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Keeping students close or afar? Whom, how and what for

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic posed great risks to some disabled students, not necessarily because of health-related conditions, but due to the pre-existing entrenched inequalities that might have led to widened disparities. Hence, our aim was to critically explore the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for disabled students, focusing on equal access to quality education. Data were gathered with semi-structured interviews with seven disabled students and eighteen parents of disabled students from Cyprus. Based on the participants' narratives, it was found that during the school closure non-disabled students who were considered as eligible to learn were usually kept close; in contrast, some disabled students, who were considered as not eligible for equal opportunities in quality education, were eventually kept afar. Thus, the induced fear of the pandemic facilitated the legitimisation of exclusion, by rationalising isolation, on the basis of the 'best interest' of the assumed as impotent and sick children. Hence, in some cases, obligatory distance resulted to the perpetuation of the dominant power relations and the prevailing social hierarchy, in which less qualified disabled people are usually placed at the lowest level, often with limited chance to climb up compared to their non-disabled peers.

Introduction

According to Bourdieu (1984), social action takes place in a field, which represents the dominating system of power relations. Social positions in the field are not randomly allocated; in contrast their availability depends on constraints and rules imposed by the most powerful. Thus, in a society that is based on the dominance of the powerful (Giroux, 2011), less privileged groups, such as disabled people, are usually marginalised and pushed down at the lowest level of social hierarchy (Oliver, 1990) and are being excluded just because they are perceived to be different (Georgiadou et al., 2021). Drawing on disability and postcolonial theory Damianidou and Georgiadou (2021:2) argue that 'the postcolonial, masculine workplace, and social life tend to be organized based on a universal (able and thereby worthy) body, thus emphasising and promoting a disembodiment between body and mind', which highlights the significance of unveiling the social relational aspects of ableism, embodiment, and disability within organisational contexts.

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Within this framework, the focus on entrepreneurship, productivity and individualism has fostered competitive schools that emphasise the creation of impeccable workers, who, according to Giroux (2011), are valued only if they can relentlessly contribute to the knowledge economy and increase materialistic prosperity. In fact, a significant body of postcolonial feminist research highpoints how the (re)production of masculinity is realised through establishing cultures and approaches of regulating able bodies, thus confirming that ability lies at the core of postcolonial mastership (Sang, Richards & Marks, 2016). As a result, schooling often becomes part of the market mechanism and the means to enhance productivity and capital accumulation, in favour of the power holders, through the exclusion of students considered as less able to become competitive (Apple, 2000), such as disabled students (Ware, 2002).

The displacement of disabled students is more than evident in the era of the pandemic of fear, when inequalities, social exclusion and the dominance of the powerful were imperceptibly legitimised based on the alibi of the panacea of social distancing (United Nations, 2020). As Georgiadou et al. (2021) remark, this pandemic has indicated that bodies matter, and all too often, has been shown that the exclusive ways in which individuals study, work, and provide care should not remain invisible. Thus, after school closure because of COVID-19, the students that were eventually kept close were the ones with unrestricted access to remote learning, better knowledge of technology and less in need of teacher support, who, according to Giroux (2011), are the students predestined to take a high position in social hierarchy and become protagonists in the neoliberal market. In contrast, less privileged students, such as disabled students, were often pushed down to the lowest level of social hierarchy, as not 'fitting' the powerful ideal that is usually considered more eligible for access to quality learning (Ware, 2002).

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic posed great risks to some disabled students, not necessarily because of health-related conditions, but due to pre-existing entrenched inequalities that led to widened disparities, shortcomings in the provision of educational support and practices of discrimination and exclusion (Twardzik et al., 2021). At the same time, the disablist attitudes that undergird exclusion were enhanced and facilitated by the general fear of people worldwide, who supported closure, despite the tremendous cost for less advantaged people that were unexpectedly put at high risk, in terms of opportunities and well-being (Georgiadou & Antonacopoulou, 2021).

