

# Challenges of Educational Support for Students with Disabilities during Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Inclusive education is a system of education that is open to everyone and can accommodate students with disabilities (SWD). SWD are disproportionately affected by school cancellations and the shift to remote learning, according to activists for persons with disabilities, teachers, parents, and policymakers during the pandemic. For students with disabilities, the study explores the availability of remote instruction, counselling options, and the barriers to their educational accessibility during the Era of COVID-19. As part of this study, qualitative methods were used to understand better how participants perceived obstacles faced by COVID-19 pandemic-affected students with disabilities. Students with disabilities had several challenges at school during the covid-19 epidemic due to a combination of factors. The problem was caused by a lack of qualified teachers, a lack of resources, and a lack of government commitment. Access to teachers who are conversant with the needs of disabled students is essential for them. An inaccessible physical environment, a lack of resources and training for teachers, and government commitment are just a few of the hurdles that must be overcome. There is no doubt that students with impairments confront several obstacles in their educational journey. As a result, students with disabilities should be provided with a proper and adequate inclusive education. Let me conclude by saying that kids with disabilities, especially during a tough time like today, should seek UNICEF's aid in funding inclusive educations. Since this study did not include students with disabilities, it would be interesting to learn more about their opinions.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, Students with Disabilities (SWD), COVID-19, Pandemic, Teachers, School.

## 1. Introduction

The WHO declared a COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020. COVID-19 had infected more than 200 nations and territories by 31 January 2021, with 102,083,344 cases confirmed (WHO 2021). Globally, its rapid expansion has affected billions of individuals and almost every facet of society. COVID-19's effect on the education sector is becoming increasingly problematic (Stifel et al., 2020). On 2 August 2020, 106 countries' schools closed, affecting 1,058,824,335

children and teenagers from pre-primary to higher education, according to the latest statistics from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Many countries use distance learning as a solution to school and university closures. Some facts and opinions about inclusive education for kids with disabilities (Song et al., 2020).

The lives of at least 1.5 billion students and their families worldwide have been greatly impacted by the school closures triggered by the outbreak government of COVID-19, which responded by conducting classes remotely, mostly online, to ensure that students continue to do so learn. In particular, for those individuals and students with disabilities, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a continuing threat. Their voices are unheard of in normal times, and this tragic circumstance is heightened during this emergency. During the pandemic, government policies mandate inclusion for people with disabilities who still have global rights, so no one in this crisis should be left behind (Herring et al., 2020).

Education that is inclusive of everyone and can meet students with disabilities (SWD) is defined as an inclusive educational system. As part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement, India has affirmed its commitment to inclusive education. Also, because it is a signatory to CRPD, it is committed to inclusivity in all areas shortly. This is not the case in reality since these youngsters are left out of the system. According to research, only half of the persons with disabilities are read, and even fewer have had the opportunity to attend a truly inclusive school (Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2020).

As a result of the COVID pandemic, students with disabilities confront additional educational hurdles. There were significant difficulties for students with disabilities to receive a proper education before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. On average, only one out of every two students with disabilities attends elementary school, compared to their classmates. In certain nations, less than 1% of students with disabilities are enrolled in elementary education (Schmid & McGreevy-Nichols, 2021). Despite great progress in moving to more inclusive systems, learners with disabilities are still taught in special schools using segregated modes of education delivery. This is due to a lack of awareness and a negative attitude towards disability in the educational system. However, even if students with impairments are part of formal education (Smith, 2020).

They may be taught separately in "special classrooms" and not receive proper instruction in the school system. Deprived access to social protection services, such as school feeding programs, information on disease prevention, and clean water, poses additional hazards to the poorest and marginalised. The danger of child abuse and neglect increases for students with disabilities who lack the protective and social setting and the associated supports (Kim et al., 2021).

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have had to change how they teach students with disabilities (SWD). During the pandemic, advocates for people with disabilities, teachers, parents, and policymakers have raised concern that SWD will be disproportionately affected by school cancellations and the move to remote learning (Adarkwah, 2021).

Every educational institution has been forced towards online learning by the COVID19 pandemic, but nobody was ready for this transition. Many studies have recognised the shift to online learning as solid but essential for continuing the learning process. The suddenness of this change initiated a discussion about the quality of student satisfaction with learning and disabilities (Khahro et al., 2021). The study investigates the availability of remote instruction, counselling

resources for students with disabilities, and the challenges to their accessibility to education during the Era of COVID-19.

## Barriers to remote learning

Educating students with disabilities is hampered by a variety of obstacles. During health crises like COVID-19, people with disabilities often receive less help and have teachers who aren't properly trained. For students with impairments to engage in the learning process, they need more time and resources. Equipment, internet connection and carefully developed materials, as well as technical assistance, are included. As a result, students and their families are forced to pay more for education (Bear et al., 2021).

