Original Paper

Special Educators' Experience Teaching during the Pandemic: A Retrospective Study

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Abstract

With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, a shift in teaching children with special needs has taken place. The purpose of this descriptive research study was to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on teacher relationships with special needs kids during the mandated school closures in March 2020. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was carried out through google form questionnaire. A total of forty special educators participated in the study. The challenges faced by special educators were documented through five sections: Demographic details, Online Teaching, Access to Resources, Individualized Educational Plan and Parental Satisfaction. During the Covid pandemic, more than 90% of teachers switched to an online way of service delivery. Special educators agree that online resources should be used properly, and that parents should be able to organize material for online education. They agreed that acquiring and exchanging information on Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), establishing IEP direction, planning and drafting IEPs for online classrooms, and implementing and reviewing IEPs were all tough. Parents' satisfaction with online education and interest in online programs were lower than in-person teaching, according to the study. Special educators were constantly seeking to adapt to the present instructional requirements. Culturally relevant resources, guidelines for implementing the Individualized Educational Plan, and a family-centered approach are all needed.

Keywords

Special educators, Covid-19, Teaching, Individualized Education Plan (IEP), parent satisfaction

1. Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization classified the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 107 nations had imposed national school closures due to COVID-19, affecting 862 million pupils as of March 18, 2020. Districts around the country were scrambling to streamline resources in order to meet both the academic and intellectual demands of all pupils as a result of the abrupt, long-term shutdown of schools. Many service providers have been forced to deliver services through telemode in distant places without access to the internet (Bhatarai et al., 2021; Dhiman et al., 2020). The global epidemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has exacerbated the challenges that children with special needs face. Children with neuro-developmental disabilities such as cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disabilities, epilepsy, speech and language difficulties, and vision and hearing impairments make up this group of children (Arora et al., 2018). The disruption in imparting service delivery and schooling programs is another difficulty faced by children with special needs who have limited access and competence to use these online learning platforms due to the closure of schools and the majority of lessons being performed via web portals.

Prior to the COVID-19 epidemic, most teachers and students in special education had little to no experience with online teaching and learning; as a result, they had little to no familiarity with online learning platforms. Educators were expected to use online platforms in March to streamline their teaching practices with little to no training. In addition to the other aspects of life affected by COVID-19, this increased stress has major consequences for teacher mental health. Teachers are also expected to devise appropriate educational plans, ensure cooperation of parents and students and use appropriate educational material.

During the compulsory school closures caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic, all general education and special education teachers, regardless of prior expertise with online learning, were expected to give high-quality instruction to all pupils. Typical tactics for direct instruction, behaviour management, and social emotional development in special education teacher preparation lead to increased inclusion for kids with impairments (Brownell et al., 2016). Furthermore, since online teachers report having little to no control over content or learning experiences, it's uncertain whether these tactics may be applied (Crouse et al., 2018). However, no research has been done to see if these tactics may be used online and, if so, what they might look like. When working with students with disabilities, Rice & Carter (2016) proposes that high-quality online teachers should have the following major skills:

• Provide instructional strategies and other specific support to students with disabilities that includes, but goes beyond, Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) when appropriate

• Assist students in learning important vocabulary and meeting other textual demands

• Extend opportunities for students to learn important vocabulary and meet other textual demands

• Advocate with vendors and support in-house course designers in making curriculum appropriate for students with various exceptionalities

Most teachers are confronted with the challenges of insufficient online teaching experience, professional development opportunities, or knowledge of online learning platforms as a result of the COVID19's unexpected appearance (Bao, 2020). The COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted those educational institutions around the world, including teacher preparation programs, need to give enough virtual instruction training to teachers so that they can continue to provide high-quality education to all students in many forms. The aim of this research study is to investigate the experience of special educators while teaching during the pandemic.

2. Method

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted. A total of forty special educators participated in the study. Most of the participants were between the age ranges of 25-40 years (50%), 18-25 years (32.5%), 40-55 years (12.5%) and least were found between 55 years and above. The special educators who participated contributed to the study were postgraduate students studying special education, working professionals and psychologists working with children with special needs.

Development of Questionnaire: A questionnaire was developed consisting of five sections: Participant demographics, Online teaching, Access to resources, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Parental Satisfaction. The questionnaire was validated by three special educators having experience of at-least two years teaching children with special needs. The corrections suggested by professionals were incorporated into the final version of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of 28 questions out of which 11 were regarding demographic details, 5 regarding online teaching, 3 regarding access to resources, 4 regarding Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and 5 regarding parental satisfaction. All questions were objective in nature (multiple choice and checkboxes) and required the participants to choose the appropriate option (s). The final version of the questionnaire was prepared as a e-survey in the form of google forms distributed through various social platforms by the researchers through convenient sampling. Ethical guidelines formulated by the institutional board of the institute where the data collection was carried out was followed for the study. Informed consent was taken from all the participants in the form of a question in google form itself. The data obtained was subjected to statistical analyses using IBM Statistical package social sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago). Descriptive statistics was carried out to analyze the data.