Context

The context of this research is Cyprus in the time of COVID-19, i.e. from March 2020 onwards. During the pandemic, Cyprus, like other European Union member countries, imposed restrictions on free movement and hastily closed the schools. Thus, hundreds of children had to switch to online lessons, regardless their access or their ability to attend lessons that might have not been tailored to their needs (United Nations, 2020). In addition, barriers to equal opportunities in quality education were raised for some disabled students because of the general educational unpreparedness for online teaching (World Bank Group, 2020), and the prevalent stereotypes about disability, which in Cyprus, is usually interpreted as illness and impotence, due to the dominance of the medical and charity model (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2018).

Research aim and questions

Based on the above, the aim of this study was to critically explore the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for disabled students, focusing on issues of equal access to quality education. Hence, this study tried to answer the following research questions: a) Who was kept close and who was kept afar during the school closure according to disabled students and their parents? b) How induced fear became the path towards the legitimisation of exclusion of disabled students? c) What were students distanced for according to disabled students and their parents?

Materials and methods

To address our research questions, we employed a qualitative methodology with the aim to gain in-depth accounts from key informants and develop grounded theory. The research was guided by the feminist approach, which emphasises the dualistic nature of the world (Rose, 1993). We focused on two dualistic counterparts, i.e., non-disabled/ disabled student and eligible/not eligible to learn, trying to inform scientific explanations that might help us understand and transgress the above intersecting bifurcations. The participants were interviewed alone at their homes, in a quiet room of their choice, after giving their informed consent. Each interview lasted between one to two hours and was tape-recorded. The interview guide was driven by Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical framework central to which is the concept of habitus; a system of dispositions that steers individuals' perceptions and interpretations. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social position is relational, since it implies that individuals' social position is determined by their relationship to the position of others in that social space (Georgiadou et al., 2021). In light of this, the research instrument included questions regarding the participants' experiences related to social positioning during school closure and online lessons.

Thus, our participants discussed with us how the education system responded to the pandemic; how they understood the process and the factors that defined equal opportunities in learning; what place they had and what identity they attributed to themselves or their disabled children in the above learning process; how they experienced the efficiency of the effort to keep students close and whether some students were actually kept afar; and what were the implications of school closure on managing to stay 'close' to non-disabled students. Data were analysed with data-driven thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step coding process. In this sense, data were coded without trying to fit the process into a pre-existing coding frame. In addition, since data were not coded in an epistemological vacuum, likely influence of the authors' ideological assumptions has to be acknowledged.

Sample

To select our sample, we employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Since one of us is currently employed as a teacher, she contacted her disabled students and their parents and asked them to participate in the research. She also asked some of her colleagues to find similar eligible participants for her. The final sample comprised 7 disabled students and 18 parents of disabled students from Cyprus, with

different backgrounds and socio-economic status, so as to recruit a diverse group of participants that could offer different insights regarding social positioning. The participants' profiles are presented with pseudonyms in Table 1.

Results

Critique on the response of the education system to the pandemic

The participants agreed that even before the pandemic, some formidable challenges were evident regarding the education of disabled children, which were exacerbated during the obligatory school closure. Thus, the disruption of education and the transition to online distance learning resulted to missing the stimulating and enriching educational environment of traditional in-person classroom instruction, as well as the opportunities for social interactions with their non-disabled peers and teachers.

> The child found it difficult to adapt to this new situation. He did not want to do anything; he was beating me and wanted to be left alone. (Eleni, mother)

> Initially, I realized that in, distance learning, contact with the teacher is different compared with being in the classroom. Especially for students with learning difficulties, like my son, I think that it's more difficult to attend and concentrate on a virtual lesson. (Georgia, mother)

Table 1. ~TC~.

