



Education of Children with Special Needs amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

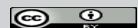
The present research paper is an attempt to explore the situation of education of children with special needs in India during ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher used snow ball sampling technique to collect information from 83 parents living in different parts of India through telephonic conversation as well as personal interview. The results highlighted the pitiable educational conditions of children with special needs in ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The parents of such children were feeling helpless to cater the educational needs of their children. The results also highlighted the unpreparedness of schools to fulfill the educational necessities of children with special needs.

Keywords: Children with Special Needs, Education, COVID-19, Problems, Educational Needs

The year 2020 has put forward many challenges in front of people's life. It was like a sudden break to a moving vehicle and life came to stand still. All the businesses, markets, schools, offices etc. were closed and it's all due to COVID-19 outbreak. "COVID-19/Corona virus disease is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus. The virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes" (https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1). As it is infectious and deadly disease so governments of all the countries worldwide decided to lockdown to save precious human lives. It affected all spheres of human life including education. The schools are providing education via online mode but education of children with special needs has

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been adversely affected owing to exceptional needs which are difficult to meet through online education.

The challenges faced by Children with disabilities during present times are becoming greater. The schools has come up with online teaching programmes that needed digital assistance but most of the families of children with special needs are facing problems of suitable assistive equipment, access to internet, easy to get to materials and proper support. Approximately 0.5% of books in countries which are on developing path are accessible and available for persons with intellectual, learning and visual disabilities (A Disability Inclusive Education Response to Covid-19).

UNESCO aimed to go ahead with the global education agenda through sustainable development goal number four to achieve universal primary education for all children by 2030. It is working towards inclusive education which should be available to all children without any inequity (Goal 4: Quality education). The biggest hindrance in achieving this goal is exclusion of children with special needs as eighty per cent of disability population lives in developing or under developing countries. In these countries access to education by children with special needs is a big challenge and Covid-19 pandemic has even worsened this challenge (Nhlapo, 2020).

The report published on June 23, 2020 by new Global Education Monitoring (GEM) UNESCO highlighted the extent of segregation in education of children with special needs due to Covid-19. It disclosed that only in the Latin America and Caribbean region, roughly quarter of countries have laws relating to inclusive education which covers all learners. The report further showed that imbalances will have extensively grown during the ongoing pandemic (UNESCO Report reveals lack of education laws to ensure inclusive education during COVID-19).

The responsibility of the government is to look after the educational needs of all children specifically children with special needs as they need individual attention. Though the schools are making every effort for providing education to children through online learning but strong support system is required for children with special needs. Parents of such children also need to be taught/guided on how they can provide education to their children at home during the time of Covid-19 pandemic.

Significance of the Problem

The ongoing crisis of pandemic has disturbed every phase of an individual life and education is one crucial part of this. Approximately 1.6 billion learners worldwide have been affected due to Covid-19 pandemic (Fostering inclusive education in times COVID-19). The most diminish group is persons with disabilities who are already facing many challenges in mainstream education system and now these challenges have been deepened due to online mode of education. It is feasible for general students to learn from online teaching but children with

special needs require individual attention which is not possible in online learning. It has become difficult for parents to keep the educational pace of children with special needs at par with general children through online learning at home.

This provoked the researcher to investigate in this area and to communicate with the parents for highlighting the problems faced by them.

Delimitations

1. The research was delimited to the educational problems faced by children with special needs during COVID-19 pandemic only.
2. Only those parents were interviewed who willingly and freely gave their responses.
3. The time period of April 2020- August 2020 was considered.
4. The researcher encountered with the parents whose children were partially blind, fully blind, learning disabled, mildly intellectual disabled, slow learners, hyperactive, hearing impaired and intellectually gifted.

Research Questions

Is online education feasible and accessible to children with special needs?

What are major problems faced by parents of children with special needs while supervising them during online education?

Methodology

Sample: The researcher was able to collect the information from 83 parents between the months of April 2020 - August 2020 with the help of snow ball sampling technique.

