



Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Right to Education of Children with Special Needs: A study in Tinsukia District of Assam.

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Abstract: Education has a great impact because of the pandemic caused for Covid-19 outbreak which led to closure of educational institutions. Though the online education has been introduced but in case of children with special needs it is difficult to accept as those children needs more practical teaching. Covid-19 is a severe illness that gets transmitted from one to another. To stop this transmission a partial or temporary lockdown in all the countries was implemented. The present study tries to understand the situation of children with special needs being locked up at home with their parents. And to know the problems faced by them in pursuing online education which was totally a new perception for them. The study also tries to know the role of parents in educating their child at home. To fulfill these objectives intensive case studies are used by interviewing five parents of children with special needs. The secondary data are collected from e-resources and research based journals. From the study it was found that the children with special need are more engaged in household works than academic. The children are more getting isolated from the mainstream society. Use of mobile and television have increased in case of children with special needs. Thus, the study tries to understand the major impact on Children with special needs during the pandemic situation.

Keywords: Education, Covid-19 pandemic, online education, children with special needs

I. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic has caused big disruption in School education in India and has resulted in significant learning loss for children because of the closure of educational institutions. Though the online education has been introduced but in case of children with special needs it is difficult to accept as these children need more practical teaching. In response to the Covid19 Pandemic Schools were closed in India in mid-March impacting approximately 286 million students (48 per cent girls) from pre-primary to upper secondary education (UNICEF, 2021). After the eighty sixth amendment of our Indian Constitution of 2002 added article 21A which provides free and compulsory education to children within the age group of six to fourteen years. According to the Rights of children with free and compulsory Education Act, 2009 every child between six to fourteen years of age shall have the full right in attaining free and compulsory education in the neighbourhood school till they complete elementary schooling. The Act also ensures the admission of a child belonging to any category of the society regardless of caste, class, race, religion, disability and economic condition. This is to promote inclusive education in the education system where there is no discrimination held with the children belonging to any disadvantaged group. The Act have enacted certain norms and standards for the schools as to maintain the pupil teacher ratio, construction of all-weather building, minimum of two hundred working days, proper use of teaching learning equipment, library facility in the school and promoting games and sports in the schools (RTE, 2009). Thus, after the implementation of Right to Education Act, 2009 the children from all sections of the society are included in the schools within the same classroom environment without any feeling of discrimination and exclusion.

The International policies aim on attaining education for all with increased emphasis on inclusion and equity in education. The Sustainable development Goal Agenda 2030 ensures in goal four that countries must “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” it also guarantees equal and accessible education by building inclusive learning environment and providing the needed assistance for the persons with disabilities. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability 2006 pertains the right of disabled children and their education specifically. The Salamanca Conference stated that:

Special needs education-an issue of equal concern to countries of North and of the South- cannot advance in isolation. It has to form part of an overall educational strategy and, indeed, of new social and economic policies. It calls for major reform of the ordinary school. (UNESCO, 2020)

Effort has been made towards providing equal rights to all the children. According to the census 2011, in India 2.21% of the total population are disabled out of which 55% are literates and 45% are illiterate. To address the number of illiteracy in a developing country like India it needs proper implementation of policies. A study conducted by Saikia (2016) revealed that in Assam there is a need for better implementation of government policies under fulfilling the norm of Right to Education Act, 2009

With the raising concern in addressing the educational needs of children with special needs there raised the situation of Covid-19 Pandemic. Covid-19 is caused by a new coronavirus which is called SARS-CoV-2. WHO first found this new virus on 31 December 2019, following a report of a cluster of causes of 'viral pneumonia' in Wuhan, People's Republic of China. People infected with COVID-19 will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Again on 26 June 2021, more than 180 million cases have been confirmed, with more than 3.91 million confirmed deaths attributed to COVID-19, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history (WHO).

The pandemic has resulted significant change socially and economically. At most all educational institutions and public spaces have been partially or fully closed and many events have been cancelled or postponed because of the outbreak to avoid connection between people. This shows how COVID-19 has changed the whole world and its people. COVID-19 has brought a drastic change in the lives of people. Shutting down of institutions, industries, social gatherings and most importantly maintaining distance from people has affected lots of lives. It has also taken away lot of lives.

