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Challenges in Learning of Children with Disabilities during Pandemic

Ms. Shikha Jain, Assistant Professor, Dr. Nazli*

Coronavirus pandemic had changed the learning teaching process in last two years. Everything had closed suddenly and there was drastic shift towards virtual learning. New challenges were arouse for all learners including children with disabilities. Children with disabilities had a hard time as their academic and personal life qchanged completely. Children with autism have fixed and regular routine but during pandemic their learning affected terribly. There is no consistency in their routine. We can't expect them to sit in front of virtual class and respond or learn. Children with intellectual disabilities found isolated in virtual classes due to lack of interaction and engagement. Inaccessibility of written material on blackboard or on presentations shared for Children with visually impairment. Similarly recorded lectures were of no use for children with hearing impairment. It was also acknowledged that it was difficult to develop individualized educational program due to lack of resources, unavailability and unaffordability of high speed internet, houses with multiple children not having enough devices etc.

Keywords: pandemic, COVID -19, children with disabilities, autism, visually impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities.

Introduction

The world is evolving and dynamic in nature and so for technology. In this pandemic situation because of covid-19 , the way we live , we think ,we move and connection with people has changed and moreover it affects our educational settings also. This crisis would make the new technology accepted by organizations that were previously resistant to adapt. This was a difficult time for the educational sectors to deal with the current situation; professional education(Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj and Sethi2020) and there was drastic shift towards virtual learning. New challenges were arouse for all learners including children with disabilities.Virtual learning is not a new concept but it was not used as only source of education earlier. The developed countries and persons who are technology friendly use this mode of virtual learning for their own ease and comfort. During pandemic it becomes necessity for all. Virtual learning refers to instruction in a learning environment where teacher and student are separated by time or space, or both, and the teacher provides course content through the use of technology. (<https://www.deccanherald.com/content/299555/challenges-virtual-learning.html>)

Virtual learning has changed the way of teaching. It enables teachers to reach out to students more efficiently and effectively through chat groups, video meetings, and also document sharing, especially during this pandemic. Students also find it is easier to

*Ms. Shikha Jain, Assistant Professor,

Govt. Rehabilitation Institute for Intellectual Disabilities (GRIID), Chandigarh

Dr. Nazli, Course Coordinator cumAssistant Professor,

Govt.Rehabilitation Institute for Intellectual Disabilities (GRIID), Chandigarh

communicate with their teachers and make their doubts clear. Butchildren with disabilities had a hard time as their academic and personal life changed completely.Children with disabilities suffer by being deprived of physical learning opportunities, social and emotional

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support available in schools and extra services such as different therapies etc. For many elementary and secondary school students with disabilities, COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the education and related aids and services needed to support their academic progress and prevent regression. And there are signs that those disruptions may be exacerbating longstanding disability-based disparities in academic achievement. (Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students). Students with disabilities in higher education are facing significant hardships and other barriers due to COVID-19, threatening their access to education, including through remote learning, and basic necessities.

Children with autism have fixed and regular routine but during pandemic their learning affected terribly. There is no consistency in their routine. We can't expect them to sit in front of virtual class and respond or learn. They can't cope up with virtual learning. Children with intellectual disabilities found isolated in virtual classes due to lack of interaction, no emotional support and engagement. Inaccessibility of written material on blackboard or on presentations shared for Children with visually impairment. Similarly recorded lectures were of no use for children with hearing impairment. It was also acknowledged that it was difficult to develop individualized educational program due to lack of resources, unavailability and unaffordability of high speed internet, houses with multiple children not having enough devices etc.

Challenges of online learning for children with disabilities

Lack of Access to Technology

Covid -19 pandemic has directly or indirectly affected financial system of everyone. Virtual classes are expensive source of education as for this there is requirement of laptop, wifi connection, smart phone etc. Parents of children with disabilities may not able to make technology accessible for them as they thought education for other sibling who is without disability is more important than children with disabilities. Due to inaccessibility children with disabilities were not able to learn in virtual classes.

Difficulty in learning the use of new technology

Children without disabilities found difficulty in the beginning of using technology and gradually they learn but when it comes to children with disabilities they found lack of accessibility to technology due to their inabilities. Children with sensory disabilities found difficulty in using technology during virtual classes similarly children with intellectual disabilities can't attend virtual classes or recorded lectures independently.

Difficulty in Concentration

Children with disabilities have poor concentration in normal classroom. Special educators make use of multisensory approaches for maintaining their student's concentration into lessons, manage behavior problems through proper management plan but in virtual learning there is no face to face interaction with teacher and children found difficulty to concentrate in the lessons. At home, students face countless distractions. These include siblings, parents, pets, cell phones, and other devices. Many lack a designated quiet place.

Difficulty in Time management

Children with disabilities have a fixed timetable. They get irritated if there is any change but during pandemic life of everyone changes. It was difficult for children with

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disabilities to manage their time in virtual learning. Some problems like connection lost, nobody to support, not able to follow instructions of teacher arouse during virtual learning.

Isolation

Among the hardest challenges to transfer to virtual learning is social – emotional learning. Children with disabilities are connected to their teachers emotionally but during virtual learning there was lack of emotional and social support and they felt themselves isolated. (<https://insightstobehavior.com/blog/common-obstacles-students-face-virtual-classroom-manage/>)

Difficulty in managing behavioral problems

Children with disabilities have one or more behavioral problems. During pandemic these problems arouse more. The reason can be any one as closure of schools, routine disturbed, no hand on classes, no therapies. Online behavior management plans were not successful as hand on sessions. During virtual learning their behavior problems increases as there is no control.

Lack of emotional support

Children with disabilities required emotional support like appreciation, reinforcement for working, motivation but in virtual classes there is no emotional support and motivation so they found difficult to learn virtually

No structured environment

Children need structured environment for learning but in virtual learning there is no structured environment. Every individual can learn on their own pace but children with disabilities required full support, repetition, hand on learning and a structured environment.

No parental support

If both parents are working they can't sit at home and provide support to their kids because it is not for one day job. During pandemic it was difficult for families to support children with disabilities in education as well as. Because they were not able to find any support from outside as everything was closed.

Lack of appropriate environment at home

For children with disabilities there is no environment of learning at home if both parents are working. Moreover focus is on other siblings who are without disabilities. So they found it difficult to learn at home. Children with disabilities required patience, time and repetition for their learning activities which are not possible in virtual learning.

Lack of tools

One of the biggest challenges faced in virtual learning is multimodality. Everyone learns differently, and there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to knowledge transfer. In a physical classroom, instructors can pick up a marker and draw or write on the whiteboard, change gears easily based on the responses they receive from the learners, use multisensory approaches based on their learners, and so on. In virtual classrooms, their options are somewhat limited, especially if the learning platform does not support multimodality. (<https://trainingindustry.com/articles/remote-learning/4-common-challenges-faced-by-virtual-instructors/>)

Lack of individual attention

In virtual learning there is no personal attention provided to children. Children with disabilities required individual attention while working.

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Lack of need based support

In virtual learning children with disabilities face problem of support as in hand on learning teachers are available and provide support as and when required and gradually faded support when the children performed independently.

Conclusion

Traditional offline learning and virtual learning can go hand by hand. E-learning i.e. virtual learning was underutilized in the past, especially in developing countries. However, the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic enforced the entire world to rely on it for education. In a virtual classroom, teachers and students have fewer opportunities to interact. Without careful planning, they have fewer opportunities for academic discussions and cooperative learning. They also have fewer opportunities for informal interactions. For children with disabilities virtual learning can be part of learning but not on regular basis. With proper planning and management both traditional method and virtual method can be used even for children with disabilities.

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