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DISTANCE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Educación a distancia durante la pandemia COVID-19: Experiencias de madres de estudiantes con Trastorno del Espectro Autista

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Abstract: The COVID-19 health crisis generated multiple educational and family changes in the homes of children with autism. This research aimed to analyze the experiences of mothers of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) regarding distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a qualitative methodology with a descriptive exploratory scope was used through a phenomenologi-

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cal design in which 17 Chilean mothers responded to a semi-structured interview. The results indicate that, for many respondents, distance education was not accepted, given that the mothers assumed the direct role of accompanying the educational processes. This resulted in an educational, emotional, and social setback, reducing mother's expectations of their children in the academic and work domains of life. In conclusion, based on the participants' perception, distance education is not considered an effective alternative for schooling students with ASD, since limited resources and the mothers' lack of pedagogical skills make it impossible to promote learning.

Key words: Chile; distance education; Autism Spectrum Disorder; mothers; pandemic.

Resumen: La crisis sanitaria acontecida en el año 2020 generó una multiplicidad de cambios a nivel educativo y familiar en los hogares de niños y niñas con autismo. El objetivo de esta investigación fue analizar las experiencias de madres de estudiantes con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) respecto a la educación a distancia durante la pandemia del COVID-19. Para ello, se utilizó una metodología cualitativa con un alcance exploratorio descriptivo fenomenológico, en la que participaron 17 madres chilenas que respondieron a una entrevista semiestructurada. Los resultados indican que la educación a distancia no fue aceptada, dado que las madres asumieron el rol directo de acompañar los procesos educativos. Esto se tradujo en un retroceso educativo, emocional y social, que redujo las expectativas académicas y laborales de sus hijos e hijas con TEA. En definitiva, la educación a distancia no es eficaz para escolarizar a dicho estudiantado, puesto que la limitación de recursos y la falta de habilidades pedagógicas de las madres imposibilitan la promoción del aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Chile; educación a distancia; Trastorno del Espectro Autista; madres; pandemia.

1. Introduction

One of the most complex health crises that humanity has experienced emerged in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly broke all the patterns and dynamics of the population worldwide, causing significant alterations in the political, social, economic, and educational settings. Being a highly contagious virus with high mortality rates (Castro, 2020), the urgent decision was made to close educational institutions to stop the spread of the outbreak, marking a significant gap in the educational processes developed until then (Bonilla-Guachamín, 2020; Quiroz, 2020). In this context, many schools adopted a distance learning modality through online platforms. Such strategies may have marginalized several students as only those with the necessary resources could access the required online resources (Garrido, 2020).

In Chile, this public health crisis accentuated existing inequalities (Gajardo-Asbún *et al.*, 2021). For instance, educational quality is strongly linked to students' quality of life, with socioeconomic adversity negatively impacting the results of standardized tests of the System for Measuring the Quality of Education (SIM-

CE) (Arriagada, 2020). Consequently, distance education during the pandemic exposed the disparity in students' living conditions. This was evident as many students had limited access to minimum technological-educational resources or had to share such resources with others (Llorens *et al.*, 2021; Simón *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, schools required families to assume an educator role to facilitate distance learning (Arias, 2021; Roitsch *et al.*, 2021); this further exposed the breaches in the Chilean educational and social systems (Quiroz, 2020). Therefore, the current study addressed the experiences regarding distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of mothers of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Distance education is challenging for students with special educational needs, particularly students with ASD. The impacts generated by the distance education modality for children with ASD were significant and are observed, for example, at the emotional level due to the inflexibility of schedules, anguish, uncertainty, and academic overload (Álvarez-Hevia and Figares Álvarez, 2020). Children with ASD also faced feelings of bewilderment and resignation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Simón *et al.*, 2021), experiencing increased aggressiveness, irritability, and dietary difficulties (Valdez *et al.*, 2021).

In Chile, to the best of our knowledge, there are no published studies regarding distance learning experiences reported by families of secondary school students diagnosed with ASD, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has focused on preschool education; for instance, a study published by Aguilar-Farias *et al.* (2021) indicates that the quality of life of families deteriorated since the pandemic restrictions harmed the development of physical activities, which increased the dependency on technological devices to perform daily actions.

This article aims to analyze the experiences of mothers of students with ASD regarding distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Chilean formal educational context. The study is decisive, given that to date, there has been no research on the subject in Chile and scarcely in Latin America (Valdez *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the following question is proposed: What were the experiences of the mothers of students with ASD regarding remote learning during the health emergency?

