

Lived Experiences of Special Education Needs Students During Covid 19 - a Post Pandemic Reflection



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ABSTRACT: The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore, describe and intertwine the lived experiences of students living with special educational needs (SEN) during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Seven purposively selected participants from 2 tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe. Participation was voluntary, by responding to unstructured written online interviews and telephone interviews. Each participant confirmed consent and keenly participated as they wished to share their lived experiences. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. The 5 themes identified in the study were challenges faced, coping strategies, sad moments, happy moments, lessons learnt and recommendations for the future. The major challenges were unreliable internet connectivity, financial constraints, meeting deadlines for assignment submissions, feelings of loneliness and frustrations from social distance and learning remotely which further led to emotional distance, challenge of lack of adequate technological competence made some to feel incapacitated to work remotely with limited assistance from fellow classmates. In addition, others felt helpless as lecturers who did not know their conditions assumed all things being equal and expected them to participate at par with the able bodied. However, most of them felt that the experience was a blessing in disguise as they developed coping strategies. It was richly rewarding as they developed resilience in the face of challenges, they felt the synergy of working together with family members from home to achieve their goals. Lastly, most of them learnt that they too could harness technology to their advantage, so they felt motivated to embrace technology and up- scale their technological skills and venture into unknown territories even after the Pandemic is over.

KEYWORDS: Covid 19 Pandemic, special education needs, lived experience, resilience

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic hit the world like a storm with devastating effects. Loss of life, loss of employment, loss of business and potential business deals was among the losses that people suffered. The education sector was not spared as schools, colleges and universities were closed during the lockdown period. Post lockdown issues faced by students in general were anxiety, worry, fear, frustration, and insecurity (Carpinelli, Bruno, & Savarese, 2021). Some students reported time-zone differences challenges and issues to do with motivation and headaches due to increased screen time. This study is mainly focusing on Special Education Needs (SEN) students' experiences as these might have unique experiences and needs. This notion is supported by a study done by Sachs and Schreuer (2011) which found that students with disabilities differed in areas of experiences in accessing higher education. In a study done by Kunkes(2020), forty percent of students with disabilities reported that their accommodation needs changed in the online environment, that is, the need for increased time on exams due to distractions at home, need for greater flexibility with assignments and the need for more asynchronous learning due to extended periods of computer use. A reflection on the post pandemic experiences help to map the future by avoiding the pitfalls of the past and learning from past mistakes.

2.2 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Teachers, administrators, law makers, students with and without disabilities and their parents should be involved in inclusive education discussions as they seek to assist all students to reach their potential (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). Inclusion includes universal access to public infrastructure and facilities such as public transport, public spaces and recreational facilities (Baldwin &

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Stafford, 2019). The bottom-line for inclusive education should be equitable access to opportunities that guarantees successful outcomes in education, employment, and community integration (Ajuwon, 2008). Teachers should have the necessary knowledge and instructional skills for working in inclusive classrooms (Leyser & Romi, 2008). Holding short workshops and presentations about inclusion in institutions of higher education could help lecturers to be knowledgeable about laws and policies on inclusive education. This would guide educators about the teaching accommodations and adaptations that need to be in place if they are to accommodate students with disabilities. Inclusion helps the country to meet Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 4-quality education and number 10-reduced inequality (UNWTO Annual Report, 2017). Quality education in the sense that different characteristics of students will be met in the classrooms and reduced inequality in that SEN students will be given equal chance to education and employment.

2.3 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE DURING THE COVID 19 ERA

The Covid 19 lockdown forced universities to shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching as universities were closed. This needed a lot of adjustments on the part of both students and lecturers. Some of the difficulties faced during this period was that students and lecturers were in experienced in online teaching and learning, the unavailability of gadgets to support teaching and learning online as well as absence of privacy when teaching and learning from home (Liu, Liu, & Zhong, 2020). Changes in lifestyles during Covid 19 era brought about some psychological and relational challenges due to anxiety, worry, frustration, fear and insecurity (Carpinelli, Bruno & Savarese, 2021). The support system infrastructure be it physical, technological, or social would be of assistance in helping students with special needs cope better in such situations. The section below is guided by the PESTEL theory to explore how these factors could affect higher education students with special needs during Covid 19. For this study, the P that stands for Political will be standing for Physical and all the other factors are as per the theory i.e. Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal factors. Although these factors are widely used in business, they can be applied to any situation that depends on external support for smooth functioning. Without varied support infrastructure, it would have been difficult for special needs students to access education during Covid 19 period. It is the lack of access to resources and information that hinders students with disabilities to achieve their goals not the absence of ability and ambition (Limaye, 2016).

