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Parental challenges in handling children with special needs during the pandemic

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Abstract

The recent pandemic had disrupted the lives of many people. Professional people had to work from home. Teachers had to teach the children through the online mode. Children had to miss their schools and stay at home to get educated. However, the most affected group were the individuals/children with special needs who had to be confined to the four walls of their house and get involved in the teaching-learning process. The pandemic impacted not only their education, but components like accessibility, behaviour and service delivery was also affected. The present study aimed at studying the challenges faced by parents of children with special needs in terms of service availability, accessibility and behaviour of their children. A survey type of research design was employed for the purpose of gathering the data. A total of 15 questions were administered on 25 parents of children with communication disorder availing various educational services in a preschool set-up under the Central Government Institute. The answers provided by the parents were grouped under the head of service delivery, accessibility and behaviour problems in their children for further analyzing the result. It was revealed that in terms of accessibility parents faced internet issue the most followed by lack of appropriate gadgets. In terms of services, parents felt the need that supportive services like speech and physiotherapy was required the most. Parents further reported that children developed behaviour like excessive jumping, flapping, hyperactivity while they were confine within the four walls of their homes.

Keywords: Pandemic, challenges, accessibility, services, behaviour problems

Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Education and Job

Covid-19 is also called Corona virus disease. It was an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The spread of the virus was considered to be contagious and this virus was declared as pandemic across the world because it affected all the countries of the world. This virus not only impacted the nations, but other components dependent on each other was also affected namely education, children and their childhood, education, business, family relations etc. The component which got impacted adversely were education, classroom teaching, job etc. According to Schafer, Dann and Lavi (2021)^[1], the pandemic introduced new educational challenges for students, teachers and caregivers due to the changed and varied learning environments, use of face mask, social distancing requirements. These were more pronounced for students with hearing loss and other communication disorders who often require specific accommodations to allow for equal access to the curriculum.

As an impact of Covid-19, most of all the Schools and other educational institutions were closed. Though schools were closed, students were continuing with education by attending online classes. The school took various educational initiatives like online classrooms, teaching through video recorded classes as well as providing worksheets and learning material on a regular basis. Even though the school did not close their education online class, video-recorded class, still many students learners were not availing the online class due to non-availability of gadgets, mobile phone etc.

During the COVID-19 pandemic almost a year and half closure of the school and other educational institutes were closed for year and a half thereby leading to delay or cancellation of the exams. This lead to confusion for many students and there is no room for curriculum. The other challenges which the learners faced was non-clarity of the concepts as most of the teaching happened through the online mode. Online classes lead to confusion for many students which were reflected in their performance during the online examination as well.

The pandemic not only affected the education sector, but also had an impact on the job sector. The pandemic activated one of the poorest job crisis in the world and changed the way people live and work. During the Covid-19 lockdown many workers suffered job losses. The pandemic affected the industrial units so severely that a beeline of labourer lost their jobs, they followed by which they headed with their children, women, elderly family members carrying belongings towards their native villages.

Challenges faced by typically developing Children and Children with Disabilities during the pandemic

Covid-19 pandemic not only affected the students but also the low-budget institutions and schools, resulting in close-down. During the Covid-19 pandemic most of the schools, education institutes and companies were closed and that lead to dropouts among students and unemployment among the workers. Many teachers were looking for an alternative job to support their families.

Children and adolescents face definite challenges based on their stage of life. Children and adolescents were generally at low risk of infection, and if they become infected it is likely to be mild. However, some children and young people have had severe experiences with the disease, and a few have died. Some of the children who came to school and having midday meals were suffering from not having enough food for their survival. Most of the school-going children were involved in child labour to support their families. (Study related the problems faced by school going children).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the systems of education for all children. The worst affected among these were children with disabilities (CWDs). As children with disabilities are more likely to belong to socio-economically worse-off households and 72% of the disabled population in India resides in rural areas. Accessibility of education during the pandemic was one of the major challenges for children with disabilities during the pandemic. Apart from education being affected during the pandemic, other aspects like socialization, communications etc. were also affected. Missing social contacts and altered routines, disturbed sleep and eating habits can be particularly intense for the kids with developmental challenges. Many children had academic and social issues being at home, but “for kids with developmental challenges, the challenges got exacerbated by COVID, some children weren’t getting their therapy, some missed being in the classroom, and some parents decided to stop medications. Other challenges included children showing angry outbursts, intense crying episodes, signs they were emotionally deregulated. Children missed out components like classroom teaching, as there is so much more contextual social information when children are in the classroom. Other challenges faced by children with disabilities during the COVID-19 included not able to understand why they have to stay at home for the entire day and showed anxiety and frustration as they have to remain indoors, difficulty in staying at home for the whole day thereby leading to anxiety and frustration. Change in the routine/ daily timetable was difficult to follow by children with special needs especially for children with ID, ASD and MD which results in anxiety and irritable behaviour. Children with special needs require one to one therapy session but are unable to take therapy due to closed schools/hospitals/therapy centres Children

