

Online Classes and Motivation of Special Students at Higher Education Level during Covid-19: Phenomenological Study of Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This phenomenological study was conducted during the COVID-19 outbreak to explore the impact of the pandemic situation on physically special students studying at university level. Special emphasis was given to the aspect of motivation of special students at higher levels during COVID-19. For this purpose, a sample of 19 students from two universities of Islamabad, Pakistan was selected. The required data were collected through a questionnaire followed by an interview. The data were afterwards analyzed through the application of frequency technique in SPSS 2.0. Findings of the study show that mostly students with physical disability showed liking towards online mode of classes in spite of abrupt change in traditional method of educational. Students appreciate mostly the aspect of flexibility of timings, saving money and exertion on travelling in online classes, while the least liked elements were poor network and connectivity issues. It was also reported that teachers were unable to support some disabled students, and they were unable to address issues like online safety and security. It is recommended that in this new challenging situation, education needs to be tailored according to the needs and wishes of students especially for special students, and teachers need to put more efforts to comprehend the individualized needs and challenges of students with disabilities in order to include them in online learning environments.

Keywords: online mode of education, motivation, special/disable student, COVID-19, higher education

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Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic struck the world resulting lockdown and other social and academic changes affecting learning of millions of students worldwide. As on March 10, 2020, the WHO has reported 1,13,702 globally confirmed cases and 4,012 deaths (Rasheed,2021). In this scenario educational institutes of all levels need to bring about abrupt changes to academic practices and teaching methods to ensure physical safety and continuity education of students. The advantage of face-to-face teaching with students that are motivated by a teacher in conventional classroom education is accepted by research worldwide (Barkley & Major, 2020) but creating the same motivating environment for development of academic as well as social skills was a challenge for teachers teaching specially at higher education level. This challenge became even greater when dealing with physically special students Online education techniques help students become more autonomous at advanced levels of education (McBrien , 2009).

Along with the challenges, online education achieved enormous prominence and created many opportunities to young generation. Adaptability and accessibility that courses at higher education provide are of great value for online learners. Students appreciated the fact that online classes provided the opportunity to be arranged according to their schedule so they can continue their other activities as jobs, trainings, internship or domestic responsibilities as family care. Online education also provides time to special students to learn and practice their academic material. Distance or non-formal education has been available for many years with these advantages, but technology made it highly flexible and reliable for students in terms of accessibility and digital self-learning. Traditional formal education system is now experiencing an increased expansion due to virtual materials and online courses (Mayadas, 2009). It is also evident from research that among traditionally operated school systems and curricula, those schools are considered as more successful and accepted that adopted the changing scenario according to social demands and parental expectations and changing needs of students. But the question arises that if online educational experiences are more accepted in present times, what are its repercussions for traditional schooling? But the focus of academic discussions should be making this online learning experience more conducive and addition of online learning in harmony with traditional classrooms rather than focusing on pros and cons of online learning.

Education is considered as an influential force on every aspect of student's life. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic this was provided in face to face, traditional manner but the requirement of

social distancing, quarantine and lock down situations made it difficult and challenging to continue with the same process. The sudden and severe outbreak of pandemic resulted in social isolation and quarantine (Hasan & Khan, 2020). The steps taken by different countries and nations included lock down, shutting down public places and controlling social gatherings. Due to these activities educational institutions that were previously providing head-on academic services needed to shut down impacting almost all the students in the whole world without any discrimination. This act affected academic, research, and other learning activities on a larger scale. UNESCO's 2020 Global Educational monitoring report highlights reports that almost 1541 million students across 190 countries were facing educational issues on different levels of education. It was the foremost priority of every govt. to plan for providing safe environment and also highlighting and improving the role of education and ensuring impartial growth and development of individual as well as nations (Crawford et al., 2020). In this scenario educational departments needed to decide for a substitute educational service that can help students in continuing their academic activities. In this way provision of system along with provision of equipment for conducting online classes created a great challenge for countries especially underdeveloped and developing countries. It also created many problems of the part of learners as provision of proper environment and internet became a necessity for poor even. The internet companies also needed to make plan for coping up with severely increased load and reachability of internet to rural and far-flung areas all over the country in Pakistan.

As like any other situation, COVID-19 also had impact on different parts of society and persons in terms of physical as well as psychological aspects. People with disabilities are usually a sensitive group as they have to face the disability (physical or mental) along with sensitivity of emotional grounds. The study intends to create such awareness that will help the normal members of society to understand and help these special members. The outbreak of COVID has opened new venues for blended learning and hybrid form of education (Education world, 2020).

Special education is a branch of education that is specially designed to overcome problems and demands of the physically special students. But in developing countries like Pakistan these facilities cannot be provided on a larger scale. So in this situation inclusive education is a better solution that allows special students to join the main stream education.