2. Literature review

2.1. *Effects of distance learning in the families of students with ASD in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America exacerbated the caregiving burden on mothers of children with ASD and their involvement in remote classes (Madrid *et al.*, 2021). However, Latin American countries offered scant assistance to mothers of children with ASD, predominantly confining their support to initiatives like family, parental, or childhood leave, exemplified in instances such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Cuba (Bergallo, 2021).

Recent findings from Chile indicate that 76.2 % of children with disabilities are cared for by their mothers (National Disability Service [SENADIS], 2022). This situation contributes markedly to the deterioration of maternal mental health, given the multifaceted demands encompassing physical, psychological, and economic aspects. According to Pozo Cabanillas *et al.* (2006), this challenge is further intensified for mothers of children with ASD, owing to the distinctive characteristics of the disorder. This predicament was notably accentuated during the pandemic, as the constraints of remote learning impeded the delivery of adequate pedagogical support to students with ASD. Consequently, this led to a profound disruption of their routines and the emergence of additional support needs in both familial and educational domains (Cahapay, 2022; Genova *et al.*, 2021; Ozsivadjian *et al.*, 2023).

As a result of the increased time devoted by mothers to the care of children with ASD, various studies emphasize not only the decline in the mental health of caregivers but also the manifestation of physical impairments, including bodily pain, reduced vitality, and overall health deterioration. The relationship between physical and emotional difficulties is notably evident in these instances (Restrepo *et al.*, 2023; Silvestre Paula *et al.*, 2020).

During the COVID-19 confinement in 2020, face-to-face teaching around the world was affected, as it underwent a rapid transition to distance education as a strategy to prevent the spread of the virus (Paz-Maldonado *et al.*, 2021; Van Lancker y Parolin, 2020; Viner *et al.*, 2020). However, this strategy was not beneficial for everyone; due to their condition, students with ASD may require particular assistance in their learning process (Genova *et al.*, 2021). Different studies show that families of children with ASD report high dissatisfaction with schooling during this academic stage (Adams, 2022; García *et al.*, 2022; Kouroupa *et al.*, 2022).

Distance learning limited the pedagogical support provided to students with ASD, which led to changes in their life routines and drastically affected their mental health; as such, additional family and educational support was required (Cahapay, 2022; Genova *et al.*, 2021; Ozsivadjian *et al.*, 2023). In addition, another aspect that displeased the families of students with ASD was the lack of follow-up of special education programs and the quality of the academic development experienced during the pandemic (Stankovic *et al.*, 2022; Tokatly Latzer *et al.*, 2021; Valdez *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, many health services provided to this population were suspended, negatively affecting family well-being (Pérez Liz *et al.*, 2022).

On the other hand, many teachers had limited training and access to digital skills and resources (Acuña-Gamboa *et al.*, 2023; Fernández-Río *et al.*, 2022); this restricted the support available to students with ASD and their families (Baten *et al.*, 2022). In the case of special schools, the picture was different since individualized teaching plans were built to face this problematic transition (Hurwitz *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the obstacles faced by families, some research reports positive results for students with ASD regarding distance learning using technological resources (Bozkus-Genc and Sani-Bozkurt, 2022; Meral, 2022; Simpson and Adams, 2022); this was related to several factors: higher grades, diverse opportunities for socialization and fewer distractions in the process of learning a second language (Briceño, 2022). Also, family

relationships, mutual learning between parents and children, and the professional relationships between families/caregivers and teachers were strengthened (Degli Espinosa *et al.*, 2020; Hurwitz *et al.*, 2022; Meral, 2022; Roitsch *et al.*, 2021). In turn, some students with high levels of ASD achieved significant advances in their school and personal development (Hurwitz *et al.*, 2022), which suggests that distance education could be an alternative in the future to enroll students with ASD (Cahapay, 2022; Majoko and Dudu, 2022), but more scientific evidence is still needed.

2.2. *Education of children with ASD during the COVID-19 lockdown*

For students with ASD, educational centers represent a context of learning academic, social, and life skills (Stenhoff *et al.*, 2020). During the COVID-19 confinement, the families of students with ASD played an essential role in the education of their children, facing difficulties that led them to reorganize their daily activities, despite the high levels of stress and deterioration of emotional well-being they faced as a result of the lockdown (Alhuzimi, 2021; Coelho-Medeiros *et al.*, 2022; Degli Espinosa *et al.*, 2020; Manning *et al.*, 2020). Due to this situation, they reinvented new ways of supporting their children; for example, involving them in domestic chores to prepare them for life (Cahapay, 2022; Majoko and Dudu, 2022).