Pseudonym	Gender	Disability	Age	Father—Mother's job	Economic status
STUDENTS					
Antonis	M	Learning disability—Dyslexia	17	Private employee—Secretary	Average
Ioanna	F	Learning disability—Dyslexia	17	Doctors	Very good
Leonidas	M	Learning disability—Dyslexia, ADHD	11	Army—Private employee	Average
Menelaos	M	Learning disability—Dyslexia	17	Private employees	Average
Stelios	M	Intellectual disability	15	Private employee	Bad
Filippos	M	ASD	7	Constructions—Unemployed	Bad
Christina	F	ADHD	6	Employees in public sector	Very good
PARENTS					
Maria	F	Down syndrome	7	Domestics	Bad
Eleni	F	Intellectual disability	9	Private employee	Bad
Georgia	F	Learning disability—Dyslexia	16	Kindergarten teacher	Average
Elpiniki	F	Learning disability—Dyslexia	15	Secretary	Average
Areti	F	Intellectual disability—ASD	11	Domestics	Bad
Spyros	M	ADHD	13	Private employee	Bad
Anna	F	ASD	8	Secretary	Average
Giorgos	M	ASD	6	Health professional	Average
Ntina	F	ADHD	9	Music teacher	Average
Rena	F	ADHD, ASD	7	Unemployed	Bad
Kleopatra	F	Learning disability—Dyslexia	8	Lawyer	Very good
Andreas	M	Learning disability—Dyslexia	12	Car engineer	Average
Onisiforos	M	Learning disability—Dyslexia, ADHD	11	Army	Average
Panagiota	F	Hearing impairment	12	Unemployed	Bad
Vasiliki	F	Hearing impairment	12	Private employee	Average
Petros	M	Hearing impairment	11	Restaurant employee	Average
Katina	F	Learning disability—Dyslexia, ADHD	10	Domestics	Bad
Memna	F	Learning disability—Dyslexia	10	Domestics	Average

Moreover, the existing vulnerabilities and the long-standing structural weaknesses of the education system, which was based on traditional methods of teaching and a bureaucratic school function, became obvious, when online platforms did not work for some children and access to learning was violently disrupted for some disabled students.

> [His needs] have not been met. My child was having a hard time anyway. There was no differentiation, although I saw the poor teacher trying a bit, but they themselves were also caught in surprise, so this situation found us all somewhat unprepared. (Spyros, father)

> There were also challenges with technology; the connection was really bad, or the teacher's voice was lost, or the image disappeared, and I had to run and fix the situation. (Ntina, mother)

> This was a difficult process. Also, the communication with the teacher was not effective, because the connection was constantly broken and since my son has a cochlea implant it was very difficult to hear his teacher. (Vasiliki, mother)

In addition, lack of information technology infrastructure for some schools and many disabled children resulted to the exclusion of the ones that could not afford buying the essential equipment. As a result, although there were students that had undisrupted learning opportunities, some disabled students from less advantaged schools and families were excluded not only from leaning but also from participation to social interactions that occurred during the online lessons.

> An additional facility provided by the school was the access we had to technology. As soon as schools closed, we were put on the distance learning program, which started without any particular problems. However, I know many children who had difficulty attending classes online and teachers that were unfamiliar with the use of technology. (Antonis, disabled student)

> [His needs] have not been met at all; we do not have a computer at home and although I asked to be given a tablet from school nothing has been done. (Katina, mother)

Disabled students were also deprived of access to support services and routines that were essential for their psychological well-being and their personal development.

> Children's needs are coming second . . . The children were upset because their routines were drastically changed. Routine is very important for them. (Anna, mother)

> My child lost interest in learning; he was upset because occupational therapy, speech therapy, physiotherapy and special education courses stopped, which led to my child regressing and having constant outbursts. (Giorgos, father)

> I had not been learning that much because at school more explanations are available, and I also have lessons with a special-needs teacher who helps me a lot. We could not do everything online so important lessons for me such as art and gymnastics were left behind. (Leonidas, disabled boy)

> I think my child's needs have not been met. It is very difficult, the whole system is fragile, one cannot check whether the child has understood the lesson or not. They need more help; they are entitled to special support, but no one has been appointed to help them. (Petros, father)

The learning process during the pandemic

The participants explained that learning during the pandemic was a multifaceted and unprecedented process, with some participants reporting positive experiences and others describing the opposite. Thus, for some of the participants, who had access to the internet and were tech-savvy, online education was an enriching experience, which enhanced learning, given that their teachers were also familiar with technology.