Most importantly as the schools got closure it caused many challenges for children as well as parents. According to WHO:

Deciding to close, partially close or reopen schools should be guided by a risk-based approach, to maximize the educational, well-being and health benefit for students, teachers, staff, and the wider community, and help prevent a new outbreak of COVID-19 in the community. (WHO, 2019)

On the recommendation of UNESCO towards the present situation of pandemic they asked the institutes to promote online teaching for children. Pandemic has created disruption in the education system globally which affected the vulnerable children. There is also found increase in inequalities and worsened on the pre-existing crisis on education. One third of students were excluded from pursuing remote learning due to lack of connectivity and devices. Prioritizing education is essential to avoid ruining the situation and drive towards sustainable recovery (UNESCO). UNESCO is also supporting countries to mitigate the impact of school closure, address learning losses, support teachers and adapt education system for the vulnerable and disadvantaged section of children.

Whereas a country like India where poverty is a major social problem, it is impossible to get a good impact of online education on children. Thus, Children with Special Needs now study in special and well as mainstream schools, both of which have transitioned online. Special instructors are appointed to help such children with their education. But the sudden transition to virtual mode has disrupted the efforts towards inclusive learning. Commonly used technology platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom or Google Meet being used in schools are not designed to keep inclusivity in mind. They require assistive technology — products and related services that enhance inclusion for people with special needs — to study online.

Inclusive education is a broader spectrum which promotes inclusion of each and every children regardless of their gender, caste, economic background and most importantly children with special needs. They all are allowed to sit together in a school where no discrimination should prevail. In that case where the children without disability is suffering a lot so it can be assumed how much a child with special need is going through.

Thus, the study tried to understand the conditions of children with special needs during the time of pandemic and physical attendance in the schools are closed and classes are held to online from home. As in a state like Assam where most of the rural population is below poverty lines it seems to be tough time for the children with special needs in availing their educational right through online platform.

Review of literature:

Sharma & Sharma (2019) revealed in their study that effort have been made to the successful implementation of inclusive education but there have been many areas remaining where no effort have taken place. Inclusive education should not aim at increasing quantity of students but to increase the quality of education for all. Similarly for the rising concern on Covid-19, Dey (2020) found in his study that online education is unable to fulfill the clause mentioned in Right to education Act 2009, like section 3(2) of chapter II where free education has been mentioned but online education is a paid education with costly internet packs. Chapter III, section 8(a) explains the term compulsory education where this commitment is not fulfilled by the state rather it is perceived as essential constitutional obligation. The researcher also mentions that those children who could not attend their classes in last 6 months can be categorized as out of school or dropout. There is a huge emphasis given in terms of digitalization but this would not really work on a developing country like India.

Moreover for better implementation of inclusive education Dash (2018) found that the major barrier towards inclusion is negative attitude. The curriculum, lack of facilities or assistive technology, lack of proficiency in teachers and also insufficient funding hampers professional development. Lakshmi (2020) in the study found that the determination of the government is seen when we look after the programmes and policies. The researcher also mentioned that developing a broader education system and with trained educators are the urgent requirements to the system. There may be lot of challenges for successful implementation. Special education should therefore focus on designing structure of education

Objective of the study:

- To analyze the educational status of children with special needs through online platform.
- To find out the challenges faced by children with special needs during online education.
- To assess the role of parents in educating their children at home.

Methodology applied:

The study has adopted exploratory research design with intensive case studies of children with special needs who are enrolled in government schools of Assam. This study was conducted in the Tinsukia district of Assam with five students with special needs from different blocks. The case studies were conducted with the help of the parents as the interviewee for those children with communicational disorder.