2.3.1 PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Most universities have availed ramps, and lifts to accommodate students with disabilities. However, there are still some modifications that are needed if inclusion is to be enhanced. A lift (elevator) though convenient to those who cannot use steps, where the buttons are placed inside the lift is not convenient for someone in wheelchair who must enter the lift backwards if they are to face the entrance side for them to press the floor they need to be taken to (Moriña & Morgado, 2018). University surroundings and infrastructures should be accessible and inclusive for all hence such lifts modifications could enhance inclusivity in the designing of the physical infrastructure.

2.3.2 ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The Covid lockdown measures led to closure of some companies, loss of employment and loss of means of income. Although most people suffered economically during Covid 19 era, people with disabilities suffered even more. This is because adapting to the Covid 19 environment needed some adjustments that were unique to SEN students that required financial resources to bridge the gap. An example of this is when hiring a personal tutor for sign language to assist those with hearing challenges to interpret what the online lecturers would be saying. In a normal situation, one interpreter could serve students but during Covid 19 period, students were scattered all over so special arrangements needed to be arranged at an extra cost. Most organisations were willing to help with tuition yet more was needed for SEN students.

2.3.3 SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Social barriers include attitudinal barriers in society such as prejudice, lack of coordination, and segregation of students with special needs (Alomari, Daradkah, Al Rub, Alqsaireen, & Khasawneh, 2023). The morality of a nation is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members (Sanders, 1997) and if morality for Zimbabwe during Covid 19 was to be measured using this measure, the country could fail to meet the standard because of how SEN students were treated together with some other vulnerable groups. The social support infrastructure should include school, family and community. Where school-family-community partnerships exist, students with disabilities build resilience to enhance their academic, personal, social and college-career outcomes (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Students with disabilities need sympathy, sensitivity and closeness for them to be feel that they are accepted socially. However, support from friends and classmates through peer networking and study groups seemed to have lacked during covid times as students were physically isolated from each other.

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2.3.4 TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Online teaching which became the medium of instruction during Covid 19 era needed to be supported by high-tech gadgets. Although students with disabilities appreciated the use of computers in their learning, some highlighted the need for some adaptation for them to use computers effectively. The availability of specialised equipment such as verbal computers for the visually impaired students would assist in their learning. Special hardware and software to convert printed material to braille for those who are blind might be needed. However, lack of training in the use of technology makes its use difficult (Tuomi, Lehtomäki, & Matonya, 2015). The availability of multimedia services library could not yield much when the employees in the library lacked proficiency in the use of technology to support special needs students (Alomari, Daradkah, Al Rub, Alqsaireen & Khasawneh, 2023). Online teaching requires different accommodations for students with disabilities that includes health and financial considerations.

2.3.5 ENVIRONMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE

For learning to take place, the environment should be conducive. Inclusive classroom environment is needed so that all students including those with special needs feel comfortable to share and exchange ideas in the classroom. The environment should offer protection, emotional support, empowerment to vulnerable students (Anderson, 2011). The lecturers should provide hospitable classrooms that have a welcoming environment in which students with disabilities feel valued and safe (Anderson, 2011). Teachers as hosts should make accommodations and modifications that appropriately include the student with special needs in all activities. The teacher's words and actions set the tone for a hospitable classroom. The teachers should be willing to learn new methods and techniques, review their teaching materials to effectively engage all the students and thus grow professionally (Anderson, 2011).

2.3.6 LEGAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Zimbabwe has set policies such as the inclusive education policy for higher education to promote equality and equity in education. However, there is need to check on the implementation of these policies in universities. The lecturers need training in offering special services for students with disabilities, the physical infrastructure need to be accommodative and assistive technologies need to be availed by universities (Tuomi, Lehtomäki, & Matonya, 2015). Besides universities guaranteeing access to students with disabilities, its policies and practices must be revised to ensure inclusive education really exists (Moriña, Lopez-Gavira, & Molina, 2017).

