Research Article

Online Education during COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard every aspect of life and has affected everyone disproportionately. Due to its viral and contagious behaviour, it forced the closure of educational institutions including those working for children with disabilities. In Kashmir, the schools were closed in March, 2020 and were reopened for a very brief period in March 2021, following a subsequent lockdown in March 2021 only. Consequently, the educational institutions resorted to an online mode of education to avoid any academic losses for the students. While this decision seemed a viable option, the vulnerable groups like children with disabilities and children enrolled in special schools found it difficult to cope with this medium of education. This is particularly for students with visual disabilities, developmental disabilities and hearing and speech impairments. In this regard, this paper is an attempt to unravel the experiences of parents of this vulnerable group. We have followed a qualitative methodology and interviewed twenty parents of children with different disabilities to explore their experiences of the online mode of education and its implications for their children with disabilities.

Keywords: Online classes, COVID-19, children with disabilities, Kashmir

Introduction

Online education has been seen as a promising agent in creating new opportunities for students, faculty and educational institutions (Mayadas, Bourne & Bacsich, 2009). With the invention of the World Wide Web in 1992, the online mode of education was made more accessible and it also paved for more pedagogical models to emerge (Harasim, 2000). Online Learning can be understood as a tool which can aid in making the 'teaching-learning process more student-centered, more innovative, and even more flexible' (Dhawan,2020) and is defined as 'learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices (e.g., mobile phones, laptops, etc.) with internet access' (Singh & Thurman, 2019 as cited in Dhawan, 2020, p.7). However, the different terms and arguments related to online learning like accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning, and policy (Dhawan, 2020) have a correlation with the target group under consideration.

Children of all ages and from all countries are affected by this pandemic, and among them, vulnerable groups like children with disabilities need extra care and protection in these times (UN Policy Brief, 2020). Schiariti (2020) says that in times of a crisis, 'children with disabilities face additional challenges as a result of their functional limitations; but most importantly, the many barriers

that society throws in their way' (p.661). During the times of crisis, they are most likely to be excluded and left behind from basic services like education and health (UNRWA, 2020). They may have diverse needs in times of this pandemic that may go unnoticed. They can become more vulnerable in these times as they may have greater needs for healthcare, an increased dependency on community-based services and concerns regarding mental health (Aishworiya & Kang, 2020). Similarly, (Asbury et al., 2021) discuss how parents and children in the UK have experienced loss, worry and changes in mood due to the social changes that have occurred. Children with disabilities, especially those with sensory impairments can face barriers in the access to inclusive public health information that relates to the preventive measure during these times and can face barriers to essential services and basic WASH facilities may also be rendered unavailable to them because of poverty and other barriers in accessing these services (UNICEF, 2020). The parents of children with disabilities may be equally vulnerable during these times and can face various psychological problems (Provenzi et al., 2020 a). It may be due to the interruption in daily rehabilitation services and lack of recreational opportunities along with the burden of caring for their 'child with special needs' and balancing their work-life (Provenzi, Grumi, Borgatti,2020 b).

Another important aspect here pertains to the education of children with disabilities. The pandemic has forced the closure of schools across the world, with India being no exception to it. The closure of schools has impacted the overall system of education for children and online modes of education are seen as a viable option. But at the same time, there are various problems associated with such a mode of education as students who are not privileged can suffer due to these digital modes of education (Jena, 2020). In the same line, online modes of education may not be a viable option for children with disabilities and their parents. As Masonbrink & Hurley, (2020) note that the closing of schools indicates a loss of critical resources and special educators for children with disabilities, also their parents are less likely to be equipped with resources to maintain remote learning. Students with disabilities are less likely to be benefitted from the distance learning teaching methods as they mostly rely on face-to-face services (UN Policy Brief, 2020).

Review of Literature

Garbe et al., (2020) have conducted a study to understand the experiences of the parents with remote learning. The study was conducted using an online survey and thematic coding was done to understand the perception and experiences of 112 parents during the COVID-19 school closure. The findings revealed that the parents were satisfied with the decision of the school closure and the level of support provided, yet they faced problems in certain areas which included problems while balancing responsibilities, motivation of the learner and outcomes of learning.