> When we were in the classroom, I had to write, take notes and had I forgotten to make a note about something, then later I could not recall what was it, and that was more difficult. With distance learning, there is a recording that I could go back to and see it again. So, I had the opportunity to listen to it again, and make up for what I lost. (Antonis, disabled boy)

In contrast, for other disabled students, learning was a struggle, which was never won.

> It is more difficult than it was in the classroom, because teachers do not have direct contact with you to bring you back if they see that your attention is lost. I believe in the classroom it is much more direct and helpful. I get quite often distracted at school, and the teacher always brought me back, so I could get back on track. Now, it feels a bit more impersonal, so I think this is the most important problem. Reading, that [for me] is a standard problem. In general, if you are not able to read fluently, the online classes cause you even more stress. (Ioanna, disabled girl)

> We did not know much about computers, and no one had shown us nor prepared us in advance. The cameras were off at first and that was difficult for my deaf child. Our interpreter could not see us from the screen because we were not allowed to open the camera and she did not have access to the software either. We had to put our interpreter on speaker [via the phone] to listen to the teacher and at the same time interpret what she was saying in sign language. When the cameras were turned on, the teacher's screen was small, and we could not see her clearly and many times we did not understand what she was saying because the connection was interrupted. (Panagiota, mother)

A crucial factor for the achievement of learning was teaching and teachers. Thus, some teachers were creative, innovative, and adaptive, and supported disabled children during the online learning process. Hence, it was highlighted that teachers may have a crucial role in keeping students close by providing equal opportunities to quality learning to all students, regardless of diversity, and supporting them to get familiar with online lessons.

> What has facilitated my child's learning was the teacher's willingness to help him learn and to show him how to learn through the computer. The teacher was quite expert and knew what she was doing. Her material was always easy to use even for us who did not really know how to help. (Eleni, mother)

On the other hand, some teachers did not try to accommodate the needs of disabled children and excluded them from the learning process by following teaching strategies that were not appropriate or effective for disabled children.

> Another difficulty for the child was that the teachers did not adjust their lesson to help him. There was no adjustment for my son, who could not answer the questions, as he could not understand them. Had he had been given access to the material in a different way he would have been able to participate in the lesson; now he just could not. (Georgia, mother)

> Distance learning was a difficult thing because my child needs to have personal contact with the teacher. After a while, synchronous teaching stopped, and the teacher just sent the lessons via email. (Areti, mother)

> The school showed no interest regarding the children's education; the only material they sent home was videotaped fairy tales. (Giorgos, father)

Barriers to learning were also imposed by some teachers' inexperience and ignorance of information technology, as well as lack of control during the online lessons, which resulted in low quality and fragmented education.

> An equally important factor that I believe made it difficult for my child with a learning disability to be educated, is the lack of experience on behalf of the teachers. Teachers had no idea how to use the technology and in fact, students were making fun of them. I realized that there was no control and teachers were completely inexperienced and ignorant to say the least, so they could not handle the situation and the time passed, without ever actually conducting a lesson. (Georgia, mother)

> The other problem is that the teacher did not know how to use the platform, he probably did not have any relevant training. (Petros, father)

(Un)Equal opportunities in learning

Equal access to learning opportunities was not achieved for many of the participants mainly because the content was delivered in forms that were not understandable nor appropriate for them.

> My daughter struggled more than her classmates because when a child has learning difficulties, it is good to follow specific teaching techniques. For example, to break the lesson into smaller sections, to be given explanations and examples. (Elpiniki, mother)

In addition, barriers to equal opportunities in quality learning included adverse living conditions, which rendered efforts to pay attention to the teacher overwhelming. Thus, some students from low socioeconomic background did not have privacy nor enough computers at the house for online work simultaneously.