2.4 ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICES DURING THE COVID 19 ERA

After all the PESTEL support infrastructure has been put in place, their accessibility to students with special needs becomes key. Accessibility to communication, information, internet services, over and above access to physical facilities through the use of ramps and elevators would be needed to support education of special needs students. A student with visual impaired would not benefit from the video shared online, the one with hearing challenges will not benefit much from audio class material. This shows that even if the material has been made available, its accessibility to those students with special needs remains a challenge. Students with disabilities' access to education was found to be enhanced by an encouraging family environment, motivation from the teachers and sufficient financial support (Tuomi, Lehtomäki, & Matonya, 2015). Wasser (1998), in applying recommendations made in Newsweek magazine to his university, refers to six important criteria for good technology access in postsecondary institutions: (1) access to university systems and the internet from a variety of locations at various times of day; (2) training on computers and the internet; (3) technical support when and where students are using computers; (4) digital libraries which provide on-line access to catalogues and electronic texts; (5) faculty support and training on integrating technology into courses; (6) responsiveness to the needs of the community (e.g., on-line application, e-mail, course and university information on the web). The same criteria need to be applied to students with disabilities to enhance their accessibility to higher education. The following are suggestions on what faculty can do to increase accessibility.

1. Put information on web so that students can print or find alternative means of converting that material to preferred state ahead of the beginning of semester.
2. Put material on CDROM for students with print impairments.
3. Avoiding pictures to minimise data usage.
4. Give time extensions for exams.
5. Offer students' accommodations that meet their unique learning styles and needs.
6. Small classes to allow reasonable student-to-teacher ratio.
7. Separate exam areas so that braille machine noise does not disturb other students.
8. Enlargement of font for exams for those with sight challenges.
9. Sign language training for lecturers.
10. Avoiding the use of Adobe Acrobat or PowerPoint presentations as these formats are problematic for some students who use screen reading technologies. A "no tables" version is best for students who are blind, and bulleted lists are preferred to tables. (Catherine, Fichten, Asuncion, Christian Génèreux, Darlene Judd, Christina De Simone & David, 2001).

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2.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The stakeholder theory by Freeman is the theory that was used to anchor this study. The theory states that the interests of all stakeholders in an entity should be taken care of (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010). Stakeholders in a university includes the government, the students, lecturers, Management, donors and other Non-Governmental Organisations. Since students are part of the stakeholders in a university, their needs should be met by these institutions of higher learning. In this study, the students are further narrowed to those SEN students. Although SEN students are usually the minority in terms of their university enrolment, their needs should be met too. To meet the need for this special group of students, effective school-family-community collaborations with the students living with disabilities should be culturally sensitive when helping (Kochhar-Bryant, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative phenomenological research design. This design sought to understand and describe the universal essence of the impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic phenomenon on the lived experiences of Special Education Needs (SEN) learners. The inception of Covid 19 Pandemic with its lock down restrictions brought a sudden change in pedagogical practices. There was a sudden shift from the traditional face to face learning to remote learning which was carried out virtually. This meant a drastic change for the special education needs learners who had been used to close interactions with their teachers.

The enrolment of people with special education needs is usually restrictive as they usually require special pedagogical assistance. Purposive and Snowball sampling was carried out to get participants from 2 Tertiary educational institutions in Zimbabwe. Seven SEN learners volunteered (as indicated in their consent) to participate. The researchers carried out the study when none of these participants were being taught by the researchers (who are lecturers at the 2 institutions). This ensured the bracketing of the researchers. In addition, the researchers tried to suspend prejudices and any a priori assumptions by working as a team of researchers so as to clear away any biases. The names of the institutions have been kept anonymous for ethical reasons.

Covid 19 Pandemic resulted in social distancing, school closures and lockdowns. School closures meant students had to learn virtually and remotely. This drastic change greatly affected learners with special educational needs such as visual impairment, hearing impairment and speech impairments. Yet, some of the lecturers were not oriented to the unique learning needs of each learner. Faced with this dilemma under the new normal left the special education needs students in an awkward position. Most of these special learners were technologically incapacitated. Most were slow in typing and were still learning new skills of doing all assignment tasks on the computer. Yet, unbeknown to the lecturers was that in their classes were special education needs learners, so they expected assignment tasks to be completed and submitted online on time.