Tool: The researcher herself developed interview schedule related to the concerned area after reviewing the previous literature and keeping in mind the core of the topic.

Data Collection: The parents were assured that their identity will be kept confidential and were made clear about the purpose of the study. The data was collected through telephonic conversation as well as personal interview (wherever possible).

RESULTS

Parents' education, family income and digital devices at home directly affect the education of children with special needs. Parents with high level of education level will be more vigilant towards their children's education than the other parents. Families with high income can provide advanced digital devices to children for better understanding of the topic.

Table 1: Demographic information about Sample

Parents' Education	Family Income p.m.	Digital Devices at home
69% parents were educated till 12 only	73% families were earning between 25000-30000 per month	Every household has TV and smart mobile phones at home
31% parents were educated till graduation/post graduation	27% families were earning between 30000-45000 per month	Only 19% families had advanced digital devices at home such as laptop, ipad, iphone etc.

It is clearly visible from the table 1 that more than 70% of the families are not able to provide proper education to children with special needs at home owing to less education status of parents, insufficient income and lack of advanced digital devices.

Table 2: Information about the Children with Special Needs

No. of Children	Age group	Categories of children with special needs
27	9-11	Partially blind, fully blind, learning disabled, mildly
39	11-14	intellectual disabled, slow learners, hyperactivity,
17	14-18	hearing impaired and gifted students.

The table 2 mentioned that most of students (children with special needs) belonged to the age group 11-14 (46.9%) followed by 32.5 % and 20.48 % from the age groups 9-11 and 14-18 respectively.

Is online education feasible and accessible to children with special needs?

When the researcher asked parents whether or not online education feasible to children with special needs to which 87% parents said that it is not feasible to children with special needs as it is difficult for such children to concentrate and understand the topic through online mode.

When enquired about the accessibility of education then more than two third parents replied that it is not accessible due to lack of economic resources and support from schools.

What are major problems faced by parents of children with special needs while supervising them during online education?

Table 3: Problems highlighted by the Parents

Sl. No.	Problems	Responses of Parents
1	Educational constrains	Most of the Parents interviewed had education level till 12 only which poses constrain while educating their children with special needs who require special attention. It is difficult for such parents to understand the educational phenomenon and to describe it to their children in easy language.

2	Lack of knowledge about online learning	More than 2/3 parents showed their ignorance towards online learning as they are familiar with the school learning only. They find it difficult to download, taking printouts, uploading/downloading videos/word documents of school assignments.
3	Lack of support	Parents highlighted the problem of insufficient support from school staff. They said that there is no provision from schools for guiding parents how to teach children with special needs at home.
4	Economic constrains	As disclosed in demographic information seventy three per cent families earn 25000-30000 per month which is barely sufficient to fulfill the family requirements. In this much family income they are not able to provide latest digital gadgets such as laptop, ipad to children with special needs.
5	Lack of training to handle such children	All the parents unanimously revealed their helplessness in handling of children at home. Their vulnerability in handling children with special needs poses a hindrance in education of such children.
6	Online teaching mainly meant for general students	More than eighty parents disclosed that online learning is prepared only from the general students' point of view there is no scope of special provisions for children with special needs.
7	Difficult to create educational environment at home	All the parents said that in school there is proper educational environment for all the children which is absent at home so it is not easy for them to educate children with special needs at home.
8	No arrangement of evaluation	Parents also highlighted that evaluation of children with special needs require special provisions which is not provided by the schools. They said that the guidelines provided by schools for evaluation are mainly meant for general children.
9	Working parents do not have time	Working parents said that they are not able to pay attention towards children with special needs consequently their education is lacking behind.