In addition, to mitigate disruptive behaviors, some families took short walks or excursions to show their children that the population was confined to their homes due to restrictions (Majoko and Dudu, 2022). Similarly, families accompanied the educational process with certain conceptual, methodological, and technological limitations (Ramos García, 2023), constantly requesting help from teachers who provided audiovisual resources with guidelines on educational topics (Daulay, 2021).

3. Methods

3.1. *Design*

This research is based on a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive approach with a phenomenological design (Bisquerra, 2009). This methodological framework was used to collect, categorize, interpret, and analyze the perceptions that mothers of students with ASD have regarding distance education and family coexistence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2. *Participants*

The sample consisted of 17 mothers of students with ASD belonging to regular educational establishments in the Maule Region, Chile. Participants were selected

through a non-probabilistic strategy, using convenience sampling based on availability (Cossio-Bolaños, 2015). The criteria for selection were: 1) having a son or daughter, 12 to 17 years old, 2) that their children attended distance learning classes in regular educational centers during the pandemic (2020-2021), and 3) having a medical diagnosis of ASD given at least one year before the data collection began. Both fathers and mothers were invited to participate. However, only the latter agreed to participate voluntarily in the study. The background of the selected participants is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of participants

Participant	Age	Occupation	Academic level	Age of son/ daughter
Participant 1	44	Housewife	Higher Education	14
Participant 2	40	Manager	Higher Education	16
Participant 3	44	Accountant	Higher Education	17
Participant 4	54	Household adviser	Technical Education	17
Participant 5	41	Housewife	Highschool Education	12
Participant 6	50	Housewife	Highschool Education	17
Participant 7	43	Housewife	Higher Education	17
Participant 8	40	Social worker	Higher Education	17
Participant 9	47	Comercial executive	Higher Education	14
Participant 10	35	Housewife	Highschool Education	12
Participant 11	43	Housewife	Incomplete Highscool Education	15
Participant 12	40	Office secretary	Higher Education	12
Participant 13	39	Housewife	Higher Education	16
Participant 14	42	Saleswoman	Higher Education	17
Participant 15	39	Nurse	Technical Education	13
Participant 16	44	Teacher	Higher Education	15
Participant 17	58	Housewife	Highschool Education	17

3.3. *Ethical considerations*

Concerning the ethical aspects of the research, the rights and integrity of the participants were protected, and the voluntary nature of their collaboration and the confidentiality and privacy of the information provided were explained. Consequently, all the ethical criteria established in the Helsinki Convention regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the data, as explained in the informed consent accepted by the participants, were met (Opazo, 2011).

3.4. *Data collection techniques*

The technique used to collect information was the semi-structured interview for which a script consisting of 10 questions was developed. Two experts in the area validated the interview script: an academic specialist in qualitative methodology and another in ASD. Some examples of the questions included in the interview are: "What is your opinion regarding the online classes provided by your child's school?", "What characteristics should distance education have for a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder?", "How did your family cope with the new modality of online classes?", "What expectations do you have as a family regarding your child's educational and employment future?". At the same time, the instrument collected the sociodemographic background of the interviewees, such as kinship, age, occupation, and level of education.

3.5. *Data collection and analysis procedures*

First, informed consent was given to each participant, ensuring confidentiality in collecting and processing the data. Secondly, a pilot test of the semi-structured interview was applied to detect inconsistencies, the accuracy of instructions, and the duration of the interviews. Finally, the interviews were conducted by telephone or through the Zoom® platform and recorded for later transcription. A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the opinions and experiences of the mothers of students with ASD regarding distance classes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile.

The systematization process was carried out manually, taking into account the elements proposed by Mayring (2014):

- *Delimitations of information units*. Notes were generated from the interviews, considering the objective and the question posed in the study. These notes helped construct the content of each of the categories.
- *Information mapping*. Transcriptions were organized into digital folders. Subsequently, these documents were comprehensively read to identify similarities, disagreements, and points of interest. Additionally, significant excerpts from the opinions provided by each participant were selected.