Typical phenomenological approach investigates the everyday experiences of human beings while suspending the researchers' preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon through bracketing. In other words, phenomenological research studies lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how people interpret and appropriate their lived experiences. In this case the participants being students with special education needs had a unique experience under the phenomenon of the Covid 19 Pandemic era. The researchers sought to describe and interpret the participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs to clarify the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. According to Cresswell (2013), phenomenology is a qualitative research design in which the researcher makes inquiry from participants about a their life experiences during a particular phenomenon thus identifying the essence of the phenomenon to their experiences. The Phenomenological research design followed the following 4 steps:

- a. Identification of the phenomenon and development of a detailed description of the phenomenon (Covid -19 Pandemic era)
- b. Bracketing personal prejudices assumptions
- c. Collection of data from the participants
- d. Data analysis.

Data was collected through online in depth interviews and telephone calls. Inductive thematic data analysis involving coding, familiarization with the data, categorizing the data into clusters by grouping similar concepts into specific constituents and arranging the data into themes as described by Clarke & Braun (2013). The themes describing the participants' lived experiences were placed in categories as reported verbatim.

FINDINGS

The seven participants of this study (from the two tertiary institutions) comprised of six males and one female. The data collected were coded as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Coding

Participant	Institution	Gender
SN1	HE1	M
SN2	HE1	M
SN3	HE1	F
SN4	HE1	M

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SN5	HE1	M
SN5	HE1	M
SN6	HE2	M
SN7	HE2	M

The findings of this study can be summed up into five themes that emerged; these are challenges, coping strategies, positives (benefits and lessons) from the experience participants' reflections of happy and sad moments, suggestions for the future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS ONE

Describe your lived experience during the Covid 19 Pandemic in terms of;

Challenges, coping strategies. Your voluntary participation is greatly appreciated as it will help future Educational Practices Challenges

The sudden switching to remote and virtual online learning resulted in generating several challenges for the special education needs students. These included financial challenges, academic challenges, connectivity challenges and loneliness.

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

According to SN2 and SN3 financial challenges were among the most difficult ones to surmount. *"It was difficult to raise money for internet Data, fees etc", (SN2).* In addition, *"Participant SN3 further expressed her plight as follows" As a visual impaired person it was very difficult as I had to buy a WIFI Modem so that I do not trail behind."*

The Covid 19 Pandemic induced lockdowns and travel restrictions wreaked havoc in that although most people were learning remotely, most online exams required efficient and reliable network which was not available in some residential areas, Hence, there was need to travel in order to get to a central place in town and write the exam. This was a challenge for most participants whose sources of income had been dwindling as reported by SN3 and SN4. *I closed my office where I operated from by April 2020 for fear of accumulated rentals and that's where our livelihood was coming and where we did our assignments and internet access in fact that is where our academic activities were centred as our suburb is not electrified even up to now and transforming to solar was something else. Yet there was need to travel. Traveling to and fro for exam sitting was another challenge. I remember going against the guns almost being waived as a sign to go back home and travelling from Masasa to town by foot in order to sit for my exams thanks to Pastor X for being patient.* A female Participant SN3 also shared the following experience. *It was not easy to overcome my financial challenges during the Pandemic, many people lost their jobs. This also affected me as well as my brother was also among those who lost their jobs. But through the grace of God I managed to overcome my financial challenges by applying for a sponsorship from the Ministry of Public Service. This did help me a lot as I was now able to travel back to school and continue with my studies.*

INTERNET CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES

The sudden inception of Covid 19 Pandemic did not result in a smooth transition from face to face learning to online learning. The lecturers were neither forewarned about the presence of Special needs learners in their classes nor oriented on how to be accommodative of the basic needs of each of their diverse learners. As participant SN 1 puts it, *"apart from Network connection challenges,*

It was difficult to explain myself to each and every lecturer this I ignored it and worked like able bodied students although it affected me (SN1 has speech and visual challenges).