Special students face many problems and issues in their academic quest as lack of homogeneity in school system providing the same academic experience to all facing special issues, physically and

mentally. Special students are more prone towards facing barriers and problems in their educational quest especially during COVID 19 (Ahmed, 2022). Higher education scholars were affected rather more. The number of special students studying at higher education institutions in Pakistan is not very large. According to Nasir and Hameed, (2021) physical and mental disabilities create more challenging situation at higher education level for special students. As a result many special students discontinue their education that is not designed according to their special needs and requirements. There are diverse nature of barriers faced by special students at higher education level. Generally observed barriers are the inaccessible structure of buildings that does not follow the universal structure. The other main barrier that affects the education of special students at higher education level is the strategies of teaching used in classrooms are mainly focused on normal students rather than inclusive approach (Sharma and Loreman, 2008 & Zhang, Rosen, Cheng and Li (2021) . For this purpose it is important to provide special training to teachers dealing with special students. Among many other barriers training of staff is an important factor. Some other factors include insensitivity towards disabilities and stigmatization from normal students along with lack of accessibility to academic and co- curricular activities (Mosia and Phasha, (2020).

Nissman, (2020) states that students with special disabilities feel relaxed when find support in physical or emotional manner. Especially during COVID-19, students at higher education level were more in need of the support from their peers, teachers and family members. This support was expected from family and specifically parents to make such arrangements that can facilitate students physically, emotionally and even in mental operations such as learning, understanding etc. Nissman, (2020) suggests teachers and institutions to have meetings with students, their parents and other individuals involved in their learning process to talk about and infer about the situations in classes in which they feel comfortable and successful. Teachers and institutional administration need to find out which interventions were found more helpful for them in making adjustments for coping up with challenging situations created by COVID 19.

Research in the field of online education have reported that online classes have a strong impact on motivation and learning patterns of normal students (McBrien et al., 2009; & Mayadas et al., 2009) but still a gap exists in literature on the perceptions, ideas and meanings that special students connect with online and hybrid mode of teaching and learning on higher education level. To fill this gap, this phenomenological study was designed to explore the perceptions and meanings that physically special students connect with educational

scenario during COVID-19 the impact of online classes on their motivation.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of the study were:

- i. to explore the perceptions of gifted students about the educational conditions during the emergency of COVID-19.
- ii. to analyze the effects of online classes on motivation of gifted students at higher education during COVID-19

Research Questions

What are the effects of online mode of classes on motivation level of special students studying at higher education during COVID-19?

Theoretical Framework

Learning in online and hybrid mode is becoming the new common especially after COVID-19. Students with physical disabilities are also affected by this change. Special education is also becoming more challenging in uncertain times of different waves of COVID 19. In this scenario it is important to design and utilize interesting and engaging learning experiences. Student's satisfaction in any learning situation is already considered as an influencer in their learning. This study aims at assessing the impact and meanings of online learning experiences of students with special needs during tough times of COVID 19. The study intended to explore the perceptions of students with special needs about they experience and problems in online mode of learning. For this purpose, the theoretical framework adopted for the study is deals with the aspects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and Value construct (Eccles, 2009).

The model consists of two layers of motivation (i) "Intrinsic Motivation" and (ii) "Extrinsic Motivation". Intrinsic motivation is defined by Sansone and Harackiewicz, (2000) "the enjoyment of an activity for an activity's sake". This definition reflects the engagement and pleasure in a learning activity that is designed and conducted for students. Hulleman et al., (2015) describes that intrinsic motivation is considered as optimal reason for individual's engagement in a proposed task. While extrinsic motivation requires such elements in environment that can engage and motivate students for their academic

activities. Rewards and punishments are considered as a very common example of this type of motivation. This is more dependent on environment rather than self-determination of student

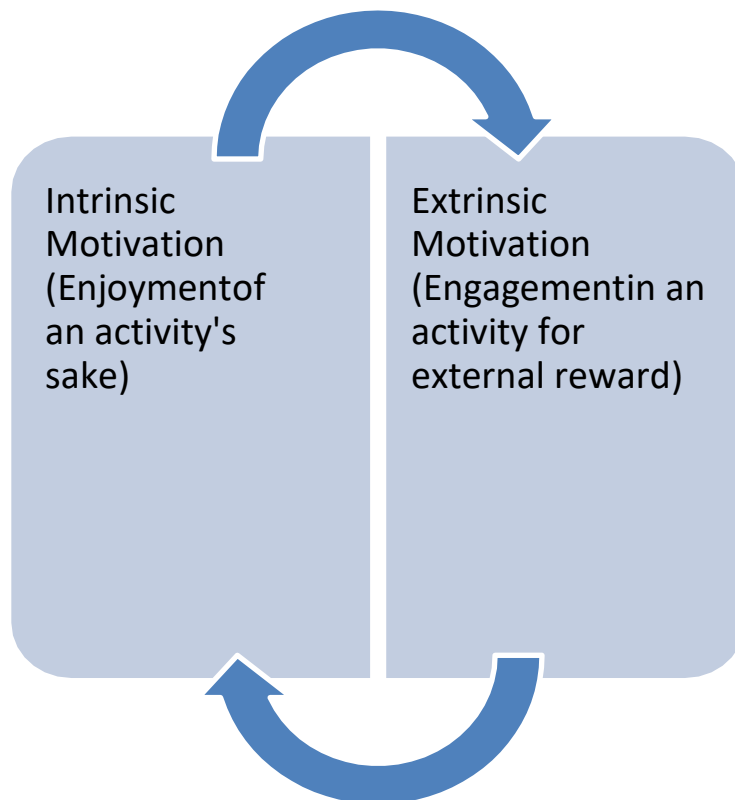
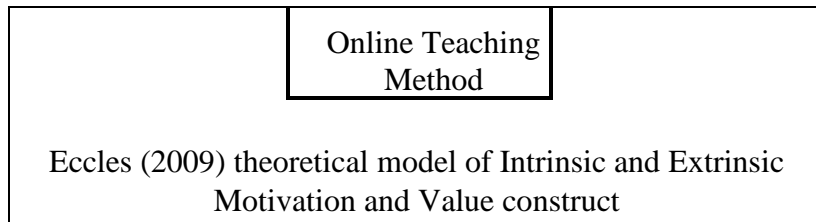


