

Digital Education and Children with Disabilities

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Introduction

School education for children with disabilities (CWD) has always been in the doldrums in India. As per the Census 2011 (MHA, 2011), only 61 percent of the total number of CWDs between the age group of 5-19 years are going to school. Recent studies (Swabhiman 2020) have also suggested a large and increasing dropout rate of students with disabilities due to the inaccessible digital learning landscape (PTI, 2020). The situation has worsened with the spread of COVID because regular classes have abruptly shifted to digital modes and have sharply increased difficulties for CWDs, their parents and teachers. The pandemic has created unanticipated reliance on digital education- a relatively new and uncharted territory for these children.

The context

The responsibility of the education of children with disabilities lies primarily with two ministries, though in different capacities. The Department of Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities (DEPD) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Welfare is responsible for launching and implementing special schemes related to rehabilitation and education of persons with disabilities (PWDs) as well as regulating the education and training of rehabilitation professionals and special educators. The Ministry of Human Resource Department (HRD) addresses the educational needs of CWDs through schemes under *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan* and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

With respect to education technology, in particular, the Central Institute of Education Technology (CIET) is involved in promoting the use of educational technologies, namely, radio, TV, films, satellite communications and cyber media etc. The CIET has also undertaken initiatives like the *Barkha* reading series, audiobooks (using DAISY) to facilitate the accessibility of school curriculum for CWDs (CIET, Accessibility in School Curriculum-NCERT's Initiatives, 2017).

In addition to this, the Central Government's

recent initiatives (the CIET and ICT initiatives of NCERT) like the PM's *e-Vidya* platform (Times, 2020), PRAGYATA Guidelines (MHRD, PRAGYATA-Guidelines for Digital Education, 2020) (Section 3.4) recognise the needs of CWDs. However, there are no dedicated public announcements or actions addressing how online modes of classroom teaching and other forms of education will be used during the pandemic for children with disabilities. These children are also covered under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) Act as a '*disadvantaged group*' and are eligible for free and compulsory education.

Problems of policy

In the area of education, India has taken remarkable strides in protecting the educational rights of CWDs and putting in place a robust legal framework. The MHRD's *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan* has its roots in the United Nations World Declaration on Education for All (EFA, UN) which called for the Rights of Children (including children with special needs) and demanded an inclusive education environment. India was a signatory to the EFA.

Other mandates have reinforced these demands. However, the rapidly changing nature of education and the gradual onset of digital learning have created the need for developing a parallel legal and policy framework to make digital education inclusive and accessible. What we have right now is a fragmented and uncoordinated policy landscape around inclusive digital education in India.

The issue of digital inclusion can be understood from the standpoints of infrastructure and design. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has released a list of recommendations in 2018 (TRAI, 2018) to make ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) universally accessible to education. However, the document exhibits concerns of coordination and implementation. The recommendation also directs government websites to be accessible to persons with disabilities, which has still not been applied to a range of government websites including educational websites like

e-Pathshala and others (Rathee, 2019).

For education, in particular, the MHRD has released a National Policy for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in School Education (MHRD, National Policy on ICT in School Education, 2012), stressing on building inclusive and accessible digital infrastructure in schools. However, it is silent on including universal design principles in digital education technologies and is not reflective of the updated Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

Digital education is being made accessible in outdated and uncoordinated ways. The RTE Act, 2009 itself provides norms and standards only for physical infrastructure in schools. The Schedule to the RTE Act simply states that teaching and learning equipment will be provided to each class as required, without considering that such equipment might have to be digital for it to be inclusive.

Finding solutions

Fixing the policy

In order to re-work the digital education policy, the first step is a coordinated approach to inclusive education that makes universal accessibility norms an integral part of the content-creation process rather than a supplementary exercise. The MHRD should coordinate with the Ministry of Electronics and IT and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disability to devise standardised guidelines for digital education infrastructure for learners with disabilities that are in accordance with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

The next step is making these guidelines mandatory for all ICT service providers (public and private) of education. There is also a pressing need to ensure adherence to the long-overdue recommendation from TRAI (2008) to make all government websites accessible for persons with disabilities.

With respect to specific acts and policies, the National Policy for ICT in School Education needs a review and an update in order to develop comprehensive guidelines on the accessibility of digital education. Similarly, it is important to amend the schedule of the RTE Act to include norms and standards on inclusive digital education that are applicable to schools. In addition, the accessibility standards for ICT in education should be notified under Section 40 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

Lastly, hopes for Inclusive Digital Education also hinge on the much-awaited National Education

Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) which indicates in bits and pieces its visions for building more accessible and inclusive learning technologies.

Learning from experience

It is important to learn from practices and examples and COVID-19, while throwing at us some unprecedented challenges, has also opened the doors to innovation and reflection. It could offer a level playing field for technology-based learning and can empower not just children with special needs but also their educators and parents. There is a need to bring multiple stakeholders together and devise unique and adaptable solutions to enable inclusion of all children. Many multilateral agencies like the World Bank (WB, 2020), are already curating best practices from all around the world on innovation in education during this pandemic.

In addition, many India-based civil society organisations are undertaking field-based research and data collection to assess the impact of COVID on the education of children with disabilities. Multiple reports and studies have pointed out the lack of devices such as smartphones, televisions etc. as an important reason for children being excluded from the online learning space. For others, it is the unavailability of high-speed internet, not knowing how to operate these devices/applications, inaccessible content form, inadequately equipped special educators etc. Several standalone organisations (Manral, 2020) are also actively producing, distributing and encouraging more viable, accessible and reachable online content to children who are otherwise left out of the discourse. States like Kerala are successfully employing more accessible and widely available infrastructure, like television, to ensure continued learning and are even providing tailor-made classes to CWDs through initiatives like *Whiteboard* (K, 2020)

The next steps

While this pandemic has created unparalleled difficulties for humanity, it has also encouraged introspection and innovation. Seen only from the point of access and not inclusion (Pandey, 2020), it could become an opportunity to enable inclusion for all children by building common bases in education through technology-based learning. Children with disabilities are often not included in strategy-planning for digital learning (UNICEF, 2020), a narrative that can be changed now. Deploying e-learning methods can also assist special educators to reach many children simultaneously. But all of

this can come together only when the government takes an active interest in building technologies and capacities to make education truly inclusive and universal. This will demand a 'well-directed and

adequate public investment, sound policy-making and democratic participation of students, teachers, administrators and communities.' (India, 2020)

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