with special needs were not much aware about health and hygiene especially children with ID and ASD have the habit of putting hands in mouth and have habit of rubbing the eyes which is not safe now a day.

Challenges faced by parents

Parents of children with special needs were required to play the role of teacher, therapist, peer and parent while they work from home. Parents were not trained in speech, physiotherapy and other therapies. Lockdown is difficult for the deaf children as most of the parents were unable to comprehend the signs of their kids. Children with autism have severe mood swings, require a special mode of communication, also they do not like changes in their routine. Such special needs require specially trained therapists for which parents are not trained. Difficult for the parents to make them stay at home and manage their behaviour problems. Health problems and associate problems of CWSN results in low immunity level which makes them vulnerable to COVID. Ibry (2022)^[3] reported that parents of children with special needs who had to manage their children as well as the job and home faced more chronicle stress. The daily family challenges they faced at home had a greater impact on their emotional/ well-being and sense of work life balance.

Need for the Study

The present study was conducted with the purpose of assessing the challenges parents of children with special needs faced during the pandemic. These parents were availing rehabilitation services at a preschool training centre in a Central Government Institute in Mysore, Karnataka. The parents were availing an array of services like education, speech therapy as well as physiotherapy and occupational therapy. The children were availing these services on a regular basis by coming and attending the services physically. However, with the pandemic attack and the lockdown, the parents as well as their children were confined to the four walls of their home. This lockdown brought about lots of challenges for both the mother as well as the children. This study reflects the challenges the parents as well as the children faced during the pandemic. Hence the study was taken up with the following objectives:

Objectives of the study

The study was taken up with the aim of assessing the challenges the encountered by parents of children with communication disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic time.

1. To identify the positive changes and the negative challenges the children with communication disorder encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic
2. To assess the challenges the parents encountered while attending online classes during the lockdown
3. To identify the behaviour problems the child developed during the lockdown
4. To assess the types of essential rehabilitation services that lacked during the lockdown.

Method

The present study was an effort to conduct an interview and collect details to study the challenges faced parents of children with communication disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sampling technique employed was

purposive in nature, seeking the answers to questions posed to parents of children with communication disorders who were availing the online class provided during the pandemic.

Participants

A total of 32 parents participated in the interview. These were parents those who were availing special educational services at the Department of Special Education in a Central Government Institute. These parents were availing the offline classes along with their children prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic they were availing the online classes. Among the 32 participants; two were mothers of SLD with ID with ASD, seven were SLD with ID, 14 were SLD with ASD, one was with SLD, and four were SLD with DD, SLD with ASD with CP, and 2 SLD with ASD with CP and 2 SLD with ID with CP. Since these children require individual and personal teaching, the impact of pandemic was more on them, hence their parents became the participants to tell and share their challenges and problems. Consent was taken from the parents before they joined the interview. They were oriented about the questions from the interview schedule which helped them to understand and respond appropriately.

Research Tool and data collection

An interview schedule was prepared which were broadly classified into three categories namely the educational challenges during the pandemic, behaviour problems among the children with communication disorders service deliver during the pandemic. Each selected criteria consisted of five questions. The questions were translated to the regional languages of Kannada and Malayalam. They were read out individually to the parents and their response was recorded by writing it. This was done by the researcher.