> We were all forced to stay into the house, so there was no peace at all. Generally, there was noise, the baby was crying while my other son was attending online classes and hence there was no way that he could attend the lessons effectively and concentrate adequately. (Georgia, mother)

> Financially, it was very difficult to cope with all this because I have two other babies and we had a problem with having enough computers. (Spyros, father)

> There was only one tablet device at home and his brother also had to attend his lesson online and many times there was a time conflict and one of them would inevitably miss his class in order that the other could attend his class. (Memna, mother)

Moreover, the parents' low education level was a crucial barrier to learning during school closure, since they could not help their disabled children understand the lesson or accomplish their homework. Ironically, children would have external support to keep up with their peers if they were at their schools, which was not considered essential during the lockdown, despite the demand for new skills that were essential for attending online lessons.

> Educating my child from home was quite difficult, as we could not afford hiring a private special tutor. I tried as hard as I could to help but I think I did not help my child as much as I should because I have not a clue on how to teach. (Maria, mother)

On the other hand, for some participants with a better socioeconomic status, things seemed easier; thus, some disabled students had already had good digital skills, undisrupted access to hardware and connectivity, and parents that had the money and the knowledge to assist them to stay 'close' to their non-disabled peers.

> The teacher always sent the teaching material beforehand in a message, so we knew what the children would be taught in the next lesson. That gave the parents the opportunity to study beforehand with their children and facilitate their learning (Kleopatra, mother)

> My son's acquaintance with technologicy and the available technology at home (printer, computer, fax, etc.), helped in distance learning. (Onisiforos, father)

The placement of students in the learning process

Disabled students with poor digital skills, limited access to hardware and connectivity, less educated parents and worse economic status, were placed at the margins of the learning process, where they received fragmented education and unequal learning opportunities.

> There wasn't any educational software that would have allowed my child to visualise the lesson and hence better understand what he was going to learn. When there were a lot of children in the session with the teacher, he did not have the attention he needed from her. Also, there was no experiential learning for my child to better absorb the information. There were several shortcomings in the virtual classroom. (Maria, mother)

Despite the unequal treatment of their children, some participants admitted that they remained passive and accepted their marginalisation and placement in an inferior position. Ironically, marginalisation and exclusion of some disabled students remained unnoticed, since the world had focused mainly on numbers in terms of deaths and new cases. Hence, the existing inequalities were worsened during the closure, while the prevalent fear legitimised the exclusion of disabled students with limited skills and access to remote learning.

> I know that there were children that had much more severe disabilities than my child; and their parents protested for discrimination; yet no one from school paid attention and hence nothing changed. In this context, how could I have asked for help, when I know that more serious problems compared to ours were never addressed? Such a pity. (Areti, mother)

Development of self-identity

Being already stigmatised and marginalised, some disabled students developed an identity of failure and impotence to bridge the widening gap that was created by the unequal access to quality education.

> You generally have negative emotions, and this leads you to want to give up and not to engage with classes anymore. And that is due to the difficulty of managing the class demands, which cannot be solved due to the lack of immediacy. (Ioanna, disabled girl)

> Okay I can confidently say that the teacher did not consider that there were children with learning difficulties in the online class and this indifference did not help them at all. My child did not have an active role in learning, she was just a passive receiver, so she did not learn. (Andreas, father)

Keeping some students close and others afar

Based on the participants' experiences, it seems that, although some students were kept close during school closure, others were kept afar, simply because they were ignored, with negative implications on their motivation.

> The school did not inform me about the online lessons. Nothing. My child had zero education. Nobody cared to teach her. (Rena, mother)

> He did not have the motivation to want to learn. He could not be taught with those teaching methods and learning material. (Eleni, mother)

> I think my child's needs are hardly met at all. He did not even want to do his homework. He used to tell me "I will not do my homework, because none of my classmates is bothered; why should I bother". (Memna, mother)

Yet, disabled students would have been kept closer if teachers had changed their instruction and rendered it appropriate for disabled children.