- *Coding and highlighting*. Various codes were created related to the questions that comprise the interview script and the initially established categories. Similarly, color highlighting was used to identify critical information in each transcription.
- *Construction of categories*. Finally, a general review of the compiled transcriptions and highlighted excerpts was conducted to organize the information into the categories presented in the study results. In this regard, the titles of the initial categories underwent some modifications.

4. Findings

Four analytical categories emerged in the qualitative analysis: 1) Perspective of Chilean mothers on distance education, 2) family experiences and academic accompaniment of students with ASD, 3) Inclusive practices in distance education of students with ASD, and 4) Expectations of Chilean mothers regarding the future of their sons and daughters with ASD.

4.1. *Chilean mothers' perspective on distance education*

Regarding the modality of distance education carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chilean mothers mostly expressed negative opinions. The format in which this type of teaching was developed, the use of technological devices and new resources/platforms, the lack of teacher/student interaction, the scarce support provided in the teaching-learning processes, the adaptation to teleworking of the parents of children with ASD, and perceived discrimination received were some of the factors that influenced the negative perceptions of Chilean mothers, as evidenced in the following quotes:

> An online class is not the same as being in an actual classroom. (Participant 1).
> Face-to-face is better; they can clear up doubts in real-time. (Participant 3).
> In my son's case, no, the classes are not helpful. The classes made him anxious, and he started to cry. At first, he did not want to log in; I let him be. Then, after that, he got to an extreme and got sick, and I had to take him to the psychiatrist. (Participant 4).

However, other mothers presented favorable opinions on this educational modality in Chile. Those opinions were more focused on how comfortable their children felt with how they were taught. In some cases, confinement conditions allowed students to be more focused and motivated in their academic development. Different participants commented:

> I think they accommodated the formats and time planning during the pandemic; they used enough resources so that the children learned better at home. (Participant 8).

> They were pretty practical and good. Apart from that, my son has a lot of support at home, we always supported him with learning from home, and he was never alone in classes. (Participant 9).

Regarding the effectiveness of distance education, the mothers stated that it was not optimal since the gaps generated by this type of education fell directly on them. In turn, their lack of pedagogical training negatively influenced the preparation of their children. Despite this, there were positive opinions based mainly on the development of autonomous learning, the educational support of families, and the possibility of having suitable spaces to develop academic activities. The following quotations capture these points of view:

> The learning was ineffective because he learned nothing in the end. They ended up sending me study guides. Afterward, almost all the classes were with study guides [...]; there was no learning. (Participant 12).
>
> There was no learning. At first, he was very enthusiastic. He had at his disposition a space with a computer. But over time, [his motivation] declined; he did not get up. He took the classes on his cell phone. He just turned the phone on and fell asleep. (Participant 16).
>
> [...] In my son's case, it was effective because, logically, I, as a guardian and in the role of mother, was constantly supervising. I still had some degree of responsibility regarding the classes so the children could learn at home. (Participant 8).
>
> Yes, they were effective. He focused more when there were no external stimuli and concentrated better on the teachers' teaching. (Participant 10).

Regarding the characteristics that online education should consider when aimed at students with ASD, mothers generally mentioned some recommendations: greater support, better organization in the class schedule, courses with a smaller number of students, less extensive educational days, and more personalized attention. Consequently, the confinement evidenced limitations in the pedagogical practices carried out in the regular establishments, which caused interruptions in these students' learning. Some participants expressed:

> I think they should be treated as individuals and not placed in a classroom with the other children. They should have identified each child's qualities and characteristics and grouped them accordingly. (Participant 12).
>
> For us, online classes are more complicated; they need more personalized support [...]. I had to learn to use the platforms to supervise my son on school days. (Participant 17).

4.2. *Family experiences and academic support provided by mothers to students with ASD*

Regarding how the family faced the health crisis caused by COVID-19, the mothers participating in this research provided multiple opinions that reflected

situations of uncertainty, fear, stress, and frustration since the accompaniment of educational processes became a direct responsibility of the families of students with ASD. Likewise, some mothers had to deal with several difficulties: internet connectivity, extensive workloads, and the absence of spaces for their children to receive their classes daily, damaging the family dynamics. Some mothers commented:

> [...] It was kind of stressful because, besides being parents and taking care of our son, together with my husband, we assumed the role of teacher. He supported me with language and writing classes. (Participant 5).
>
> The truth is that we spent a lot of time locked up. We had to have, well, I had to receive psychological attention because I was terribly afraid to go out, but it favored us to be in the house. (Participant 8).

