



SCHOOL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DURING COVID PANDEMIC: A DISCUSSION ON THE DILEMMA

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Abstract

The COVID pandemic has resulted in the nationwide closure of educational institutions. As far as India is considered, there has been a wide acceptance and employment of technology and digital resources to transact curriculum and other learning activities to the students who are geographically separated from their teachers and school (Dhawan, 2020). The greatest challenge of the teachers is to address the needs of the pupil, especially Children with Special Needs (CWSN), to an extent to which it had taken place in brick-and-mortar classrooms. In this scenario, they are deprived of a great deal of attention, care and support from their teachers, peers and school authorities and it is important to uplift them as a part of the learning community similar to that of other students. This paper discusses the National Education Policy 2020 on inclusiveness, program offered by the Government of Kerala to address the special learners in this pandemic situation and also the perception of parents of CWSN about the influence of the government initiative on this marginalized class of students.

Keywords: Children with Special Needs, School education, Perception of parents

INTRODUCTION

The COVID pandemic has engulfed and transformed the face of human life as a whole. Especially the field of education has been affected as same as other walks such as social, political and economic aspects. But the need to address the shift in the pattern of transmission of knowledge and educational activities is very important because the nation's development and future is mainly dependent on its growing class of learners.

The educational institutions were shut down nationwide and as a result, the extensive intervention of technology to teaching and learning was seen as the only way to meet the needs of the learners who were geographically separated from their teachers and schools (Dhawan, 2020). Online classes were initiated by the teachers to transact the curricula at its best considering the limitations of the current situation. It has become inevitable for the teaching class to undergo rigorous training on utilizing digital resources for initiating learning and related activities to the so called 'techie' students (Das, 2021).

Even though it has been more than a year since these changes have been taking place drastically, the extent of effectiveness of the ongoing distant teaching- learning process is still a question. Not only the satisfaction level of the pupils, but also of the teachers and the school administrators are at stake. As far as the students are concerned, this whole procedure has left them with the feeling of being 'left alone'. This scenario has left the students' needs unattended in many of the instances. A large majority of them are even pissed off being separated from their mates and the school environment.

If this is the case of an average performer, what about the vulnerable class of learners? Aren't they meant to face even adverse barriers to learn? It will be very easy to admit that those students will find the situation extremely chaotic and challenging where they are always left behind.

NEP 2020 ON INCLUSIVENESS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS (CWSN)

In the National Education Policy 2020, it is underlined that every future citizen of the nation to contribute and work for its betterment, needs inclusive as well as equitable learning circumstances. The draft also pinpoints the fact that at the secondary school level, there are still disparities for the non-privileged groups of children, who are mentioned with the name 'Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)', and the children with learning disabilities is one category among this group, along with the student with issues in gender identities like female and transgender, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs and other minority classes, those from lower economic family background and vulnerable situations etc.

The 'Divyang' or CWSN should be provided with flexible mechanisms in accordance with their disability to ensure quality education and opportunities never less than that of their normal mates. This can be attained through "One-on-one teachers and tutors, peer tutoring, open schooling, appropriate infrastructure, and suitable technological interventions to ensure access".

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 defines inclusive education as a 'system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities'. The NEP has put forward all its recommendations in congruence with this act. The policy states that every school complex should be ensured with the appointment of specially trained teachers with cross-disability training. The pupils with grievous disabilities should be guaranteed help from the special resource centres that have to be established wherever necessary.

Complete access for CWSN without any sort of impediment, enough accommodation facilities and reinforcing mechanisms planned and executed in accordance with the nature of disability are guaranteed to bring inclusion to its full-fledged implementation. Some of the measures in the list include use of appropriate technology mediated devices for assistance, as well as teaching learning materials, especially textbooks in large prints or in the form of braille transcripts. Special modules prepared in Indian Sign Languages is also an initiative put forward by National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) to cater to the teaching learning process of students with disabilities. Not only in academic activities, proper assistance to children that confirm their participation in co-curricular activities is also a key point in the report. Each and every differently abled should be provided with ample attention so that they should feel safe and secure within the school premises.

The act mentions the two forms of schooling- regular and home schooling- from which such pupils can opt according to their circumstances. Even if they are choosing home schooling, they will be assured with all sorts of assistance from the part of resource centres and special trained teachers, as the regular students are availed with. In this manner, not only the rehabilitation and the learning requirements of the students, but also the need of helping and encouraging the guardians for catering to home-schooling of good standards are meant to be achieved. Timely auditing to corroborate the effectiveness of schooling from home establishes both 'equity and quality' of the opportunity in comparison to that of regular schooling of CWSN.

The report underlines the fact that it is the sole responsibility of the State to mitigate the issues among the differently abled students in learning by planning, executing and monitoring special programs with ample technological interventions and also to incorporate the parents and guardians with proper guidance and orientation to diligently support and assist their wards along with the efforts of the State.

