

Seminar/Conference/Workshop - Academic Year 2020-2021

30-07-2020

INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR

On

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HEALTH AND EDUCATION OF THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED CHILDREN

Organised by

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

DIAMOND HARBOUR WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY

The convenor of this webinar was Dr Ashis Kumar Debnath, Assistant Professor of Department of Education who has arranged it with utmost perfection. The webinar has been graciously and judiciously hosted by Dr Indrani Ghosh, Head of Department of Education. Dr Ushashi Kundu De, Assistant Professor of Department of Education, has been found to be quite vocal and effective in communicating the questions of the students to the esteemed speakers. Dr Amalendu Paul, Associate Professor of Department of Education has been efficient enough in handling the technological segment. In fact it has been their joint effort that has led this webinar into a grand success.

During the inaugural session Prof. Anuradha Mukhopadhyay, our Hon`ble Vice Chancellor praised the Department of Education for choosing such a significant topic. Even our Registrar, Dr Sayeedur Rahman has found the topic quite winsome. Our Dean of Arts, Prof. Tapan Mondal also appreciated the motive of this webinar. The technical session started with keynote address by Dr Muhammed Muhibub Rahman.

Technical Session 1

Education in the Pandemic: Forgotten Stories of Children with Disabilities

By DR. MUHAMMED MAHBUBAR RAHAMAN

Associate Professor and Chairman

Department of Special Education

Institute of Education and Research (IER)

University of Dhaka

Due to the spread of the recent pandemic we all are fully or partially locked down inside our houses and facing various challenges in our daily life. We are trying to cope with the challenges in our own way to get accustomed with the new normal life. But what about the specially abled children? They are already compromising a lot in their social life and are facing many more problems in the prevailing pandemic situation which needs attention and empathy.

Dr. Muhammed Mahbubar Rahaman, through his vibrant speech has tried to sensitize us about the overlooked stories of children with disabilities and their education in the pandemic. The therapy and service providing options in the field of disabilities have taken a back seat, the schools providing vital one to one support are also closed now. So the special children are facing a lot of obstacles in their education right now. In the current pandemic the education system has entirely shifted towards the online without thinking much about its accessibility to the special children. He stated that 15% of the country's population is suffering from disability and this percentage varies from country to country. Every child has right to live free from discrimination and have right to effective education. So we need to think sensibly about how to incorporate the huge number of children with disabilities in the present educational technology. He started his presentation with a symbolic picture showing a child trying to make his way out of a narrow funnel. It symbolizes a challenged child to reach the huge potentialities of the outer world but the clutches of the pandemic is constantly pushing the child off, thereby leading to frustration. He further elucidated that the background of his presentation is based on three basic concepts of loss of learning, therapy and service. While detailing about his study he elaborated on the methodology which he had adopted. It was the Critical Eye of Analysis, a culmination of Critical Disability Theory and Social Constructivism.

Dr. Rahaman focused about the risks that the people with disability will face in the pandemic. According to the Australian Government, the persons with disability will be at higher risk if infected by corona virus due to their chronic conditions and weak immune system. Physical distancing will prevent them from availing support provided by the family members or caregivers. It will be difficult for some of them to follow the basic hygiene measures and to safely wear the face masks. The UK newspaper Guardian reported that the wellbeing of almost two thirds of disabled people were affected due to corona virus related concerns, many are suffering from loneliness and problems at work which is taking a toll on their mental health. Thus in the bleak scenario, the emerging discourse for education in emergency should focus upon the basic idea, that is Ability vs. Disability, the goals of education and considering “inclusive” as a noun.

Covid-19 has caused severe problems in the field of technical, economic and social issues for visual and hearing impaired students. Currently such disabled children are currently resorting to Zoom, Telegram and other online platforms which are not built to cater the diversified needs of the special children.