On the other hand, as a consequence of remote working, some mothers managed to support their sons and daughters constantly. They also acquired better technological resources to facilitate learning, as evidenced in the following quotations:

> For them, the class schedule was sacred; they had to dress and get up early. Once the classes were finished, they took off their uniform. They did not lose the dynamics of face-to-face education. (Participant 9).
>
> I acted every morning as if they were going to classes. I sat with him at his bedroom desk. The classes would start, and I watched him constantly and supervised the activities. We had to take money out of pocket because it was necessary to invest in technology. We also had to pay for a decent internet plan so they did not have difficulties. (Participant 13).

When considering the dynamic between family relationships and confinement, most mothers of students with ASD confirmed that physical and communicative distance, mobilization problems, and family discussions were manifested through disruptive behaviors such as anxiety and stress. At the same time, there was a reduction in mental attention for mothers and students with ASD, a situation that increased the crisis within the home. Different participants commented:

> Being always together generated stress and some cohabitation problems because we needed to get out to clear our minds. It was not the same even though we had our physical space. (Participant 9).
>
> We observed stress and exhaustion due to the confinement. I know my son does not like to go out very much, but he needed a bit of fresh air. It took a toll on all of us; we did not have mental health. (Participant 10).

On the contrary, a minority of mothers argue that the confinement was beneficial to refocus their work life and cultivate family moments that allowed them to know their children's condition in greater detail and accompany the teaching-learning processes. Participants exposed that:

> For us, it was satisfying [...]; it served us to share more as a family, get to know each other, and get to know our son more, to be more united. With the pandemic and the confinement, we had lunch, played, and got to know us better as a family. For my son, he got to know us better. He matured, grew a lot, and surprised us. (Participant 5).
>
> The four of us felt more united as a family. It was a union. We supported each other, and the children learned to cook. We took things from the friendliest side possible to avoid arguments. (Participant 16).

4.3. *Inclusive practices in distance education for students with ASD: insights from mothers' experiences*

Most of the mothers in this study stated that schools did not implement inclusive school practices for students with ASD. In this regard, they believe that schools decided to reduce the academic demands because they did not have the necessary tools to face the health crisis. Some participants argued:

> No, because the school is not fully prepared for children with different abilities or conditions because they do not give it, well obviously, the SIP [School Integration Programme] has enough educational psychologists, but not even the Inspector was very clear about topics of ASD. (Participant 4).
>
> There were no inclusive practices with her in the online classes. She was treated as another student. We had zero support, zero everything. At school, there was no conversation, no attention given, nothing. (Participant 14).
>
> There were no inclusive practices. In online classes, everything was lost. The differential educator did not work with him anymore. The psychologist was nowhere to be found. Having children with the [ASD] diagnosis, we felt in no-man's land. There was no follow-up, no one worried, nothing like that. (Participant 16).

On the contrary, a few participants commented that their schools carried out inclusive practices to facilitate learning, such as constant feedback, the implementation of curricular adjustments, the attention of teachers in academic spaces, the delivery of adapted materials, and teacher accompaniment to achieve better learning.

> [...] In the school where my son is, they always showed awareness. They have a very small enrollment [...]. The language teacher always asked my son, "Did you understand?", "Are you sure?", "If you want, I will explain things again?". (Participant 2).
>
> Yes, I had a lot of support from the teachers from the SIP, with some teachers in particular. He finished middle school in the best way possible. The SIP teacher accompanied him twice a week. They showed concern. There were meetings to report on my son's progress. (Participant 17).

With regard to good practices implemented by schools in the context of distance learning, almost all the mothers identified the following: prioritization of content in the different subjects, support in providing technological devices to students

with limited economic resources, using videoconferences, the use of new forms of teaching, adjusting the rhythm of the courseload, providing printed materials, showing respect for privacy by not forcing the camera to be switched on during videoconferences, using different platforms to organize upcoming tasks, openness to dialogue between students and teachers, ease of carrying out the assigned activities and improvement of communication between mothers and the staff. These quotes substantiate the previous statements:

> [...] they are very aware of people who can not connect, which is not our experience or case, but they loan equipment to those with no resources or people who live far away. Sometimes, some children do not have internet, so they call and send classes by WhatsApp. And sometimes, they are all reinforced by the tutor. (Participant 2)
>
> For example, 40-minute classes, interactive screen classes through TEAMS, and group work. (Participant 9).