Zhang et al., (2020) have conducted a study to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the students with disabilities and their health concerns. The study was done with 147 students out of which 119 were without disabilities and 28 were students with disabilities/ health concerns. The analysis has revealed that students with disabilities faced more problems and adjustments with the online mode of learning than their non-disabled counterparts. They also faced more COVID- related adversities than their counterparts. The study also revealed the anxiety and worry among students with disabilities vis-à-vis online learning and its impact on their grades and financial concerns.

A study done by (Amor et al., 2020) explores the impact of COVID-19 on with people having Intellectual Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and the response employed in Spain during the period of lockdown. The sample for the study was 582 individuals with IDD who shared their perspectives on COVID-19 and its consequences. The analysis has revealed that support was conditioned by the living contexts. The participants living in certain conditions had less natural supports while participants who lived with their families had relied on it. The participants had received information regarding the COVID-19 from the organizations working for the disabled, friends, groups, family and in some cases from health care centres.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology to understand the perception of teachers and parents regarding the online system of education and its implications on children with disabilities. Qualitative data are a source of well-grounded rich descriptions of social processes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). A qualitative approach was found to suit best to this study as this approach 'looks deep into the quality of social life. It locates the study within particular settings, which provides opportunities for exploring all possible social variables, and set manageable boundaries' (Holliday, 2016) pp.6. Additionally, non-probability and purposive sampling techniques were used to identify the participants. The aim of qualitative studies is not to generalization but to get a nuanced analysis of the phenomena being studied (Sandelowski, 1995). The inclusion criteria were parents of children enrolled in special schools in Kashmir.

1. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews that were done by the first author. The interviews were tape-recorded with the prior permission of the participants and also notes were taken simultaneously. At the onset, the purpose of the interviews was explained and the meetings were set according to the convenience of the participants. Due to the present circumstances of COVID-19, meeting all the participants at home was not possible. So, telephonic interviews were preferred and as such interviews were conducted accordingly.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated from Kashmiri to English. The transcripts were read thoroughly and then coded. After the initial set of codes was identified, we then devised categories and from these categories were narrowed down to three major themes.

2. Ethical Consideration

All the ethical issues were taken into consideration. Informed consent was taken from all the participants. The purpose of the interviews was made clear to all the participants. We also discussed their right to withdraw from the interview at any stage. The interviews were tape-recorded with the prior permission of the participants and pseudonyms are used for this paper.

Participants

The participants for this study were the parents of children with disabilities who are enrolled in special schools in Kashmir. The detailed description is given in Table 1 below.

Table-1: Description of Participants

S. No.	Pseudonym	Occupation of Husband/Wife	Gender of Child	Age of Child	Type of Disability in Child
1	Ahmad (F1) and Asifa (M1)	Business/ Housewife	Male	13 Years	Down's Syndrome
2	Feroz (F2) and Haseena (M2)	Government Job/Housewife	Female	9 years	Down's Syndrome
3	Heena (M3) (Divorced)	Private Job	Female	10 years	Autism
4	Ali (F4) and Mansha (M4)	Govt. Job/ Teacher	Male	12 years	Learning Disability
5	Fahad (F5) and Hafsa(M5)	Private Job/ Housewife	Female	8 years	Learning Disability
6	Showkat (F6) and Fatima(M6)	Govt. Job/ Housewife	Male	11 years	Learning Disability
7	Sahil (F7) and Bushra (M7)	Business/ Private Job	Male	6 years	Down's Syndrome
8	Fayaz (F8) and Snober (M8)	Govt. job/ Housewife	Female	12 years	Hearing Impairment
9	Rasiq (F9) and Zareena (M9)	Business/ Govt. Job	Male	8 years	Autism
10	Hilal (F10) and Shagufta (M10)	Govt. Job/ Teacher	Male	14 years	Visual Impairment
11	Shiraz (F11) and Tehseensa (M11)	Business/ Private Job	Male	11 years	Visual Impairment
12	Shoaib (F12) and Gazala (M12)	Private Job/ Housewife	Male	10 years	Down's Syndrome
13	Aijaz (F13) and Sabreena (M13)	Govt. Job/ Housewife	Female	14 years	Visual Impairment
14	Athar (F14) and Beenish (M14)	Teacher/ Bank Employee	Male	9 years	Down's Syndrome
15	Shariq (F15) and Afroza (M15)	Govt. Job/ Housewife	Female	5 years	Visual Impairment
16	Manzoor (F16) and Amina(M16)	Teacher/ Housewife	Male	7 years	Down's Syndrome
17	Bashir (F17) and Rizwana (M17)	Farmer/ Housewife	Male	10 years	Visual Impairment
18	Alim (F18) and Tahira (M18)	Govt. Job/ Housewife	Female	9 years	Autism
19	Shakeeb (F19) and Nisa(M19)	Business/ Housewife	Female	10 years	Down's Syndrome