> It could have been more effective had the lesson and material been adjusted to the student's learning difficulties by the teacher. Had they used the right technology with programs that would have helped my child learn effectively. (Maria, mother)

> What I have noticed however is that, although every child has the right to ask for adjustments regarding teaching and it's the parent's right to ask for it, not to say demand, the teacher does not do anything because they consider it as extra effort. (Areti, mother)

The implications of school closure on managing to stay 'close'

The learning loss during the pandemic, because of school closure, had serious implications on the efforts of some disabled children to stay 'close' to their non-disabled peers. Thus, some disabled children were excluded and most probably deprived the opportunity for acquiring the essential proficiency to participate effectively and equally to society and work.

> Now with online classes it is more difficult, as you easily feel that you are excluded, and you are disappointed. (Ioanna, disabled girl)

> I think lessons are incomplete; sometimes the connection is lost and hence you end up missing half of the lesson. Also, there is no collaboration, nor we work in groups that make the lesson more interesting. (Menelaos, disabled boy)

> During online schooling, the screen often freezes, and I cannot hear the teacher at all. This irritates me a lot. I get lost and find it difficult to catch up. (Christina, disabled girl)

Hence, it may be assumed that for some disabled children that most likely did not serve the interests of the neoliberal market, the gap became so huge that may be too difficult to transcend even after the end of the pandemic.

It was as if he never went to school that year. He forgot what he had previously learned. (Areti, mother)

We don't have a computer and so I could not attend class every day but rather only when Mrs. E. lent us her own. I would like to have my own computer like other kids. I'm afraid that when we return back to school, the other children will know more things than I do. I cannot attend class every day. One day I can, on another I can not attend. And when I can, other kids have already moved on and the teacher asks things I don't know about and I feel bad and I don't raise my hand. (Filippos, disabled boy)

Ironically, for some participants having education of less quality appeared as something good, raising questions regarding how and why some people get eventually used to inequality.

He didn't acquire many skills but had a good time in class. (Eleni, mother)

It was fun because I could see my classmates, but without actually taking a class. (Stelios, disabled boy)

Discussion

The closure of school buildings due to COVID-19 resulted to hardship for some disabled students and their families (Twardzik et al., 2021). Thus, as found in this research, students who had unrestricted access to remote learning, digital skills, adequate financial resources at home and educated parents, i.e., middle and higher-class students, were kept close; on the other hand, disabled students with limited access to hardware and online communication, less educated parents and poor families, i.e., low-class disabled students, were eventually left afar. Hence, it may be assumed that the latter were not considered as eligible to learn like the former, probably because of not fitting the ideal of the new 'homo digitus'.

The above phenomenon may be explained by the prevalence of the medical model of disability, according to which disability is a personal 'problem' of disabled people, resulting from physical impairment; for this reason, disabled people are supposed to focus on 'correcting' the disability by asking for medical help, aiming to reach the prevalent normality (Oliver, 1990). Within this dualistic framework of ability, education systems that view disability as illness focus on providing medical help to disabled children instead of proceeding to the essential arrangements that may facilitate access to equal opportunities in learning (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2018).

The intersection of disability with socioeconomic status renders inequalities and exclusion even more likely, because of the associated lack of resources and limited access to learning opportunities and quality teaching (Traustadóttir & Rice, 2012). As explained by Bourdieu's (1984) theory, such constraints are imposed by the able/masculine/powerful, aiming to push the less privileged classes down at the lowest level of social hierarchy. Drawing upon the notion of social capital, we therefore recognise that the latter defines the individuals', school's but also society's approach towards the informal and formal forces, which are working towards or against the value of inclusion in specific -including schools- contexts.

Hence, what seemed important in the time of the pandemic was to 'safeguard' the disabled children's health by keeping them afar from their teachers and peers, despite the consequent harm on learning. According to Kendall et al. (2020) the practice of isolation

is imperative during pandemics, because disabled people are considered as 'typically more exposed to the risk of infection than the general population as a result of their need for daily care and support from external service providers' (p. 1774), which seems though a plausible excuse to rationalise exclusion. On the other hand, non-disabled students from the dominating social class, who might therefore be considered as more eligible to learn, were kept close and provided opportunities for learning, in ways that excluded disabled students from lower socioeconomic classes.