3. Results

Total of 40 fully submitted responses were obtained, which comprised of 82.5% of the young adults in the age range of 18 years to 40 years, and rest above 40 years of age. All the 40 teachers had minimum qualification of Bachelor in special education. 28 participants reported of less than five years and 12 reported to have more than five of experience in the field. All special educators were dealing with group of special students as depicted in figure 1. 23 teachers reported they handle a group of ten students, 7 reported working with group of 10 to 20 students and 1ten teachers reported they were dealing with group

of more than 20 students. They are involved in teaching children with disorders like Autism spectrum disorders, Hearing impairment, Intellectual disability, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Multiple Disability and Visual impairment. Hearing impairment (80%), autism spectrum disorder (72.5%), and intellectual disability (70%) were three disordered population dealt by teachers regularly.
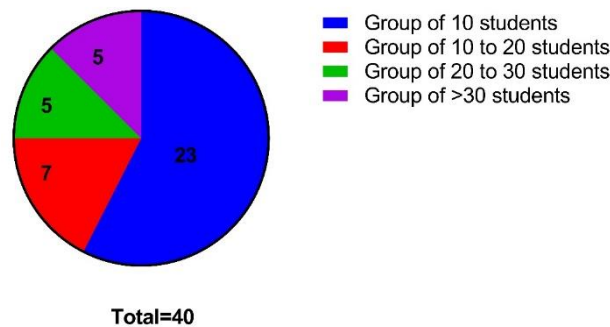

Total=40

Figure 1. Group of Students Handled by Special Educators

Participants (70%) reported of facing difficulty in handling cases with autism spectrum disorders, hearing impairment, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders and multiple disability chilMore than 90% of the teachers shifted their service delivery to online mode during Covid pandemic. They used either one or all of the freely available online platform namely Google meet (72.2%), WhatsApp video call (66.7%), and Zoom video call (55.6%) for teaching. Although shifted to online mode 70% teachers received no normal training for service delivery online.

Section II of the questionnaire assessed the experience of teachers in online mode of teaching through five questions. All the questions were assessed using 5-point Likert scale where 1 indicated strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree. On assessment teachers average response to conduct online classes smoothly as online was 3.35, suggestive of slight difficulty in online classes. With respect to gauging attention teachers average response was 3.83 suggesting difficulty in gauging attention through online teaching. However, technical difficulties and following routines were not much faced by teachers as the average responses among teachers was 3.25 and 3.30 respectively. In contrast, teachers were not confident about students learning better via online mode (average response 3.90).

Section III included questions related to access to online resources and included three questions, assessed with 5-point Likert scale where 1 indicated strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree. Special educators agree on using online resources effectively and parents being able to arrange the material for online teaching, with average responses being 2.88 on both. But they disagree on question about availability of the online resources easily in Indian language, with average responses being 3.53.

Section IV assessed teachers' ability of using Individualized Education Plan (IEP) effectively, with four questions assessed on 5-point Likert scales. All the participants agreed with having difficulty gathering and sharing information on IEP, setting up direction for IEP, developing and writing IEP for online

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classes, and implementing and reviewing IEP with an average response of 2.75,2.95,2.90 and 3.025 respectively.

Section V had questions related to parent satisfaction with online classes, and included four questions assessed in 5-point Likert scale. On analysis, special educators disagreed on two of four questions. They reported that parents' satisfaction with online classes and parents' interest on online classes were less as in with in-person teaching, with average response of 3.55 and 3.50 respectively. Whereas participants neither agreed nor disagreed on reporting the parental cooperativeness and them addressing parental concerns, with average response being 3.125 and 3.2 respectively.

4. Discussion

With the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic the service delivery throughout the globe has changed. Mandatory government policy to maintain social distance, use of face mask and lockdown has affected daily routine very badly, mostly affecting the students with special needs. This new normal it has forced policy makers to think of alternative mode of service delivery for teachers handling special children. Till date, no study evaluating experience of special educators teaching during pandemic exists so far. Therefore, the present study aims in investigating the experience of special educators while teaching during the pandemic.