Additionally, students with impairments are badly affected by the classroom closure. Another hurdle is that many teachers lack ICT skills and knowledge, crucial for development and learning. In OECD countries, on average, 40% of instructors lack professional ICT skills. 8 Especially for pupils with disabilities, they are ill-prepared to teach online. The digital skills of special education instructors in developing and least-developed nations are currently unknown (Running Bear et al., 2021).

## 2. Methodology

### Study Design and Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted as part of the study. One advantage of the qualitative method is open-ended questions, which allow participants to react in their own words rather than constraining them to choose from fixed and planned responses. This study used qualitative approaches to understand better participants' perceptions of difficulties students with disabilities face when trying to access education during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are two main types of participants: Teachers (classroom teachers and resource teachers affiliated to the inclusive schools were selected) and parents were among the ten people interviewed. Participants for the study were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Special education teachers are chosen from among those who have taught at the school for at least three years, while those in inclusive schools are chosen from among students with disabilities in their courses (Kim et al., 2021).

### Data Analysis

Interviews were performed through call and social media from different countries with permission from participants. Because of its versatility, researchers were able to adjust questions as needed. For each of the two participant categories, researchers transcribed verbatim their interviews. For each interview, the researchers examined the response from the interviewee at least three times before transcription began. A Microsoft word file was produced for the transcripts, saved on a portable computer accessible to just the researchers. The researchers re-read the transcripts multiple times to familiarise themselves with the responses to the questions and comments. Purposive sampling was utilised to choose the participants for this investigation. Purposive sampling was used to select well-versed participants on the challenges facing

students with disabilities and their access to education, among other things. This increased the value of the information. Some participants were also permitted to read their responses after transcription by the researcher (Lebrasseur et al., 2021).

### 3. Results and discussion

There is an internal void, social isolation, and digital divide between people with disabilities because the provision they require before, during, and probably after the pandemic is not given to them. The article below provides the legislation, educational initiatives, and guidelines that support people and students with disabilities by the government, politicians, educators, and parents (Narvekar, 2020).

During the covid-19 epidemic, various interrelated constraints hampered the support for students with disabilities in school. Lack of trained teachers, a lack of resources, and a lack of government commitment were reasons for the problem. Students with disabilities must have access to teachers who are familiar with their requirements. According to participants' responses, teachers in inclusive and special schools have little or no expertise in educating children with special needs. This was a point on which all participants agreed. Because there were not enough specially prepared educators, it was difficult for special education teachers to find qualified candidates during this period (Soriano-Ferrer et al., 2021).

In the absence of competent teachers, the schools relied on teachers who were not qualified to teach students with disabilities, posing a major difficulty for both the pupils and teachers alike." *So, a teacher in a deaf school said, "it's difficult. I can't explain things to the pupils."*

*"I have four pupils with disabilities to teach during the lockdown,"* said another instructor without any special training. *"It can be challenging to teach children at times, but I do my best to assist them. Although it was first tough for me to deal with them, over time, it has become second nature to me, yet I still have trouble dealing with them efficiently."*

As a result, according to some participants, students with disabilities, especially deaf students, perform poorly in school. Students with special needs tend to perform worse than their peers without disabilities, but deaf youngsters are even more disadvantaged. Due to the lack of understanding and knowledge of sign language amongst most professors, deaf students do not do well. There was a shortage of resource teachers to assist instructors and children in inclusive schools, which worsened the issue (Supena & Hasanah, 2020).

This was confirmed by a resource teacher who said, *"When it comes to the pandemic lockdown, I am the only resource teacher. Unfortunately, I am unable to teach all subjects to my students."*

Since resource teachers are needed to help children with special needs and classroom instructors, especially those without special needs education training, providing their services could cause aggravation for both teachers and children who need them.

There is a lack of teaching and learning resources such as Braille sheets, a stylus, recorders, embossers, colours, toys, and photographs. There is some evidence that schools may not have adequate resources to teach and learn students with disabilities. *It would be beneficial for me to use audiovisuals to help them (intellectually impaired students) see what I'm teaching, but these aren't available in the school. I'm supposed to have electricity, but I'm not. The one thing I can't do is make them watch something or listen to something. If I don't have these things, I have to improvise."*

In support of this assertion, one parent stated that *"the pupils do not fully comprehend some of the things their teachers believe because of the few resources available"*.