THE PROJECT 'WHITE BOARD'

Considering the inability of physical access of CWSN to the educational institutions in the COVID period, 'White Board' is the special project designed and put forward by the Department of Public Instruction and Samagra Siksha Kerala (SSK). The aim of the project is to improve the learning circumstances and opportunities of differently abled children studying in public schools in Kerala. The initiative comprises the preparation distribution of online video lessons to address the learning needs of the

deprived category of students. Block Resource Centers (BRCs) carry out the designing and preparation of such lessons, which are later assessed by Kerala State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT).

The online lessons for all the subjects for students from Grade 1 to 10 were prepared under this project. The lessons were prepared keeping in focus with the six categories of students namely Autism spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual disability, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment and Specific Learning Disability. The whole package of video lessons was prepared by the cumulative effort of 2500 special teachers, SSK officers, teachers from the Department of Public Instruction, DIET faculties and 168 BRCs.

The prepared materials are disbursed to the students concerned through social media platforms such as YouTube and Telegram. In addition to these lessons, special assistance and learning support based on the lessons are provided via separate WhatsApp groups based on the categories like class, discipline and nature of disability. The members of the group constitute the child, the special teacher, the subject teacher, the class teacher and the guardian of the child.

The project also includes distribution of ample and appropriate worksheets based on the disability, directly to the homes of such students. Also, to monitor the functioning and effectiveness of the whole project, members assigned by the BRC level Core Committee also make periodical home visits.

The broadcast of the lessons was commenced from June 2020 in YouTube channel, 'WHITE BOARD SSK' and currently 81,982 students and 41,231 students from elementary and secondary level, respectively, are recipients of this initiative.

The operations under the project in the microscopic level are as follows.

- In the preparation phase of the online video lessons BRC Core Committee members take into strict consideration the strategies to be employed for each content, appropriate learning materials and most importantly, the method of evaluation of the student's learning. The preparation is headed by District Educational Officer (DEO), Assistant Educational Officer (AEO), BPC etc.
- The members from BRC working on this project also keep updated with the principal and class teacher of the school concerned where the child with disability is studying and confirms that they are availed and is employing the provided White Board learning materials to the full extent.
- Resource teachers play the important role of assisting the subject teachers in executing the adaptation activities for differently abled in their respective classes. They also have to maintain the records of pupil participation in the learning process, their responses and reflective notes based on the continuous and comprehensive evaluation performed.

- The effectiveness and quality of transaction of content to CWSN through the White Board learning resources are examined by BPCs and District Programme Officer of the BRCs, for the purpose of further improvisations in any stage of the project, if needed.

PARENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE WHITE BOARD ONLINE CLASSES

Understanding the parental perspective seems necessary to gain an external view of the online learning practices for differently abled students. The role of parents and their perception about the White Board video lessons for CWSN are important factors that determine the level of motivation provided to their children towards the education in this pandemic scenario. So, this paper also studies the perception of parents and their satisfaction towards the new implemented project.

In the point of view of the parents, before the upcoming of the pandemic, there was proper 'inclusion' in our schools. The differently abled pupils were very much fond of attending schools as they were supported both academically and emotionally by their friends. Weekly, they also received different types of therapy and learning assistance from their schools under the guidance of trained resource teachers. Both parents and their children were satisfied with the school and the teacher's support. The regular schooling provided ample opportunities for social mingling with peers.

Coming to the present scenario of online learning, parents generally face no issues in setting up sufficient electronic devices and internet facilities at home for their wards to watch and respond to White Board online classes. Parents of students from primary classes shared that their children regularly watch the video lessons provided in the White Board channel. But in the case of upper primary and secondary students, they cannot reach up to the pace of the video lessons. Due to the overload of the subjects they seem to be lagging behind both in watching and imbibing the concepts transacted through the video lessons.

The parents opined that the trained and experienced resource teachers are able to provide support for their children in performing follow up activities and assignments given through White Board. But at the same time, some are worried that the newly appointed resource teachers are not able to supplement with necessary support as they are not familiar with the children personally.

During this pandemic situation, parents are completely satisfied with the extra effort laid by teachers in keeping intact communication with them through WhatsApp and Telegram. Parents are also provided enough opportunities for meet ups via. video calls that again ensure support for the emotional well-being of CWSN. This also channelises both the stress of children and their parents. Since, all learning activities take place in distance mode, parents are tensed about the emotional and behavioural changes in kids as a result of social detachment from friends and the school environment. Most of the parents also find it very difficult to afford therapy from private hospitals.

In short, the implementation of White Board project catalyses learning in the case of children with learning disability to a much greater extent. While to the moderately autistic children, the programme is perceived to be less efficient by the parents.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of COVID-19, the state has applied various techniques and standards for managing changes in the learning system which mainly consist of shifting the educational process from offline to online. Alongside, there is the implementation of some instructional and technological strategies to optimize the online learning of children with special needs. The Kerala State government introduced White Board online classes for such children, which incorporated the rapport and support from resource teachers that supplemented the video lessons provided via YouTube. It is clearly evident that the majority of parents are confused with the emotional and behavioural problems of their wards in this situation. They are only partially satisfied with the implementation of this special programme. However, they strongly opined that the students are more comfortable and trained in offline classes. And they enjoy learning in the school environment alongside their peers and teachers, not in an 'exclusive' zone.

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