20	Waseem (F20) and Bisma (M20)	Teacher/ Housewife	Female	12 years	Down's Syndrome

Findings

After analyzing the data, three themes were identified that narrate the perspectives and experiences of the participants. The themes are:

1. Challenges with Online Mode of education.

2. Issues of Accessibility and Satisfaction with the Classes

3. The Financial Burden.

1. Challenges with Online Mode of Education:

The online mode of education has brought various challenges with it. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the current system of education to switch to online mode. Various studies have concluded how the online mode of education has burdened the parents, teachers and students. Within this, children with disabilities and their parents form a vulnerable group who face different problems than mainstream society. As M6, shares the experience of their son with online classes as:

> My son is not able to understand anything through the online mode of education. The teachers try hard to keep him engaged but he is unable to cope with this.

Sharing similar thoughts F2 says that:

> Our daughter has Down's Syndrome. She was enrolled in a special school which she attended regularly. But due to the lockdown, she is unable to go to school. Now she is attending her classes online which are not of any benefit to her.

Some of the parents shared their concern about how they felt that the online mode of education was a difficult and different process to understand for them. As M5 shares:

> I am not able to use and adapt to these online classes. How can I expect my child to understand this? It is very different form of learning. Earlier our children used to be at school and we only helped them with their homework but now we have to sit with them continuously and learn everything along.

Similarly, F15 shares that:

> The earlier system of education was one-to-interaction, especially for students with disabilities. Now, the virtual mode has changed this concept altogether. Adapting to this routine has become difficult for both parents as well as children.

Sharing the concern regarding the online mode of education M9 says that:

> My child has autism. He used to go to a centre for special kids. He was showing good progress. But with this online mode of education, his progress has suffered. He is not benefiting from these online classes as he does not make eye contact and does not look at the screen continuously. He needs one to one sessions.

Some of the parents discussed how the teachers had advised them to engage in the sessions and teach their children afterwards. M11 says that:

> My child has a visual disability. He uses braille, and these online classes are of no help to him. His teachers

told us that we should learn braille so that teaching him would be easy. But they don't understand that learning it is equally difficult for me.

2. Issues of Accessibility and Financial Implications.

The second theme discusses the digital accessibility barriers that the parents faced. The theme also explored the satisfaction that the parents felt with the online mode of education for their children. The narratives point out how access to resources like smartphones and high-speed internet had impacted them. F6 shares that:

> After the lockdown was announced, we got a call from the school authorities regarding the conducting of online classes. Accordingly, we had to arrange a new smartphone for her so that she would not skip her classes.

Accessibility becomes an important issue while we discuss using online modes of education. Here M6 shares that:

> Kashmir is a conflict zone. We have witnessed frequent shutdowns and internet blockades. When the pandemic started there was only 2G internet for some months which aggravated our stress.

Regarding the financial implications of the online classes, F12 shares that:

> We don't have access to broadband, high-speed internet or costly phones. I am a poor person and I cannot manage all these things. Initially, my son missed all his classes because of this, then we had to arrange a smartphone for him.