Our eminent speaker then shared some of the real life problems faced by the children with disabilities with the online teaching learning now a days. Audio captions used during online classes are not heard by deaf students and need an interpreter to translate the captions, but unfortunately they can't meet the interpreter as and when required due to network issues and phone problems. A hearing impaired person also blamed the health rules especially design feature of masks because lip reading is an important part of their communication method. A similar problem is faced by the visually impaired student in case of power point presentations. It is not always possible for them to have a reader or a standby assistant to take notes for them so it becomes difficult for them to access the visual learning materials. Children with physical disabilities having limited mobility needs personal assistance and cannot avoid coming into close contact with support providers or family members who may be infected. Many of them are extremely anxious in the fear of isolation and absence of guidance from their occupational therapists in lockdown. The students with ASD are also at a higher risk because their behavioral difficulties are increasing and their access to the community has completely changed

due to the covid lockdown. They are going through a lot of pain because any kind of change in routine creates a lot of problem for them.

Dr. Rahaman highlighted the practices that need to be adopted in this pandemic in the field of disability. We need to first identify the competing discourses about inclusion and understand the ideological barriers. He puts a significant question in front of us- “Does one size fit all?” The answer is obviously no, but in mainstreaming we are expecting the children with special needs to adapt to the already existing education system without being concerned about their individual needs. He also mentioned about hegemony which describes our cognitive and moral submissiveness to capitalist economic and moral submissiveness to capitalist economic and extra-economic rationality. Hegemony does not just mean dominance, it is the fine grained analysis of the power of ideas and how we are constituted through them. In the present day the thick theory of inclusion should be based on a philosophy of “difference”. All humans have equal value being human, relationships should be based on mutual respect and the prevailing ideology should be of cooperation. The speaker also made us aware about the guidance provided by the UNHCR about covid-19 and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Last but not the least, the speaker pointed out some key actions that should be adopted by the States and stakeholders for educating the children with special needs. Clear guidance should be provided about the variety of available resources, accessibility to the internet, software and assistive technology with proper accommodation should be ensured, proper training and support for teachers to continue remote teaching learning must be arranged, guidance should be provided to parents and caregivers to assist in setting up equipment and support the education program of their wards, accessible and adapted materials to support remote learning should be developed, and accessible educational audio-visual materials to disseminate through different media also need to be developed.

This enriched presentation was followed by an interactive session. The questions that came forward were

1. What about the mental health of disabled children, coping with this pandemic?
2. What are the measures to cater the differently abled children?

The questions were answered and clarified comprehensively by the esteemed speaker.

Technical Session 2

Social Challenges Faced by Persons with Disabilities During the Time of COVID-19

By SAYOMDEB MUKHERJEE

Senior Specialist EILABS, Enable India

Our second speaker was Mr Sayomdeb Mukherjee who although has been found to be facing multiple disability was quite vocal and eloquent in his opinions. He has rightly focussed several times on the phrase “The world is going through a change”. He has mainly stressed upon the social challenges faced by persons with disabilities during this pandemic situation. He has tried to throw light upon the medical exigencies faced by those disabilities which are not much spoken about and are quite often overlooked during this pandemic like blood disorder disabilities. He has stressed on the fact that if we want to negotiate with the authorities then we must include all forms of disabilities to achieve our aim. Presently the whole medical world has become COVID centric, neglecting chronic long term disabilities that are already mentioned in the Disability Act 2016 like Haemophilia, Thalassemia. These children are already compromising with their social life. Specially the parents of Thalassemia patients are facing lots of hardships in arranging blood every month. Some short term disabilities that can be cured with medical interventions and corrective surgeries which has become impossible now. Regular physiotherapy sessions required for the orthopedically challenged has also come to a halt. He has also spoken about the seriousness of the neurological disorders. But all these treatments and surgeries have taken a pause. Thus he can foresee that if this is the general condition of the health sector now, many are going to face some kind of disability or the other in near future as a collateral effect of COVID-19. Thus ultimately the total disability number would arise in the whole world.

Another significant issue Mr Mukherjee highlighted through his talk is about the funding crunch in this field. 95% of the organizations that cater to disabilities are NGO's. Infact without the proper functioning of the NGO's the wellbeing of the special children can't take place. Most of the funding of these institutions have been diverted to the relief funds for COVID-19. This is going to affect the social diaspora of the persons with disabilities immensely. Mr.