According to certain participants from the special schools, government monies were used to purchase various teaching and learning tools. Government funding is insufficient, and therefore they are unable to obtain the materials. Their examples included scenarios in which teachers paid for supplies using their own money. Teaching and learning resources are essential for teaching students with disabilities, and their lack or inadequacy could severely hinder efficient interaction between teachers and pupils (Tremmel et al., 2020).

Due to a lack of resources, adequate examination of the children before admission was also hampered. Symptoms and appearance strategies were used in the classroom to identify children with special needs. To select how to approach certain children, they evaluated their physical appearance and conduct. If this strategy is used, students with disabilities may not receive the help to participate effectively in school activities (Gazmararian et al., 2021).

Support from the government is crucial to the smooth operation of schools. Although participants' comments suggest that the government isn't doing enough to help the schools, Participant's said that a lack of government support hindered schools from making their classrooms accessible to students with disabilities. *"It is the government's responsibility to provide facilities such as ramps, light doors, and accessible restrooms, but these facilities are not given, and the schools do not have the resources to offer them,"* a teacher once stated.

Persons with disabilities face significant barriers to social, economic, and political inclusion due to negative attitudes of disability and a lack of understanding of their issues by society. A combination of a negative impression of disability and misinformation about the potential of people with disabilities has led to a lack of investment in the education of students with disabilities by society, including parents (Bikson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Lebrasseur et al., 2021; Oomen et al., 2021; O'Shea et al., 2021; Surya et al., 2021). A more constructive attitude towards disability education is expected from the government, which is required to offer education for all and has signed various international conventions on disability. This responsibility appears to have been shunned by the government, as evidenced by the study's conclusions. For example, in special and inclusive schools, financial support has been inadequate and often released late, causing academic work to be disrupted. Because of a shortage of funding, some special schools have re-opened late or closed (Alsoufi et al., 2020; Atilas et al., 2021; Soriano-Ferrer et al., 2021; Supratiwi et al., 2021; Tekin-Iftar et al., 2021; Toquero, 2020).

Noteworthy is that while enrolling in school is one of the biggest obstacles for students with disabilities during covid-19, those few who do succeed in enrolling face multiple barriers because conditions in the school do not cater for them at all

times. Several factors make teaching and learning difficult for students with disabilities during covid-19 (Alsoufi et al., 2020; Gazmararian et al., 2021; Lebrasseur et al., 2021; Toquero, 2020). These include inaccessible premises, inadequate support services, and a lack of qualified teachers who understand the children's requirements. Because most educational facilities are created without considering children's impairments' concerns, physical access to school buildings plays a crucial role in increasing access to education for disabled children. To make these schools accessible to students with disabilities during covid-19, many schools that practice inclusive education were established without disability-friendly facilities (Adarkwah, 2021; Atilas et al., 2021; Jesus et al., 2021; Surya et al., 2021).

## 4. Conclusions

According to the study's findings, students with disabilities had difficulty gaining access to education. There have been many studies on students' schooling with disabilities, and these findings are consistent with them. Policies and other stakeholders are expected to implement appropriate policies that address students with disabilities during covid-19 have in accessing school. Every individual has a right to a high-quality education. Because this fundamental right must be safeguarded and preserved for all children, including those with disabilities, to participate effectively as equal members of society, and barriers that prevent access to education must be removed. Several obstacles include an inaccessible physical environment, a lack of resources, training teachers, and government commitment. In this regard, this study has revealed the challenges faced by students with disabilities across the globe. Hence the proper and adequate provision for inclusive education should be made for students with disabilities. In conclusion, the help of UNICEF should be seeking in funding inclusive educations to enable students with disabilities to have adequate learning programs, especially during a difficult time like this.

## Recommendations

There is a need for a broad-scale study to understand better the issues preventing students with disabilities during covid-19 from gaining access to education across the globe. Students with disabilities and their parents' perceptions and experiences might also be explored, as the current study did not address their perspectives. There should be a greater emphasis on expanding in-person learning opportunities for SWD, including summer and extended school year programs. Regardless of school and student demographics, teachers have found it challenging to provide SWD's services and supports in distant settings. This is likely to result in even greater learning deficits. SWD should continue to be favoured for in-person learning because of these obstacles and the risk of learning losses. As a result of the American Rescue Plan funds, state and local education organisations should emphasise and expand in-person learning options for SWD. Education authorities should make significant investments in training and preparation procedures to ensure that all teachers can effectively educate students with disabilities. During the pandemic, many teachers felt unprepared to educate SWD remotely and meet their IEP criteria. School and district leaders must invest in and implement ways to enhance learning for SWD with funding support from the federal government. Effective special education is characterised by evidence-based practices and treatments that enhance learning. As a result of federally funded resources, school

leaders can easily access proven strategies and interventions for speeding SWD learning.

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