Unreliable internet connectivity was another major challenge. *At times the sudden power cut frustrated me when I thought I am almost done with an assignment and power goes off before I save my work. Sometimes internet connectivity was bumpy this would derail progress (SN6).*

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

The sudden introduction of online learning brought vibes of shock to some special education needs learners who were already struggling to cope with the normal class load where they follow the same curriculum with the able bodied learners. This is evidenced in some of the participants responses.

As participant SN 4 put it; *Among the top Academic challenges encountered during covid 19 era were communication challenges inadequate technological competency.*

a) Top most was communication barrier with the various lecturers as everything was now via Whatsapp platforms and on Moodle, I missed my quizzes, assignments which were either sent later and some lecturers could not understand my situation (SN4).

Another participant from a different institution experienced similar communication challenges.

Although the University allowed students to take classes online. However, there was a problem when I took a lecture online and my interpreter was unable to support me while he was still in town (SN 7).

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Participant SN 3 also stressed the negative impact on their performance due to the increased screen time. *It was a challenge to work on the computer full time since it strains eyesight* (SN3).

Internet based exams (Moodle) was another mammoth task and I had to battle it out that an arrangement of physically set exams was to come through to Harare centre (SN4).

Another participant SN 3 echoed similar sentiments.

“Some of the Lecturers used pictures and diagrams for their lesson demonstrations, this was a challenge for me as a person with visual impairment, I had to ask for other people to describe what was in the picture. At times they were not able to give me a clear description (SN3). Coupled with inadequate technological competency, the issue of being required to make some oral presentations on virtual platform also proved a challenge to one male participant with speech and partial visual impairment. He struggled with online group discussions and timed oral presentations on virtual platform. *“Group discussions were not easy without physical face to face interactions. In addition, timed oral presentations in the form of audios were very difficult for me* (SN1). Another Academic challenge was travelling from home to write the exams in the Trimester offices which are located in town, this was expensive as I had to ask someone to accompany me and I was the one to pay for her bus fare (SN 3).

A participant living in remote rural area also shared his experience as follows;

I encountered some academic challenges in my journey since the out-break of Covid 19 pandemic March 2020 when I had to learn from home. I live in rural area where there is no internet at all or internet is there but it is very slow to use. I needed internet to find some sources when I'm writing some assignments and term papers.

I have a visual problem, my challenge was reading soft copy notes on the computer and I used my phone. At the school Pastor Muchinguri printed some hard copies notes for me to use. I was forced to read soft copy notes on my phone because there was lock down and I do not have printing machines at home.

In other words the challenges were compounded for those living out in the rural areas. This separated some of the SEN learners from those who used to help them at school as testified by one participant. *“Although we have access to a small solar system when it is cloudy and raining day, solar power system is not working properly and the power battery is very low and I was about to start to write the examination”.* He then added, *“ Network problem was a perpetual problem that I encountered when I wanted to download the examination sent by lecturers or to sent it back when I finished writing. I lived in rural areas where network is usually slow* (SN5). In brief, it can be summed up that the internet connectivity challenges compounded the academic challenges faced by these SEN students.

LONELINESS

The social restrictions imposed as a way to control the spread of the corona virus kept most people isolated from their loved ones. One such experience is shared by participants SN 6 & SN 7.

My saddest experience was to be separated from friends and family (SN6). Then SN 7 added,

My own experience is that I stayed in the hostel room without going to class or the town when it was brought on by COVID-19 in March 2020. Fortunately, participant SN 7 adds the following comment in appreciation; although the airport in Zimbabwe had been banned, I was nevertheless entitled to travel home.

Research Question Two

How did you manage to cope with your studies during the Covid 19 Pandemic?

Coping Strategies

Although the SEN faced a lot of challenges during the pandemic all of them managed to circumvent their challenges and none of them dropped out. Each of them developed unique coping challenges. Some of these are described here.

I made sure to be extra vigilant and where possible find suitable works around as per situation. To make financial ends meet at times I would be a part time literature Evangelism, repair and sell computer accessories, and my family would support me (SN1).