Table 4: Specific Problems highlighted by Parents as per category of Children with Special Needs

Sl. No.	Category of children with special needs	Problem
1	Partially Blind	Parents pointed out that special equipments like magnifying glass, chart paper with bold words, large print material etc. are not available at home which is posing a hinder in providing education to such children.
2	Fully Blind	The parents of completely blind students highlighted that it is not possible for them to buy Braille. The parents, who are able to buy Braille, do not know how to use it.
3	Mildly intellectual disabled	It is difficult to describe any topic with relevant examples at home. Moreover teachers through online education provide general examples to explain any topic which makes it difficult for mildly intellectual disabled children to understand.

Slow learners	Slow learners require more examples and repetition of topic for better understanding but it is not provided through online mode of education.
Hyperactivity	Students with hyperactivity are difficult to handle and making them sit in front of digital gadgets to get education for long time (4-5 hours) is not possible at home.
Gifted Children	Students who are gifted with high level of creativeness find regular online classes monotonous and boring. They lose their concentration very easily and do not take interest in online classes.
Hearing impairment	Students with hearing impairment were unable to understand the lecture without supportive equipments i.e. hearing aid, charts with proper explanation, sign language videos etc.

Apart from the above mentioned problems parents also disclosed some general problems which are given below:

1. Parents of children with special needs who were earning less than 30000 said that it is difficult for them to buy costly and uninterrupted internet plans for children with special needs.
2. Families of children with special needs who live in rural areas face the problem of long electricity cuts which hinder the educational process.
3. The home environment for education of children with special needs is not suitable.

Recommendations to make Online Education More Fruitful for Children with Special Needs

The following recommendations may help school teachers and parents to overcome the educational problems of children with special needs:

1. Parents urged that firstly they should be trained on how to teach children with special needs at home efficiently along with training of working on digital gadgets with ease. From time to time teachers should prepare special classes/orientation for such parents.
2. Support from local government and school teachers should be provided to students as well as parents from time to time.
3. Parents suggested that online classes of children with special needs should be taken separately where focus should be on teaching in easy and ground-breaking language.
4. Specific evaluation guidelines for children with special needs should be prepared by the teachers and parents should be taught how to use evaluation sheets.
5. Working parents strongly recommended that special support system need to be developed for them so that when they are at work place their children should not lose their education time.

6. A strong collaboration of school teachers, leaders, intellectually gifted children, professionals, volunteers and resource teachers is the need of the hour to make online learning successful for children with special needs.

Table 5: Specific recommendations given by Parents as per category of Children with Special Needs

Sl. No.	Category of children with special needs	Recommendations
1	Partially Blind	Large print material, magnifying glasses, assignments with large and bold letters/sentences etc. should be provided by schools for partially blind students.
2	Fully Blind	As it is not possible for parents to have Braille at homes, so teachers should record special lectures for blind students in slow pace with voice modulation.
3	Mildly intellectual disabled	Short lecture videos should be prepared for mildly intellectual disabled students with sufficient examples.
4	Slow learners	Slow learners should be taught step by step with real life examples.
5	Hyperactivity	Teachers with the help of special educators should teach parents on how to handle hyperactive students at home efficiently.
6	Gifted Children	Enriched assignments that feed the creativity level of gifted children should be provided.
7	Hearing impairment	Parents suggested that teachers with the help of sign language experts can prepare distinctive lectures for hearing impaired children. Moreover they can prepare learning sheets with in-depth explanation and with more visual examples for such children.

The parents also recommended that software which caters the educational requirements of children with special needs can be purchased by a cluster of schools to fulfill the exceptional educational needs of such children. The help of bright/gifted students may be taken to develop unique learning material for children with special needs. It will help both type of students i.e. gifted students will be able to satisfy their creativity and children with special needs will be more benefitted from online mode of education. Some parents also said that schools can share the links of animated lessons/story telling of topics/videos which are already present on internet for children with special needs.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research paper culminated the contemptible educational situation of children with special needs during Covid-19 pandemic. These students were already marginalized earlier but now have been totally ignored when it comes to online teaching. The demand of

the present time is to mainstream such children and pay attention towards their educational needs. The schools need to develop such kind of online programmes which can easily and effectively fulfill the educational needs of such children.

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