensuring their right to participate in lifelong education and promoting independent living and social participation. The current lifelong education, to this end, provides differentiated services depending on the age and features of the disability of adult learners with disabilities.

The Government of Korea has strengthened its legal accountability since establishing provisions regarding lifelong education for people with disabilities in 2007 as part of the Act on Special Education for Persons With Disabilities, and further the transfer of the provisions to the Act on Lifelong Education in 2016. Finally, this year's amendment of the Lifelong Education Act laid the foundation for designating and supporting a lifelong learning city for people with disabilities.

While lifelong learning services for people without disabilities have centered on six primary areas, including employment, entertainment, and literacy, the necessity for lifelong learning for people with disabilities arises from their unique needs with disabilities, such as improving social skills or acquiring social participation skills. (Yoon et al., 2016)

The current lifelong education for people with disabilities covers basic literacy, supplementary education, vocational education, culture and arts, humanities, civic participation, and independent living education, according to disability type, degree, age, and current and future educational needs.

4. Suggesting the Bridge Programme educate people with disabilities in Laos

Laos is home to more than half of the world's recorded munitions casualties. It is an environmental risk factor for young children to have disabilities. This paper suggests Korean National Commission for UNESCO Bridge Programme consider students with disabilities and environmental factors in

Laos.

Less than 1% of unexploded bombs have been removed in Laos during the past 40 years, and 41 out of 46 of Laos' poorest regions are suffering from unexploded ordnance (UXO). High UXO explosion results in victims with disabilities, of which children and youth have damaged the most thus far. Their most common injuries sustained from a UXO explosion include limb loss, blindness, hearing loss, shrapnel wounds, and internal shock wave injuries.

In many cases, households are at a loss with resolving and caring for family members who developed disabilities from UXO. According to an officer in charge of Laos projects at Korea Food for the Hungry International said students with disabilities are barely witnessed outside, presumably quitting school and staying at home due to lack of public awareness on disability. This indicates an increasing number of children with disabilities due to the explosion need a system that provides education, career, employment security, and support measures for independent living.

In the People's Democratic Republic of Laos, over the past few years, the entire population's exposure to basic education has increased, but children with disabilities were exempt from this positive change. Children without disabilities are twice as likely to complete elementary education compared to those with disabilities.

Lao PDR Disability Monograph (2018) and Midterm Review (2018) of Education Sector Development Plan 2016-2020 demonstrated that children with disabilities continue to have difficulties in accessing education. According

to Laos' Disability Monograph based on the 2015 Census of Population and Housing, 43% of children with disabilities did not enroll in elementary school compared to 9.6% of the general population. Furthermore, children with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school before the end of the fifth grade, and 60% of children with hearing impairment, communication disorders, or cognitive problems stand a slim chance of going to school.

The Disability Monograph also identifies several school-level factors, such as a lack of assistive devices, differentiated academic performance assessment, untrained teachers, and absence of customized curriculum –educational support for Thai children for example— hinder children with disabilities in Laos from equal participation or academic achievement.

With intact cognitive function, children with hearing impairments or physical disabilities could gain opportunities for economic independence and build up their competitiveness, while physical discomfort accompanies them. Similarly, children with visual impairment can develop unique abilities in memory and develop careers in various fields, including document translation or interpretation through proper education and independence skills.

Realistically, regions with poor infrastructure for transportation and hardware construction may collaborate with non-formal education institutions such as Community Learning Center (CLC) to enable online and offline vocational training. Cooperation with relevant organizations or institutions as well as joint programs is a promising option to connect disability rehabilitation/treatment programs and vocational education.

While these attempts mainly target to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education), they could also help to accomplish SDG 8 (Promote full and productive employment and decent work for all), SDG 10 (Reduce inequalities within and among countries and ensure opportunity for all) and SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies.)

5. Suggesting distance learning to the Bridge Programme under the COVID-19

Currently, the Bridge Programme by the Korean Commission for UNESCO (KNCU) improves the learning environment through Community Learning Centers (CLC) and promotes non-formal education. I suggest the future Bridge Programme to provide distance learning in disastrous situations like COVID-19. As part of the digital transformation, the world's education sectors have turned their eyes to distance learning catered to the situation of each country. Some factors, however, prevent distance learning from fulfilling the needs of all children.

Therefore, UNESCO organized Global Education Coalition in 2020 to help states equip with innovative and contextual solutions by employing the expertise of the United Nations, civil society organizations, technology partners, and public and private actors. They have worked to combine high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech approaches altogether in providing distance learning.

Before the pandemic, the KNCU implemented the Hope Bridge project, an

education project for basic literacy and vocational skills that aimed to establish and support CLC. The impact of the project was officially appraised at the UNESCO General Assembly by the national commission of the Bridge project's partner country to the KNCU for supporting the CLC. The project laid down the critical foundation for cooperation with the UNESCO network.

With the COVID-19 exacerbating exclusion, marginalization, gap in education, and putting strain on face-to-face learning, how can KNCU add effectiveness in the Bridge Programme? Can we open a possibility of implementing ODA projects on distance learning, based on digital transformation?

In preparation for the post-pandemic era, the KNCU should review a possible international cooperation direction in educational development for UNESCO member states to increase access to education and enable learning regardless of time and space, which is a core principle of distance learning. This may gradually lead to the full implementation of online-based projects in the future; expansion of ODA on education with the transfer of Korean-version distance learning; greater international cooperation in distance education; establishment of a solid foundation for educational cooperation; and strengthened solidarity with the local community.

Although the KNCU already has a five-year plan for the Bridge Programme Phase 2 and taking a dramatic turn for the future direction and approach would be challenging, it is worthwhile to discuss the possibility of supporting distance learning to UNESCO member states, in case the pandemic outlasts in the long run.

However, a feasibility study must be prioritized first to come up with a concrete action plan because each country has a unique dynamic and environment. In the feasibility study, a wide range of variables need to be examined such as the current situation of each country's ICT infrastructure, the cost of wired and wireless services, statistics on Internet users, diagram of two-way transmission network, base station coverage of mobile communications, social network service platforms, and mobile data service.

For countries with poor power supply, the feasibility of distance learning can be estimated by generating solar power for distance learning. For example, what is the prerequisite to implementing distance learning as part of supporting non-formal education in East Timor, Bhutan, and Laos? Figuring out a safe way to supply power without interruption to the villages with CLC should be the utmost priority.

Distance learning in Korea has steadily evolved since the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides technological progress, the evolution should also accompany advances in educational methods and teaching strategies. In other words, technology experts should not be the keyman driving distance learning. A practical approach is always important in dealing with educational content, teaching methods, and evaluation. I hope that the KNCU develops the Bridge Programme dedicated to supporting distance learning in the future, by fully taking advantage of their know-how and assets.

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