M3 shares that:

> I have three children and I am divorced for 5 years now. Keeping

three separate smartphones for my children is not possible for me. My younger daughter was enrolled in a special school, but she had to skip her classes for two months because I didn't have a separate phone for her. Then a local NGO gave us a phone.

In the same line, F17 says that:

> They switched to the online mode of education without realizing the implications for poor people. They didn't provide us with smartphones, but expected our children to attend the classes regularly.

3. Satisfaction with the Classes

An important point of discussion here remains the satisfaction of parents and students with the online mode of learning. In the previous themes, it was discussed how the parents had gone to any length to arrange the resources for their children so that they won't miss any of their classes or sessions. But, of equal importance remains here to understand their level of satisfaction. Here F10 says that:

> The online mode of education demands time management and other resources. It may prove fruitful to students without disabilities but not for our children.

F8 shares that:

> I feel that assessment of progress through this online medium is not valid and up to the mark. But the current pandemic has forced us to do so.

In the same line M16 shares that:

> Even the teachers are unable to devise appropriate content for children with disabilities. This mode of education has difficulty in meeting the academic discipline... but what else can be done is the

need of the hour.

Drawing a contrast between her disabled and non-disabled children, M20 says that:

> I have four children, three among them are non-disabled. They can manage their classes well and learn something new every day. But as far as my daughter with a disability is concerned, she is not able to cope with the online classes. Their curriculum is different from mainstream schools. As such they are not able to benefit much from these classes.

Sharing a different experience M14 says that:

> I am a working woman and I have two children. My elder son can manage his classes on his own. But my younger son has a disability and he is not able to manage it. I am also not able to help him out as I have a full-time job. This has been a source of stress for me. I don't know if he is benefitting from his online sessions or not.

Adding to this F19 says that:

> The teachers of this Institute are really good and hardworking. My daughter takes her classes through an NGO working for children with disabilities. They also make home visits once a week to ensure that her progress is not hampered.

The parents discussed how they were not fully satisfied with the online mode of classes for their children, yet we're quick to add how it was the only option during the current pandemic. At the same time, we observed how they were discussing that the school authorities and respective governments should take appropriate measures and steps to ensure that children with disabilities are not left out and their progress is not hampered.

Discussion

The themes that have emerged from the analysis of data have shown how parents of children with disabilities in Kashmir are struggling with the online mode of education. There are many problems associated with this mode of education, as the satisfaction with classes, financial implications and issues of accessibility. The participants of our study were not satisfied with the online mode of education, yet they were quick to add that studying in this manner was the need of the hour. Here, it is important to understand that the needs of vulnerable groups during the times of a pandemic should be considered. But we note how children with disabilities were left out of the intervention strategies that were followed to minimize the academic losses. For students with disabilities, 'individual learning plans' are deemed best to create student-centric learning. But this was by large compromise as we switched to an online mode of education. Additionally, the other barriers like financial implications need to be noted, as were discussed by the participants of this study. Here, children with disabilities from lower socio-economic strata faced additional vulnerabilities as their parents struggled to arrange uninterrupted internet and smartphones for them. Children with disabilities are at particular risk of academic losses as schools have resorted to online modes of education. COVID-19 can have an adverse impact on children's education as extended school closure may lead to lower educational attainment (Psacharopoulos et.al, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have focused on the experiences of parents having children with disabilities vis-a-vis online mode of education. We have used a qualitative methodology to explore their experiences of the online mode

of education and its implications for their children with disabilities. The narratives point out the difficulties encountered by the participants and some narratives show how some children with disabilities struggle with the online mode of education. It is also known that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of life and has created disequilibrium in all the phases of living. The current pandemic has affected everyone disproportionately. It has led to the closure of schools, thus forcing the students to take classes online. The current system of education has not considered the concerns of young children with disabilities who are enrolled in different special schools. This category of students is not able to fully benefit from this mode of education and thus may lag behind. This pandemic is not going to end any time soon, so the mainstream population has devised ways and means to adapt and adjust accordingly. So, the concerns of students with disabilities, particularly young students with disabilities should be taken into consideration.

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