Findings of the study

The study has been conducted through intensive case studies of children with special needs. With respect to the objectives of the study here are the major findings of the study:

(For maintaining the confidentiality of the respondent the names have been changed for each case.)

i. The educational status of children with special needs through online platform:

- During the study it was found that children with special needs felt to be isolated from the society. Being locked up at home for one and a half years was really difficult. Children with special needs are although sensitive they can't move out free in usual days but because of Covid-19 it is much more difficult for them to step out of home at all. Online education is not given much importance by student. As stated by Reema studying in class five with locomotor disability;

We have to live all the time inside home which I do not like. I want to go out and play with my friends. I use to submit my homework through whatsapp. We write in our copy and click photos and send it to our teachers. My brother helps me doing the homework. Most of time my brother does my homework.

- The study also found that girl children with special needs used be more busy with their parents doing household chores with mothers like cleaning, cutting vegetables in the kitchen, washing utensils, dusting, serving food on the table apart from academic learning. These are some of the positive changes where children are getting trained in daily life activities as the parents are able to give them more time which help helped in making the changes. Whereas the boys with children with special needs are found to be more interested in watching television and watching mobile video despite of household chores like the girls were engaged with. Mother of a Down syndrome girl Neha commented that;

We are getting enough time these days to take care of our children. So I am training her in all aspects I can. I am happy that my girl is learning from me the daily works we do at home. She is less interested in academic learning even when the schools were on and now she hardly attends her online classes.

- During the study it was found that the rural children with special needs had almost discontinued their education because of online classes. Due to poor economic conditions they are unable to afford mobile phones for classes. In addition, in the rural areas children with special needs and their families are found mostly violating the Covid protocols and they continued to meet their friends in neighbourhood and play together. The children play with each other without concerning their health impacts from Covid-19. According to Akash (cerebral palsy boy);

We get bored of staying at home. So we sometimes play with our friends in the neighbourhood but we wash our hands properly. We are not allowed to go to the ground but we gather at someone of us house and play for some time. We do not have any online class because none of our classmate has smart phones.

- The study found that some children are fully indulged in using television and mobile phones other than studies. Mother expressed her feelings that;

I get tired of my children they fight with each other and create chaos inside the house. We have only one smart phone they all try to fight for it and they make videos click photos. My eldest son even uses Facebook. I am tired of them. Ravi (intellectually impaired boy) also gets busy with them.

ii. The challenges faced by children with special needs during online education:

- During the study it was found that online education has become prior to children's education during this pandemic situation. There are no live online classes conducted in the studied area. The teachers and students have their whatsapp groups' class wise. The teachers use to upload the pre-recorded videos of lessons or poems. It is also found that the messages asked to teachers are hardly answered by them. They also assign home works in the whatsapp group. Mother of Ravi (intellectually impaired child) commented that;

It would have been better if the schools get open because I do not like the online teaching or classes that are held. The teachers only share the videos and from those videos my child with intellectual disability is difficult to teach. We are also uneducated and untrained to train Ravi in his daily activities. But during these days our resource teachers was in contact with us and guide us to take care of him.

- In the study it was found that purchasing an android mobile and recharging data packs monthly is a problem for the children with financially weaker families. Although many families have android mobiles but purchasing a data packs for every month is always a problem. Father of Lucky an hearing impaired girl expressed his situation as;

After the schools got closed we are bound to have a smart phone at home for their online class. I somehow managed to buy a secondhand mobile from one of my relative. But purchasing data packs is getting costly for me as because of pandemic I had no work. We do vegetable cultivation in our small portion of land and sell them in the neighbourhood. This gives us a small earning with which it is difficult for me to manage the whole family. Lucky needs proper guidance. She is interested in learning her mother teaches her whenever she gets time from the household work.

- It was also found that online education is not much effective for children with disabilities like cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, intellectually disabled and Down syndrome apart from those children with locomotor disability are more beneficial through practical classes. They are found to be totally deprived of education in time of pandemic. This has turned to be a serious threat towards the education. Neha's (Down syndrome girl) mother shared her feeling that;

It will be difficult for our children to get adjusted in the schools again after a gap of more than one year because it took two years for my child to get adjusted in the school since she first joined. My child also finds difficulty in making friendship with other children in the school.