In this study, 5% of the participants were younger teachers of age below 40 years, and 57.5% of total teachers reported to be having experience of less than two years in the field. The main reason for new and younger teachers participating in the study is that the concept of special educator and their roles have come into the attention of other professionals very recently in India (Das & Shah, 2014). Moreover, as number of special educators in India is also less (Deniz, 2017), they are forced to take a group of students (as in Figure 1) during teaching, thus compromising the quality of service being provided. Most of the participants worked with pediatrics age group, as incidence and prevalence of pediatric cases of communication disorder is higher (Sinha et al., 2017). Similar, findings were reported in a study by Aggarwal et al., 2020. Within pediatric group most of the participants reported child language disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Intellectual disability, multiple disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Hearing Impairment (HI). This is main to do with the behavioral issues these child exhibit along with difficulty comprehending the instruction provided and expressing the need as per the context (Van Daal et al., 2007). Also, many of these children do present with reduced intellectual functioning that adds more into the pre-existing problem. Interestingly, a similar trend was observed in a study and reported that children with these behavioral disorders are difficult to handle (Vrinda., 2020). The behavioral issues in children could also lead to decrease in attention span and difficulty following the instructions given, and stimuli presented via online mode reducing the effectiveness of service delivery. Due to pandemic the mode of teaching has changed globally (Pacheco, 2020). This new normal has been adapted by special teachers too for teaching their students.90%o the teachers in present study answered positively on service delivery via online mode. These professionals

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used either of the freely available online platforms like Zoom, Google meet and WhatsApp for teaching. Similar reports have highlighted the benefits of online platform in teaching during pandemic (Aduba & Mayowa-Adebara, 2020). Though special educators started online classes for their students they received no formal training. This is mainly due to the academic curriculum that does not address on the online teaching procedures in the field. Teachers reported of facing difficulty handling and gauging attention of students with special needs through online mode. As mentioned earlier children with special ability tend to exhibit difficulty in communicating thus developing behavioral issues (Van Daal et al., 2007) affecting attention span, an important pre-linguistic skill needed for communication. This makes them to not follow instructions and direction provided during the class. Also, sustained attention during distance teaching is difficult to monitor due to behavioral issues exhibited by them. Most of the participants in the present study are young adult group of teachers. As this age group is more familiar with the recent technological advancement (Olson et al., 2011), they tend to have less difficulty in handling technical difficulties and following class routines with online classes. Low confidence of special educators for children learning better in online classes is mostly due to difficulty in handling these children when they are alone only with parents. In person teaching they tend to have group of children who acts as a model for a special child (Eidsvåg et al., 2019), and hence helping in effective teaching.

With respect to the resources, special educators are more creative and tend to develop handmade teaching resources for their students (Kuo, 2007). This becomes a model for parents too. Hence, they face no difficulty in finding and utilizing the online resources available for teaching and parent tends to follow the direction given by teachers. Participants in the present study reported to have difficulty developing, directing, implementing and judging the IEP for children with special needs. For effectiveness of IEP a teacher needs to be trained adequately. With the current scenario, teaching and handling children with special need is difficult as discussed earlier (Van Daal et al., 2007). There is no formal training for special educators during their student life because no such provision of online teaching-learning is addressed in the academic curriculum of special education. They reported to have difficulty in finding resources in Indian language as there are no literatures addressing this concern. As reported by special educators, parental seemed to be less satisfied and interested with online classes. This might be due to cost for good internet service, technical difficulties with online classes, inadequate learning environment at home and poor handling of the child in online classes (Sharma & Kiran, 2021). Apparently, due to the reasons mentioned above, special educators could not find any difference in the cooperativeness and have doubts whether they were able to address parental concerns with child need.

5. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, research on the influence of the pandemic on all aspects of education has been conducted quickly and often. Through a survey, this quantitative research project discovered four recurring themes, many of which may benefit from further investigation. The special educators are constantly trying to adapt the current requirements of teaching during the pandemic. There

is a need for culturally appropriate resources, guidelines for implementation of Individualized Educational Plan and family-oriented approach. Our study had few limitations. The study's first drawback was that it only included a small number of participants from a small number of special schools. This quantitative study drew a total of forty participants from four special schools. Another limitation is the time difference between the research event and the time of the interviews. The study's first school shutdown occurred in March 2020; however participant interviews did not take place until July 2021. Due to this delay, participants may have provided less specific reports of real events and may have used experiences from the current school year rather than the preceding school year. Further research into the academic and emotional effects that students with special needs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic would be valuable as educational officials try to plan ahead for future long-term school closures. Parent and student impressions of obstacles encountered during online learning would aid school leaders and curriculum designers in identifying emphasis areas as they seek to develop the most effective ways for teaching kids with special needs in a virtual setting. To ensure that future teachers and school leaders have the information they need to succeed in a virtual context, a restructuring in teacher and administrator preparation programs is required.

Acknowledgement

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