Surprisingly, the induced fear easily became the path towards the legitimisation of exclusion, by being based on the affect heuristic, i.e., the mental shortcut, which prompts people to take quick decisions about problems based on their current emotional state (Slovic et al., 2007). Thus, the continuous bombards of social media about the dangers of socialising and the consequent possibility of severe illness forced governments to take hasty decisions, which did not consider the implications of school closure in the long-term and the practical difficulties that would raise barriers to learning for some groups of children (World Bank Group, 2020). In this way, and in the name of health, the priority was to switch immediately to remote learning, even if the education systems had nor the essential infrastructure neither trained personnel that could effectively teach the diverse range of contemporary students. As a result, the pre-existing education disparities were legitimately exacerbated, since the learning opportunities of the most vulnerable children were significantly reduced (United Nations, 2020).

What were then students distanced for? The answer is not that simple, since the most privileged social classes have created the illusion that humanity can control nature and the limitations of the planet, by keeping close the powerful ones that are assumed to be able to find solutions to problems and govern the universe (Giroux, 2011). To this end, it is often assumed that it is essential to keep some distance between the elite and the less important and useful ones, i.e., disabled people, using as an excuse for their exclusion their assumed impotency to keep up with the pace of the powerful (Bostad & Hanisch, 2016). Likewise, as found in this research, in the time of the pandemic, disabled students were not only physically but also emotionally and socially distanced and kept afar through their limited access to remote learning and the difficulties to adapt to teaching methods that were not appropriate for disabled students.

Yet, according to Oliver (1990), disabled people's exclusion from social life, work and education is not a situation that exists a priori nor an outcome of the impairment; in contrast, it is created because the lives of disabled people are shaped by the economic, political, and social forces which produce inequality and discrimination against disabled people. As a result, as explained by Bourdieu's (1984) social theories, disabled people, as not the powerful ones, are displaced at the lower levels of social hierarchy; at the same time, the empty positions at the higher level are filled by the powerful dominant class that is better qualified, more skilled, and adequately prepared, because of having a priori access to quality education, even in times of disasters and pandemics, such as the COVID-19.

As Bourdieu (1984) argues though, displacement may eventually become habitus, i.e. a long-lasting scheme of perceptions, which recycles the social order and reproduces unequal relations; hence, even when the pandemic will be over, the created inequalities and the widened gap between disabled-not eligible to learn students and nondisabled-eligible to climb at the top of social hierarchy ones may result to the permanent

legitimisation and perpetuation of exclusion in the name of the 'best interest' of the 'sick' and 'helpless' disabled students. Thus, as Sabatello et al. (2020) underline, responses to the pandemic must be bound by principles of distributive justice, aiming to ensure that inequalities are not exacerbated.

Our contribution then includes a better understanding of how education systems tend to distribute social positions to students, even during extraordinary situations; based on a universal dualistic prototype of ability/eligibility to learn, disability may become the main criterion of the students' potential to be welcomed by the powerful and get access to quality learning that may be used to climb social hierarchy, in the form of higher qualifications. As a result, within a business-like model of education that modifies accordingly the learning process to fit the needs of the non-disabled/eligible to learn student, barriers to the inclusion of disabled/not eligible to learn ones are raised, and inequity is perpetuated (Williams & Mavin, 2012).

Our study also highlights the political role of schooling in the time of international crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the stereotypes about disability as impotence and sickness were emphasised much more than ever before, legitimising the limited access of disabled students to equal learning opportunities, perpetuating the dominant power relations and recycling social hierarchy. Hence, the important role of teachers emerges, who need to resist the pressure to conform to the powerful. Inspiration to deliver quality teaching and commitment to inclusion may enable teachers to find ways to empower disabled students and distribute social justice by facilitating access to quality learning for all students, despite the imposed restrictions (United Nations, 2020).

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