On the other hand, different participants stated that schools did not make correct decisions that benefited their children's learning during confinement. They attributed this to the scarce pedagogical support and the lack of diverse actions to generate inclusion, which demotivated students.

> In that context, we had to guide our daughter in classes. We studied with her; we always made decisions with her [...]. (Participant 14).
>
> Then he lost the desire and did not connect [to the classes]. In fact, he told me he did not mind failing the course. (Participant 16).

4.4. *Expectations of Chilean mothers regarding the future of their children with ASD*

In general terms, mothers of children with ASD were optimistic that their children could access university or technical education or achieve what they set out to do. According to participants, family accompaniment is vital so students with ASD can become self-confident and share their competencies with society. These concerns are evident in the following quotes:

> [...] We want him to continue studying; he has all the available possibilities. We think he will be motivated to continue studying at the university. (Participant 3).
>
> [...] We have tried to insert him into society. In the end, some traits do not change. We tell them that most people do not think the same way. He has to open his mind. We have always told him that he has to study. We know that he is intelligent; if there is something he likes or is passionate about, he can achieve it rapidly. (Participant 7).
>
> We hope that she can live on her own. As a mother, my expectations reside in her studies. (Participant 14).

However, several of the participants expressed their concern about the educational future of their children. The health emergency produced discouragement, given

that there was an evident setback in socialization processes in face-to-face teaching. The confinement generated uncertainty, and this directly affected the students with ASD along with their families as a result of not knowing the time it would take to return to normality. The following quotes present such opinions:

> [...] I hope he develops normally in terms of learning, but virtual classes are not for him or anyone else. It affected him a lot. I expect my son to be calm and perform what he can. (Participant 4).
>
> [...] He lost confidence in the other school, and he lost confidence in himself, and even I lost confidence in my family. (Participant 6).
>
> [...] Even though he has good grades and everything, it is very hard for him. But sometimes people do not understand. Although there is inclusion, it does not really show. I have heard many people do not give them work because they do not believe in their capabilities. I am really scared of discrimination. (Participant 10).

Related to job expectations in general, mothers indicated that they visualize an uncertain future for their children with ASD since disruptive behaviors, lack of socialization, and insufficient progress in the development of skills would limit, according to them, the ability to perform in this area. In addition, with the quarantine during COVID-19, the possibility to share and socialize with others was scarce.

I prefer not to think that because I do not expect him to go to work. (Participant 6).

[...] He does not share much with people or express himself much, either. (Participant 11).

Finally, several participants reported that their children had previous successful work experiences. This gives them confidence regarding their children' future, despite society not being knowledgeable on ASD-related topics. Such social unawareness is considered an obstacle for ASD children soon to become adults, as indicated in the following interview fragments:

> In the work context, he has already worked in a food truck. He likes it very much. (Participant 9).
>
> I could not tell you that he will immediately land a job, but we will help him fulfill his dream of traveling, meeting, and acquiring experiences outside the country. (Participant 13)
>
> He got a job this year. He has done very well. He works every Saturday in a 360-camera event company. (Participant 16).

5. Discussion

Considering the findings of this study, the discussions aim to analyze the experiences of mothers of students with ASD regarding distance classes during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Chilean regular education system from the analytical categories addressed.

Regarding the perspective on distance education, most participants were dissatisfied with this teaching modality for reasons related to the format, the use of new devices and applications, the scarce interaction, and the amount of work assigned. In addition, the participants constantly objected to the frequency and quality of teacher accompaniment during the confinement period, with mothers having to assume direct responsibility for the educational process, in several cases, without having pedagogical skills to guide their children with ASD in resolving assignments.

The need for continuous support led them to contemplate a shift in the dynamics of educational practices within institutions, recognizing the necessity to cater to the diverse student body. This, in turn, prompted communities to reassess the approach to virtual education concerning the individual needs of students with ASD. While this adjustment became evident during the pandemic, it paved the way for adapting teaching and learning methodologies. Looking ahead, there is potential for the development of more flexible and inclusive educational systems that align with the diverse characteristics of the student population (Muñoz, 2021). Different studies show similar findings (Acuña-Gamboa *et al.,* 2023; Efstratopoulou *et al*., 2021; Guller *et al*., 2021; Wong *et al*., 2021); distance learning was implemented as an immediate adjustment to respond to the restrictive confinement measures, it did not take into account the socioeconomic conditions of the population. This is particularly relevant in Chile, as it is considered one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (Silva-Peña, 2017).