Participant SN 5 said, *“I have managed to overcome some of the challenges which were caused by the Covid 19 pandemic such as;*

- On the issue of finance, my sponsor paid my fees through online banking system and sent some money via ECOCASH to buy data bundles for down loading some soft copy notes which were sent to me by lecturers.*

- Travelling to school I must be vaccinated first, at least three doses and I must have an authorized letter from the Zimbabwe Republic Police. I must put on face mask, washing my hands with sanitizers and maintaining social distance.*

- With the support of family members, relatives and school mates they act or put some effort on the upkeep of my online studying to be in good condition.*

- The completion of my school assignments and taking examinations, Pastor Z helped me a lot. Lecturers sent some assignments and examinations to Pastor Z's email and he sent to me to my phone. Pastor Z gave me the time which I must finish to write my examination. When I finished writing the examinations, I sent to him and he will sent to the lecturers for marking* (SN 5).

How I Managed to Overcome challenges and balance Upkeep and School

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It was not easy to stay afloat during the Covid 19 Pandemic. It was difficult to make ends meet, Although some business people with several sources of income were struggling it is amazing that none of these students with SEN dropped out of school. However, looking back on how it all happened participant SN 4 believes it's a miracle.

Honestly speaking up to now I even wonder how I managed to pull through. To sum it up it was a big MIRACLE, why? The whole family was at school I and my wife at Solusi, First born at Polytechnic, Second born at Prestigious High school and the other two children in their primary no scholarship of some sort for any of us. However these are some of the adjustments we made (SN 4).

a) *We had to close the business office to cut expenses and operate from home and outsource secretarial services for business needs*

b) *We had to rely with Solusi Harare centre when it comes to academic needs the advantage being of self-reliant*

c) *All idle assets with potential of being turned into cash was sold to cater for our immediate needs.*

It was not easy to overcome my financial challenges, during the Pandemic, many people lost their jobs. This also affected me as well as my Brother was also among those who lost their jobs. But through the grace of God. I managed to overcome my financial challenges by applying for a sponsorship from the Ministry of Public Service. This did help me a lot as I was now able to travel back to school and continue with my studies (SN3)

Other coping strategies pointed out include the following;

By utilising protection on my own, wearing a mask, and regularly cleansing myself, I may avoid waiting in queues with other people. I was able to submit assignments and take exams using the Moodle program since HE2 allowed students to take classes online (SN7).

With regards to assignment completion and other academic deadlines and coursework it seems instructors and students were understanding, accommodating and supportive

Research Question Three

As you reflect, what are your sad and happy moments from the Covid-19 experience and suggestions for improvement of programs for SEN students.

Positives from pandemic experience

The Covid 19 Pandemic was one of those bitter sweet experiences after which one reflects and cannot help but be thankful. As some of the participants report; there were several benefits

In response to the question; ***How did Covid 19 Pandemic affect you positively?*** The Participants shared very touching experiences reported in the following passages.

SN3 testifies that *"Somehow the Covid pandemic affected me positively as I now preferred online school than to be at the University. The reason I say so is that, as a student with visual impairment, we meet different students who are not helpful at all. If you ask for assistance from fellow students. Some are not willing to help as they see you as a burden. I once stayed with a student who used to steal my food stuff as they thought that since I am blind I may not notice that they steal from me. So the Covid in a way was of great benefit to me as I was learning online without the stressful situations of going back to face to face school"*.

It helped me to grow socially as I made friends with other Students online. Spiritually it helped me a lot since during that time we were not allowed to go to Church, at our house we would call other Brethren to come and fellowship with us. This made us to grow spiritually and also it helped us to study the Bible as a family (SN3). Indeed the pandemic helped to increase collaboration and networking among the students. *Online learning has encouraged me to collaborate and communicate more effectively with my peers through discussion boards, virtual group projects, and online forums (SN7).*

Participant SN3 also made the following interesting comment; *During the COVID-19 pandemic, I may have experienced stress, anxiety, fear, sadness and loneliness. And mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, can worsen. But through it all I developed resilience and new coping strategies.* Then participant SN7 also added; *It's not just social skills that need to be improved, but the desire and ability to experience new things was a rewarding experience. Although I also suffered during the pandemic. With so much stress, isolation, and monotony all around, many of us didn't feel motivated, but I ended up with the ability to learn new things, take chances, or have adventures (SN7).* Some of the positive effects of the Covid 19 pandemic that were realized from studying as SEN learners were like blessings in disguise, as reported by some of them. *I appreciated the flexibility of online learning, as it allows me to create their schedules and study at their own pace. Being able to attend classes from the comfort of their own homes has been a positive aspect for some students, as it eliminates the need for commuting and provides a more relaxed learning environment (SN7).* Ability to work from home allowed the SEN students to be with family for a longer time as reported by SN 2, SN3 and SN5. With the institutional support such as of organizing transport to and from school campus the academic journey of these participant was bearable. A major advantage developed during the Covid 19 Pandemic was that learning was provided in a flexible mode such as blended learning, video calls and video conferencing.