Result and discussion

The study was conducted to assess the challenges faced by parents of children with communication disorders encountered during the pandemic time. For the same purpose an interview questionnaire was prepared to collect the data. The responses received from the parents were grouped under the criteria of positive change, negative challenges, challenges faced during the online classes, behaviour issues as well as the service concern. The result is discussed as below

Positive changes observed and Negative challenges

The following were the positive and negative information's received from the respondents

Table 1: Positive changes and Negative challenges encountered by parents and children with communication disorders during the pandemic

Positive changes	% of response	Negative challenges	% of response
Communication	37.5	Not sitting	46.87
Eye contact	37.5	Not paying attention	18.75
Making friends	9.37	Fell back	78.12
Conversation	12.5	Network issues	31.27
Overall improved	21.87	Addicted to phone	12.5
Social Skills	3.12	Missing daily routine	9.37
Fine being at home	9.37	Missing classroom and physical teaching	34.37
Happy to be with grandparents	3.12	Difficult to purchase material	34.37
Toileting skills	3.12	Extracurricular activities	21.87
Having food alone	3.12	Lack of socialization	3.12
Socialization	3.12	Teacher concept	6.25
Plying with mother	3.12	Crying	3.12
Non-verbal communication	6.25	Missing friends	9.37
		Lack of gadgets /mobile	6.25
		Financial Problem	3.12

The above table clearly shows that the pandemic not only impacted the population negatively, but it helped them positively also. The above result clearly shows that according to the parents, the children showed improvement in communication, which being a major concern for children with communication disorders. Followed by which they also improved on the component of eye contact as well overall improvement was also observed. The other positive changes which were observed are as follows improvement in conversation, improvement in socialization and happy being at home. On the contrary, the negative challenges which the children and their parents faced were difficulty sitting at one place, many fell back on their education. It was also informed that the children missed the physical classroom environment. Thus it could be concluded that the pandemic had both positive and negative impact on the children and their family.

Challenging components encountered by the parents

The questionnaire further probed the parents to tell challenges they encountered during the pandemic and the

online classes. The list is provided below.

Following were the challenging components the parents encountered during pandemic.

- Not sitting
- Not paying attention
- Fell back
- Network issues
- Addicted to phone
- Missing daily routine
- Missing classroom and physical teaching
- Difficult to purchase material
- Extracurricular activities
- Lack of socialization
- Concept about teacher.
- Crying
- Missing friends
- Lack of gadgets /mobile
- Financial Problem

The above list clearly states all the practical problems the

children and their parents faced due to the pandemic. The list revealed that the parents had network issue, no gadgets; the children did not even have the concept 'as to who was a teacher' as well as classroom concept was missing.

Behaviour issues observed among the children with communication disorder during the pandemic

- Stubbornness-16 %
- Naughtiness-6 %
- Shouting-6%
- Repeating words-3%
- Biting-3%
- Jumping-3%
- Hyperactivity-37.5%
- Flapping-6.25%
- Not sitting-66%
- Self-injury-3%
- Hitting others-9%
- Crying-6%
- Swings side to side-3%
- Disturbing family members-9%
- Laughing loudly-3%
- Afraid of seeing vehicle-3%
- Abnormal behaviours-13%
- Angry-3%

The above list clearly shows the behaviour issues like not sitting at one place; stubbornness and hyperactivity increased the most during the pandemic. The children with communication disorders also exhibited behaviour issues like hand flapping, shouting, and other abnormal behaviours.

Requirement of services during the pandemic

The questionnaire further probed issues like the services which were required more, but was not provided due to many other issues. The list below provides the details of the Speech -34%

Occupation Therapy-63%

Physiotherapy-22%

Thus the list clearly records that the selected group of participants require occupation therapy as they face lots of behaviour issues. But the service was provided for a lesser time and was cut off due to overload.

Conclusion

Thus it could be concluded from the above results that the Covid-19 pandemic not only confined us to the four walls but it impacted and disrupted the education and a normal life of an individual. Furthermore, the impact was more on children from low socio economic background, disadvantaged group and children with special needs. Even though children with communication disorder showed positive sign like improvement in communication, eye contact, etc. they also encountered challenges like lack of internet facility, mobile phones, behaviour issues like hyperactivity, stubbornness etc. The study highlighted the difficulties in getting services like speech, occupational therapy and physiotherapy etc. thus the study highlighted the need for sufficient teaching learning material to help engage the children during crises, empowering parents to help children when such type of crisis strikes and developing a mechanism for effective rehabilitation during such type of crisis.

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