- During the study it was found that students with special needs are facing lack of participation in the society. It is important to make them socialize and bring them forward in the society whereas this pandemic situation has created a large gap is between children with special needs and society. Mother of Akash shared her views as;

While attending school our children like Akash got much opportunity to be a part of an inclusive society. They get to learn many new things with other children. He also made friends with other children.

- It was also found that children with special needs took long time to get accustomed in the school environment after they were admitted. Because of the gap that has arised due to closure of school the children with special need will get difficult in readjusting in the school environment after it get reopen. Ravi's mother commented that;

It will be very difficult for me to send Ravi to school again. He has started isolating himself from the other children at our neighbourhood. He does not remember anything that has been taught in the school.

- During the study it was also found that the children with special needs are unable to cope with the classes or the curriculum that are being taught through online sources. This will result in reducing their interest in studies and attending school ones the pandemic gets over. There is a fear of increase in dropout if the child shows disinterest in fulfilling their educational needs. There was a visit by the resource person during the month of December to few children family. They took report of the last ten months and their activities. Lucky's father mentioned that;

After the schools got closed he had no means to teach our children as we both parents cannot find time for our children. We have to be busy in farming because it is the only source of income we have. This online teaching is not much benefited for our children. They do not seat in the tests honestly. They can look into their books and write for the test which I do not support being a parents.

iii. Role of parents in providing education to their children at home:

- During the study it was found that the Parents were living in a difficult condition financially. Some parents try to engage them in different activities throughout the day. Some try to teach them household works and gardening. Instead of giving effort in children's education the pandemic has led the parents to focus more on generating income as all the sources of income of parents was cut off as they are not getting any work. This lockdown had changed the life of many families. It has also leaded to poverty and crisis in the lives of mostly the rural people those who live below poverty line has to undergo a difficult life. Reema's mother expressed that;

We do not get time to look after our children and their education because we have to first think of our living so that we can give them a better life. Lockdown had shattered our lives economically. We wish every things get to normal so that we can again start our business again. my daughter is active in household work.

- It was also found that the poor parents are unable to purchase an android mobile for their children for the purpose of attending classes. According to the parents online education has created all the difficulties in the lives of children with special needs as they are getting far away from the school learning. Akash's father mentioned that;

Learning or attending classes from home is not effective like attending class at school with all the other children.

- The study also found that the parents encourage their children more on working on their child's interest area than forcefully teach them academic courses. They also keep them engaged in indoor games as well as drawing and paintings. Lucky's mother commented that;

It is okay if my child at least can do her drawing practices seating at home. This is the easiest way to engage them in productive work.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The Impact of covid-19 pandemic has largely affected the children education. It is clear from the study that online education cannot take place the school education. School education has very vital role it is second social institution where children learn to socialize. After the implementation of right to education in the year 2009 inclusive education came into existence where all the children must get equal opportunity to go to school. As a result of which children with special needs started joining the mainstream school with other children. This is a great initiative that government had taken for the children with special needs. But many studies found that there are lots of loopholes in the program. Covid 19 pandemic has disrupted the education of all children in India. Online education and remote learning is acting as a media for continuing the education sitting at home. Many students and their families do not have access to digital devices and internet and therefore they are not able to access online education. The teachers must be active in answering the queries of every student but from the study it was found that teachers hardly answer the questions and instead they just upload their video and assign homework. If this continues in the process of education it will be difficult for students to learn new things. Perhaps, we all know that online education is not much effective than school education especially for children with special needs who require special educators. During the lockdown they could not avail the services of special educators which have disrupted their academic and cognitive growth. School closures due to Covid-19 Pandemic has led to big academic loss in School education and this study finds that this learning loss is even greater for Children with special needs. There is an urgent need for appointment of more Special Educators to cater to the different needs of Disabled children during the time of the Pandemic as well as during normal times. Efforts in mission mode are required to bridge the learning gap which has happened because of the Pandemic in an inclusive way. NGOs like Pratham have continued to work with children during the time of the Pandemic. Therefore Government and NGOs must work together to bridge this learning gap on an urgent basis.

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