Mukherjee mentioned about the importance of a more comprehensive mechanism and responsible partnerships between NGO's. They need to collaborate without competing with each other. We cannot expect the Government to do everything but some regulatory authority is needed to redefine the amount to be spent by the companies in the disability section. An unequal fund distribution is faced by the disability sector. This issue needs serious attention and should be taken to higher authority and make them understand that without proper funding the organizations will also be unable to maintain the professionals whose skilled service is very much essential in these field. The professionals may move to a more lucrative job sectors which is not expected at all.

The social impact of this pandemic is so immense that the effect will not only remain restricted to our family or in education sector but will also propagate even in the job sector. Working at pioneer company like Enable India which place persons with disabilities in corporate sectors after having training, he has witnessed how job and family are closely related which are not going to remain same due to change in social status because of the pandemic. But the positive aspect is that persons with disabilities can engage into different alternative productive professions even while sitting at home. They are providing training online now to disabled people all over the world although some significant aspects of job training are missing like punctuality, work ethics etc. This concept of work from home can be taken positively in a broader pan India context that was used many years ago for reducing the economic burden.

He has also thrown light on autistic and intellectually disabled children who are having huge problems in getting in person training which are tried to be solved by Mr Mukherjee through EILABS. They have specific sensory form of disability which requires special attention. Their Lab is providing 70 assistive solutions. His much acclaimed organization can be praised to have placed disabled persons with serious diseases like Quadriplegia, Articular dystrophy etc in several work places. He has urged India and Bangladesh to come together to find out low cost solutions for the benefit of disabled people both in job as well as in education sector.

Lastly, he has also answered some participants' questions like how big and small private companies can be brought together to contribute in the special education sector. He has replied very quickly that the CSR funding agencies must be quickly contacted for this. Again, on being asked that whether disability studies can be taught as a paper in school and college level,

he answered affirmatively and wants a basic curriculum should be maintained on disability at every level. He has also given a proposal to our university in showing path to others by introducing this subject as a compulsory paper into our curriculum.

Technical Session 3

The Role of Inclusive Technology in Combating Covid 19

by SHRI VASHKAR BHATTACHARJEE

National Consultant for Accessibility, a2i, ICT Division,

Bangladesh Govt. Program Manager, IRCD, YPSA, Bangladesh

Mr. Vashkar Bhattacharjee started his speech with his own personal experience about how unfortunate he was as he didn't get chance to be admitted in an inclusive school rather he had to go to a special school where there was neither technology nor digitally accessible books. He had to struggle throughout his entire educational life. Hence he decided to develop innovative technology for the differently abled. Especially in this pandemic situation the differently abled are facing lots of technological hardships. He has highlighted on how Bangladesh government has already started a channel for children with disabilities. They have also a community radio for rural children with visual disabilities along with a national helpline (333) for visual, speech and hearing disabled. Bangladesh government in association with Bhattacharjee's organization has already converted all textbooks into full audio mode. He has also introduced a wonderful innovative multimedia enabled book called DAISY book. His organization has already innovated accessible book reader that is based on Android device which is low cost and they have already distributed that among 2000 children with disabilities all over the country. Another great innovation is the accessible dictionary which can be downloaded from Google Play Store. They have also converted 200,000 pages accessible books for higher education and other ledger related information. These books are audio enabled which is very much useful for disabled children in this pandemic scenario. They have almost 700,000 digital books accessible through Bookshare Library for disabled children. During this pandemic many government and non-government organizations have come forward to develop accessible materials like sign language video. Bangladesh government and Department of Health has created two manuals - one on disability and another on neurodevelopment disability. These are fully audio-enabled. Their organization is also piloting a programme in University of Chittagong to make the

place inclusive and they have innovated three technologies- one accessible notice board, another wheelchair and the last one is the GPRS map.

Lastly, he has concluded with the view that how digital technology has diminished gap between visually impaired and us. He has urged India and Bangladesh Government to come together to innovate high quality Bengali speech digital technology. This was followed by the interaction session, where ideas regarding the use of low cost smartphones in rural areas, free accessible book reader and books to be made by the Government.