Participant SN6 testifies that *"I learnt to be responsible, manage my studies by creating my own Timetable and taking ownership my studies (SN6).* In addition, the Pandemic experience helped many to grow technologically. *Access to resources: Online platforms and digital resources have made it easier for me to access learning materials, study guides, and additional resources that can enhance my understanding of the subject matter. Further, Improved technology skills has been one of the greatest benefits. The*

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pandemic has forced me to adapt to new technologies and online platforms, which has helped them develop valuable digital skills that will be beneficial in their future careers (SN7).

Participant SN5 also said: *I benefited a lot through the associated with Covid 19 pandemic era.*

- a. Although I have a problem of reading soft copy notes on the computer. I managed to read soft copied notes over my phone.*
 - b. I was studying online and I spend most of my time with my wife and children. Before the pandemic I left my family for at least three months at home.*
 - c. Instead of paying US\$1500.00 + US\$1.00 per meal and I wanted at least three meals per day at school. I was just paying US\$750.00 tuition fee only.*
 - d. I learn how to solve some of academic challenges and finding some solutions. I also helped and encourage some of my school mates who came across the same challenge I faced.*
- 4.a.i.** *The pandemic derailed my social growth because of the lock down. The Zimbabwe Republic Police arrested people, if they found you in group of more than three people or found you without put on face mask. I created some what's app groups for example SN5 Family What's App Group etc.*
- ii. The pandemic helped my spiritual growth. As my custom, I always go to church every Sabbath with my family. When there is lock down people were not allowed to go and attended church services or to have mid-week prayers. With my family members we did church services from Sabbath school, divine service and afternoon lesson every Sabbath and mid-week prayers at my home. I did some prayer and fasting every Wednesdays and all night prayers every Saturdays with my family.*
 - iii. The pandemic helped me to grow professional, I sent some sermons, devotions and quotations from The Spirit of Prophecy on Whatsapp groups which I have created and we had virtual Camp-meetings. I also did some small group discussions and Bible study on what's app groups.*
- b.** *My happiest moment of my journey during the Covid 19 pandemic era*
- i. When I finished writing all my quizzes, assignments and examination for every semester. Because I went through a lot during my studying online.*
 - ii. When I passed my courses with flying colours. Even though I have faced some challenges but I managed to overcome them.*
 - iii. I was studying online but at the same time. I had enough time with my wife and children. Because of financial problem I was forced to go to school, leaving my family at home.*
 - iv. If my sponsor told me that she had paid all my tuition fee for each semester. It was a difficult moment for her because she had other responsibilities upon her shoulders.*

Reflections from the Covid 19 Pandemic Experience.

Several participants shared similar sentiments such as frustrations from unreliable internet connection and loneliness that resulted from the Covid-19-induced lockdowns. Some of these are summarized in the following section. Loneliness due to lack of social interaction affected most of the participants. *The absence of in-person classes and social events has led to feelings of isolation and loneliness for many students (SN7).* In addition, *"inability to meet friends, classmates for face-to-face learning, unable to visit family has been a significant source of unhappiness"* (SN6). SN5 reflected on their saddest moments as follows; *My unhappiest moment of my journey during the Covid 19 pandemic era. My phone's battery was very low, wanted to be charged but there is no electricity. The weather was cloudy, raining and solar power system is down. On that day I was supposed to write my examination and I could not able to write.*
ii. When I was about to start writing Greek II quiz and my phone freezes. I could not be able to write the quiz that day.
iii. I wrote Science of Origin mid-semester examination and I was given the time which I must sent the examination. That day network was down and I could not able to send my examination for marking. Thank God he sent another examination another day.
iv. I was supposed to write Principle of Sociology at HE1 in Harare. When I was in town I felt so sick that I could not able to walk and I phone my sister to take me to the hospital. I was tested and I was Coronavirus positive.

