

IMPACT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The current corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic is having a profound impact, not only on people's health, but also on how they learn, work and live. Among the most important challenges created by COVID-19 is how to adapt a system of education built around physical schools. At its peak, more than 188 countries, encompassing around 91% of enrolled learners worldwide, closed their schools to try to contain the spread of the virus. According to UNESCO report, due to COVID-19 more than 1 billion students were affected by school closures. Among that large number of students, students with disabilities need to be given specific attention as they tend to have fewer educational opportunities outside school because of various barriers like Non availability of appropriate teaching and learning materials, unaffordable technical devices to learn, Modes of instruction used during the pandemic were inaccessible for several reasons, including, in particular, lack of adequate infrastructure.

This review-based paper focused on impact of covid 19 on online teaching in inclusive classroom and Challenges faced by teachers and government officials like nonacademic work, financial insecurity, technical problems, lack of training to deal with technology, inactive responses from students etc. And also, provisions for Children with Special Needs.

INTRODUCTION

The current corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic is having a profound impact, not only on people's health, but also on how they learn, work and live. Among the most important challenges created by COVID-19 is how to adapt a system of education built around physical schools. At its peak, more than 188 countries, encompassing around 91% of enrolled learners worldwide, closed their schools to try to contain the spread of the virus. School closures have a very real impact on all students, but especially on the most vulnerable ones who are more likely to face additional barriers. Children and youth from low-income and single-parent families; immigrant, refugee, ethnic minority, backgrounds; with diverse gender and those with special educational needs suffer by being deprived of physical learning opportunities, social and emotional support available in schools and extra services such as school meals. They risk falling further behind and becoming isolated with school doors closed. These students are likely to lose the most in terms of educational outcomes. The support provided by schools if countries take insufficient measures to promote educational equity and inclusion.

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More than 1 billion people, or 15 per cent of the global population, live with disabilities, with up to 190 million people (3.8 per cent) aged 15 years and older having significant difficulties in functioning, often requiring healthcare services (WHO, 2020). The number of people living with disability is dramatically increasing, due to epidemiological and demographic trends, and increases in chronic health conditions (WHO, 2020). Among the world's most disadvantaged groups are children with disabilities, with stigma and discrimination against them often leading to increased exposure to neglect, reduced access to services, and general lack of recognition (UNICEF, 2020a).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such children may face heightened risk of exposure, complications and death due to underlying conditions and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Despite recent improvements in the availability of data on disability, internationally comparable data allowing an analysis of the links between disability and education remain scarce, and many disabilities remain unidentified. Nonetheless, as people differ in their learning needs and capabilities, educational opportunities must be inclusive and equally beneficial for all. Unfortunately, educational opportunities remain out of reach for the majority of children with disabilities, who are among the most left behind in education systems worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the shortcomings, fragilities, risks and inequalities in the education of learners with disabilities within and across countries. According to the United Nations (2020a), ‘1 billion persons with disabilities in the world are among the hardest hit by COVID-19.’ The United Nations policy brief (2020a) further states that persons with disabilities ‘have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.’ Even prior to the pandemic, millions of learners with disabilities were reported to be receiving inferior-quality education, often separated from their peers (CRPD, 2016). The situation is compounded in emergency contexts (UNICEF, 2020b).

Many countries around the world employed technology-based solutions to maintain the continuity of education through alternative delivery modalities, including online and distance learning. However, 40 per cent of poorer countries did not provide specific support to disadvantaged learners during the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020a). Worldwide, many students lacked the necessary equipment, internet access, accessible materials, adapted content and human support that would have allowed them to follow online programs. For the most vulnerable learners, online and distance education deepened existing social inequalities: 826 million students (50 per cent of learners) around the world lacked a household computer, 706 million (43 per cent) lacked internet access, and 56 million were unable to use mobile phones to access information owing to limited coverage by mobile networks (UNESCO, 2020b). The cost of assistive technology and software could pose an additional challenge for families of learners with disabilities.

Accessibility means that every child can participate in education regardless of ability (World Bank, 2020). Full learner participation requires not only internet connectivity, devices and accommodated software, but also individualized support tailored to learners’ communication abilities and educational activities. Many schools worldwide (particularly in low-income countries) were unable to introduce technology-based solutions and provide distance education during the pandemic because of substandard infrastructure and connectivity, and insufficient support from national and local governments. Those that did were not all prepared to support their teachers in acquiring the digital skills required to deliver one-on-one pedagogical and technological support to students with disabilities

LIMITATION IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF MODES OF EDUCATION INSTRUCTION USED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Modes of instruction used during the pandemic were inaccessible for several reasons, including, in particular, lack of adequate infrastructure.

- Non-availability of appropriate teaching learning materials (TLM).- Most students were unable to understand lessons and complete assignments, because of unavailability of appropriate teaching material with respect the disability.

