**Online teaching and students with special needs**

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During the first wave of the COVID 19 pandemic, all academic institutes were forced to discover alternate ways of extending teaching – learning experiences to their students due to lockdown. During the first wave there were 1.2 billion children across 186 countries who were affected by the closure of schools. Higher education institutes and schools alike, had to shift to online mode to continue the academic activities.

We know that the generation Z is tech native and spends a significant time on electronic gadgets and social media sites. Yet, the abrupt shift from on campus teaching to online learning was viewed as a difficult transition by most of them. During a survey by Barnes and Noble college insights, they discovered that 63% college students across USA were concerned that they might find it really challenging to attend their classes away form the campus.

They were primarily concerned about distractions in home environment, difficulties in maintaining attention on the computer for longer hours, keeping themselves disciplined and motivated, challenges in meeting the course expectations and deprivation from social and emotional support of their friends and fellow students. In developing countries, the list of potential challenges also included difficulties in internet connectivity, availability of electronic gadgets and lack of appropriate or enough quite space to take online classes comfortably.

According to WHO (World Health Organization) there is 15% of population of world living with some sort of disability or special need. Unfortunately, statistics provided byworld health survey indicate thatchildren with disabilities have significantly lower rates of completing primary education and less mean years of education as compared to their non-disabled peers. Situation is not much different in our country. In Punjab province, where we have a very strong network of public special education schools, only 5% students with special needs are going to any school, rest of 95% are out of school.

Considering the fact that disability and poverty are closely interrelated, it became very evident that many families did not have access to internet, android phones or computers

For an already less privileged school age population with special needs, COVID 19 and resultant shift to online learning made things more tough. Special education institutes had to take all possible measures to reach out to their students. I remember we instantly made our WhatsApp groups more active, so all plans, worksheets and guides could be shared with the parents promptly. Efforts were made by different organizations to launch or re-activate their YouTube channels so video guides could be shared with the students and parents.

Out of personal experiences I can share that although online classes on zoom or google team were initiated for students with visual impairment. But it was a constant struggle on the part of the teachers and students alike. Students with visual impairment, use screen reading software that read the screen for them, enabling them to use computers independently. At times, the online platforms used for teaching were not compatible with their screen reading software, or students simply did not have the software available at their home PC, therefore they had to rely heavily on family support. Since their hearing is the major receptor when it comes to online learning, presence of a family member became a source of distraction at the same time.

Younger students with visual impairment require structured training in independent living skills. They also receive extensive training in orientation & mobility so they can navigate and move safely in their surroundings. This practical instruction could not be extended during online teaching. Though teachers did try to bridge the gap by sharing videos and reading materials with the parents, but not all parent were able to continue these trainings at home. Similarly, in schools where children were learning Braille, a system of embossed dots that children use for reading and writing, their Braille learning got badly affected.

Students with hearing impairment, use sign language to communicate. I know of schools, where teachers continued their online teaching through video conferencing. I think with little effort, online learning can be made accessible for a maximum number of children with hearing impairment. Govt. of Pakistan launched the tele-school channel in April 2020. It was a good collaborative initiative of Pakistan television Ltd. and the ministry of education. If captioning and sign language interpretation is added to those video lectures, all students with hearing impairment can also benefit from it.

Things are not that simple when it comes to students with intellectual impairment. These students have individualized educational plans, many a times they have issues with concentration, they are easily distracted and mostly require one to one instruction. Many of them also need therapeutic services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and physio therapy. Extending online services to this group of students has been the most challenging task.

From our own experience amid COVID 19, we learned that empowering and guiding the parents was the most effective way of ensuring that students with neurodiversity and intellectual impairment could be facilitated through online teaching and therapy. Online sessions were only effective when the student was full time accompanied by a parent or a family member and family followed the suggested activities throughout the week at home.

Considering the fact that disability and poverty are closely interrelated, it became very evident that many families did not have access to internet, android phones or computers. I am associated with an NGO where a significant number of students with special needs come from financially less privileged families and parents are not well educated. In order to facilitate learning of those student, we developed academic and therapy plans, guides and worksheets in Urdu. Those documents were combined in a summer pack and provided to the parents. These guides were also uploaded to a free online resource center, so any parent or teacher across the country could access and download for their students.

In short, online teaching for students with special needs has been a bumpy road, specially for students with intellectual impairment, autism and multiple disabilities. During the course of last one year, teachers, students and parents have been learning and growing to adjust to the requirements of the new normal.

Currently, its important to learn from experiences of different organizations anddevelop programs based on the best practices. For instance, in Punjab the directorate of special education, school education department, non-govt sector, Pakistan television and PITB (Punjab IT board) can work in collaboration to develop more accessible online learning programs for students with special needs and their families. Therefore, working on online learning programs will not only solve existing challenges, it will also help in increasing learning opportunities for students with special needs in future.

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