Another relevant finding relates to family experiences regarding the accompaniment of students with ASD in distance education processes. In this sense, respondents reported adverse situations, including fear, stress, and frustration, which resulted from the health crisis affecting their family dynamic. The economic and work conditions, physical distance, and movement restrictions added stressors to the already complex situation. This finding is coherent with international studies that suggest the mental health of mothers was negatively affected during the COVID-19 pandemic (Althiabi, 2021; Cárdenas-Ramos and Chalarca-Carmona, 2022; Daulay, 2021; Sui-Qing *et al*., 2020; Yılmaz *et al.,* 2021).

According to the participants, inclusive practices during distance education were nearly non-existent since the health emergency forced schools to reduce available academic activities. However, respondents identified good practices implemented by schools; these include prioritizing selected content, using new teaching methodologies, providing technological resources, and strengthening communication between mothers and school staff. Schools with previous experience in the care of students with ASD were able to solve this complex scenario with fewer problems (Hurwitz *et al*., 2022).

Additionally, mothers' expectations regarding their children's educational future were lowered due to the uncertainty of the sanitary measures established in Chile. Several studies show that before the pandemic, this negative outlook was on the rise (Toledo Manríquez and Basulto Gallegos, 2020; Villegas Otárola *et al*., 2014). Similarly, poor socialization, limited development of life skills, and disruptive behaviors are perceived as factors that hinder people with ASD from entering the labor market. Such a situation makes mothers feel uncertain about their children's future regarding work-related domains of life. In Latin America, despite the existence of an extensive regulatory

framework to facilitate the labor insertion of people with disabilities, unemployment, poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities continue to prevail and affect their quality of life (Caldera-González *et al*., 2021; Paz-Maldonado and Silva-Peña, 2020).

Despite the relevance of our findings, this study has limitations to be considered. For instance, although both fathers and mothers were invited to participate in the study, only the latter volunteered to be interviewed. This tendency is also present in previous studies, where mothers are habitually the primary parent participating in ASD research (Grebe *et al*., 2022), as historically, they have assumed the role of caring for their children with ASD. Such disparity can hinder active involvement and decision-making in their children's education. Moreover, it suggests a need for tailored programs and services that address the specific support needs of fathers in the context of online distance education, including emotional support, information, and coping strategies related to online learning. Previous studies in Chile suggest that parental involvement strongly predicts students' academic achievement (Lara and Saracostti, 2019).

To date, in the Chilean context, this is the only study conducted on the topic. Therefore, this research is a fundamental input for decision-making and future studies. More work is still needed to better understand the experiences regarding distance learning, as reported by the families of children with ASD. To achieve this, future studies could focus on the opinions of various social actors (including fathers and teachers), the quality of life of mothers, work-family burdens, the link between schools and family, family support programs, the socioemotional strain on mothers as a consequence of caring for children with ASD, the socioeconomic situation of families, maternal workforce abandonment, and the role of families in supporting children with ASD and the training teachers receive on how to serve students with educational needs in the context of distance learning through the use of technological devices. The above advocates for the approval of public policies that address these needs while shedding light on a complex national reality. This may also be a reality other mothers face, specifically in developing countries where the context becomes challenging.

The implications of this study extend far beyond the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on persistent challenges faced by mothers of students diagnosed with ASD. The research unveils the significant impact of distance education on these families, as mothers assumed a direct role in accompanying educational processes, resulting in educational, emotional, and social setbacks. Beyond the pandemic, the study underscores broader issues concerning the effectiveness of distance education for students with ASD. It emphasizes the limited resources and the mothers' perceived lack of pedagogical skills as barriers that make it challenging to facilitate meaningful learning experiences. Consequently, the study's insights advocate for ongoing attention to the unique needs of this population, calling for a nuanced approach in educational policies and practices to ensure equitable and effective learning opportunities for students with ASD in the post-pandemic era.

In conclusion, distance education is perceived as an incomplete strategy that may not constitute the best means for regular education establishments to develop the training processes of students with ASD in Chile. Mothers' lack of resources and

pedagogical skills makes it difficult to effectively support their children's learning; these circumstances may negatively impact educational quality.

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