- Unaffordability of digital devices and high-speed internet, and lack of technological know-how amongst parents and students. -‘Lack of computers or even smartphones are the main barrier to promoting effective
- e distance learning for our children. It is too expensive for parents. We see that if the school can provide some equipment to students, the rate of schooling increases, because it provides new opportunities and motivates parents to enroll their kids.’ (SEN teacher, public school, Kigali City, Rwanda.)
- Students having visual and hearing impairments reported unique issues with accessibility of TLM such as lack of subtitles or sign language interpreters on TV lessons for the latter.
- Children with intellectual disabilities reported greater need for individual attention, social interaction, and routine. Experiences primarily varied based on categories of disability and socio-economic background of households.
- The lack of student teacher rapport in online teaching. Lack of student’s involvement in online class.
- Teachers are not aware about online teaching methods and did not get any special training for this change.

CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

- Teachers reported increased non-teaching activities, job insecurity, and issues with using digital modes of instruction for teaching CWSN
- Government teachers specifically reported an increase in non-teaching activities in the form of COVID-19 relief work. Teachers in private mainstream schools did not report a similar increase in non-teaching work.
- Teachers faced economic insecurity, such as delays in salary payments, and suspension of contracts with uncertainty about contract renewals.
- Teachers faced similar difficulties in navigating online modes of instruction as students such as access to devices and internet, technological know-how, and the effort and time taken to navigate new modes.
- Teachers were reliant on parental engagement, and issues of CWSN and their caregivers on issues of accessibility to digital modes of instruction.
- Digital modes offer limited opportunities for two-way interaction. While some tried to conduct home visits, many were not allowed into communities or homes as people feared contracting the virus. Guidelines or training for education of CWSN were not issued to teachers.
- Government officials suggested education could not be a priority ahead of provision of food and health care.
- Across states, stakeholders expressed similar concerns regarding accessibility and efficacy of digital modes of education for students and teachers, and the need to support vulnerable households. Vernekar, N. Pande, P. & Niana, N. (October 2020)

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMPENSATE NON-INCLUSION OF CWSN

1. Identify needs of CWSN that require face-to-face interaction, and what can continue remotely, without compromising quality –

In consultation with parents, children with intellectual disabilities might be provided access to special schools and rehabilitation centers. However, children with chronic illness, low immunity, (possibly at higher risk of contracting the virus, and suffering more severely from it) and children below 5 years should not return to schools yet.

2. Bring CWSN back to schools to ensure continued education and rehabilitation (where required) –

Identify and track children at high risk of dropping-out, or who have discontinued education during the pandemic, and reopen hostels/ residential schools for older CWSN, following COVID-19 protocol. Further, priorities transportation needs of children with restricted mobility due to disability, ensure schools have appropriate TLM that is accessible to children with visual, hearing impairments, and install appropriate infrastructure to facilitate physical access for CWSN.

3. Making digital modes of education inclusive and accessible –

These include using multiple modes of communication to be more inclusive, interactive and efficient, enabling two-way interaction between students and teachers, through home visits, follow-ups on calls or messaging applications, employing sign language interpreters, using pre-recorded videos or television lessons, and assessing the possibility of providing devices/ internet to vulnerable households where possible, among others.

4. Address needs of CWSN more holistically, regardless of modes of instruction –

These include opening up vacancies for special educators in mainstream schools and as resource persons in underserved regions, reorienting pedagogical practices towards teaching children at their level rather than syllabus completion, and encouraging a holistic approach to a child's education, including mental socio-emotional, psychological well-being.

5. Support services –

Provide targeted support services, including by identifying needs and providing benefits through school psychologists, student welfare coordinators, social workers supporting family needs, behavioral specialists, special education supports, language support and school care programs. For students with severe multiple disabilities, conveyance school allowances help with travel costs to and from education institutions. To ensure access to the latter, schools can apply for special needs modifications.

6. Ensure diverse accommodations –

Use alternatives to printed materials in instruction, such as audio or other formats, pictures, flexible scheduling and deadlines, and assistive technology; ensure full and equitable accessibility of alternatives, including captions for persons with hearing loss, sign language for deaf persons, descriptive audio for blind persons and plain language for those with intellectual disabilities

CONCLUSION

This review-based paper focused on impact of covid 19 on online teaching in inclusive classroom and Challenges like Non-availability of appropriate teaching learning materials (TLM), Unaffordability of digital devices and high-speed internet, and lack of technological know-how amongst teachers, parents and students and challenges faced by teachers and government officials like nonacademic work, financial insecurity, technical problems, lack of training to deal with technology, inactive responses from students etc. And also, provisions for Children with Special Needs. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, it is essential to strengthen global collaboration and create an encouraging and sustainable ODL ecosystem. ICT and ODL solutions for the education of students with disabilities can act as a real-time support system, but require a system-wide educational reform that recognizes the multiple and diverse channels for learning, and encourages learning beyond formal education.

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