The good news is that Corona virus did not claim the life of participant SN 5. He survived the viral attack.

Suggestions to Educators and scholars for DISASTER PREPAREDNESS and INCLUSION?

There are several lessons learnt from the lived experiences of SEN students during the Covid 19 Pandemic. Each of them came up with suggestions and recommendations for best educational practices in the face of a crisis such as the Covid 19 Pandemic. Here are some suggestions for educators and scholars regarding disaster preparedness and inclusion.

Participant SN 7 made the following recommendation.

1. Develop comprehensive emergency response plans: *Educators should work with experts and local authorities to create detailed emergency response plans that address various types of disasters, such as natural disasters, fires, or other emergencies. These plans should include protocols for communication, evacuation, and ensuring the safety of all students, including those with special needs.*

1. Prepare for technical disruptions Online learning often comes with technical difficulties such as poor internet connections, software glitches, or hardware problems. Dealing with these issues can be frustrating and can disrupt the learning process.

It's important to recognize and address these challenges by seeking support from friends, family, or mental health professionals. Universities and educational institutions often provide resources and counselling services to help students navigate these difficulties.

Lived Experiences of Special Education Needs Students During Covid 19 - a Post Pandemic Reflection

1. Always keep improving (participant SN 5 said)

i. *They must improve and use the latest Information Communication and Technology systems for special education needs students.*

ii. *Some students lived in rural areas where there is problem of network. They wanted their scholar's assistance, to search some materials or sources on the internet.*

iii. *Some of students with visual challenge cannot able to use computers or smart phones, they wanted to be taught how to use electrical gadgets.* Another participant also made the following suggestions. *The suggestion that I will give is that every, Institution should stay prepared for any disaster that may come. They should make sure that every Student should get education e.g. if the students do not have money for DATA, they should make provision that no students has to drop out because of their financial shortages. The Institutions should also cater for Students with special needs. They should give them first preferences in everything. the Institutions should have a budget set aside for such disasters. The Educators should also identify students with special needs in, if there are there, they should be able to assist them with their academics. If the students are visual impaired, they should limit the use of pictures and diagrams in their lectures. If there are students with audio impairment, they should limit using audios so that every student is not left behind. The Scholars should be ready for any disaster which may come their way. They should not let such disasters steal their dreams away. No matter how difficult the disaster, they should learn to trust in God. For God says that He is the way, the truth and the life (SN 4).*

There is also a great need to implement strategies of inclusion as pointed out by one participant. *“Be flexible to accommodate different learners. This helps to alleviate the stress”* (SN6) usually experienced during a crisis such as the Covid -19 Pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The participants of this study (SEN students) had memorable bitter-sweet life experiences during the Covid 19 pandemic that have lessons for us all. Although there were challenges met, it seems each participant confirms that there were great benefits associated with each experience. As each of them tried to surmount the obstacles or cope with the challenges they developed resilience, acquired new skills and competencies. This post pandemic growth is the bright side of any stressful situation, as pointed out by some scholars as post traumatic growth (Thorpe, 2021). Each of them was determined to succeed and achieve their dreams, hence even though some faced financial challenges, others felt lonely and helpless they kept the ray of hope that they will be able to sail through. Though faced with daunting challenges, none of them dropped out of school. Instead they developed visions of progressing with their studies beyond just a Bachelor's degree. The recommendations they suggested helped the institutions to be proactive in being inclusive, to be disaster-prepared and as well as to upscale their technical skills. Their experience was an eye opener, that inclusive education includes universal access to public infrastructure and facilities such as public transport, public spaces and recreational facilities (Baldwin & Stafford, 2019) as well as being accommodative of each learner's socio-emotional needs. Teachers should have the necessary knowledge and instructional skills for creating and working in inclusive classrooms (Leyser & Romi, 2008).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion although the Covid 19 Pandemic had drastic impacts on the learning experiences of the special education needs students at tertiary level, most of them came out with richer and rewarding experience. Most of them learnt that they too could harness technology to their advantage. So they felt motivated to embrace technology and up-scale their technological skills and venture into unknown territories even after the Pandemic is over. Based on the stake holder theory lecturers realized that they are among the key stakeholders for implementing inclusive education. They felt motivated to be proactive in demonstrating inclusion in all aspects of education.

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