Figure 1: Theoretical model of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation and Value construct

Methodology

The study under consideration was a phenomenological study aimed at exploring the perceptions and meanings gifted students connect with the online learning experience studying at higher education level introduced during COVID-19 situation.

Participants

Participants of the study consisted of gifted students studying in two universities of Islamabad. Total 18 Students were selected through convenient sampling technique

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the participants for the study.

Table 1.

Demographic details of the gifted students

<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Disability</i>
18	11	7	18-30	4	14	Physical Type

Research Instruments

For collection of required data for the study, two instruments were prepared. One questionnaire and second tool used for data collection was a structured interview. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. Section one was meant to collect demographic information about students. This section consisted of data about gender, age, residential area. And type of disability. While section two consisted of items that aimed at exploring the perceptions and meanings that special students connect with the online learning scenario created due to COVID-19 situation. The questionnaire was converted into Google form and link for it was shared with students through email, what Sapp and SMS.

Participants needed to respond in five point Likert Scale. Aspects covered in different subsections of questionnaire were related to comfortable and enjoyable learning , devices and platforms commonly used for joining and attending online classes, most liked and dis-liked aspects in online learning mode, modes used for delivering the content effectively, preferences of teachers and students in using these online modes, internet related issues as availability and quality

of internet, and students perceptions about advantages and disadvantages of using online teaching and learning modes.

Findings

Data were collected from 19 participants to examine special students' experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and to find answers to the research questions. The results of the current study are given in table 2. The table below provides the details of the student's responses according to the areas covered and items asked. The responses were recorded and interpreted in percentages to provide an overall pictorial description of the perceptions of the gifted students related to the online learning phenomena. The table covers their perceptions about their comfort level during online classes, enjoyment, devices and platforms commonly used for participation in online classes etc.

Table 2.

Analysis of the experiences of special students concerning online learning during COVID-19 pandemic

S.N	Statements	YES		No		Total
		F	%	F	%	
1	Comfort with Online learning during COVID-19 pandemic	12	63.15	7	36.84	19
2	Enjoyment with online learning during corona virus crisis	12	63.15	7	36.84	19
3	Mobile	14	73.68	5	26.31	19
4	Computer	0	0	19	100	19
5	Devices used for online learning	3	15.78	16	84.21	19
6	Tablet	2	10.52	17	89.47	19
7	Digital platforms used for online learning	16	84.21	3	15.78	19
8	Zoom					
8	Google Classroom	0	0	19	100	19
9	Google Hangouts	0	0	19	100	19
10	WhatsApp	3	15.78	16	84.21	19
11	Facebook	0	0	19	100	19

12	You Tube	0	0	19	100	19
13	Knowledge about the use of Devices and Digital platforms	19	100	0	0	19
14	Accessibility of Good Internet Connectivity	4	21.05	15	78.94	19
15	Most liked features of online platforms	17	89.47	2	10.52	19
	Flexibility					
16	Accessibility of					
17	content materials	16	84.21	3	15.78	19
18	Interaction with					
19	teachers and peers	18	94.73	1	5.26	19
20	Comfort	12	63.15	7	36.84	19
21	Self-paced	14	73.68	5	26.31	19
22	Poor network and Most disliked elements of online platforms connectivity	4	21.05	15	78.94	19
23	Distractions	7	36.84	12	63.15	19
24	Lack of interaction	1	5.263	18	94.73	19
25	Poor					
26	comprehensibility of	0	0	19	100	19
27	content					
28						
29						

		Lack of support	2	10.52	17	89.47	19
1	Content delivery modes used by teachers	Teacher-made Text	4	21.05	15	78.94	19
		Materials					
		Video conferencing	0	0	19	100	19
		Textbook or					
		Reference book materials	13	68.42	6	31.57	19
		Teacher-made video	0	0	19	100	19

		Video from online source	0	0	19	100	19
		Teacher made audio file	19	100	0	0	19
		Audio from internet	0	0	19	100	19
2	Students' preferred content delivery modes	Teacher-made Text Materials	19	100	0	0	19
		Video conferencing	3	15.78	16	84.21	19
		Textbook or Reference book materials	19	100	0	0	19
		Teacher-made video	19	100	0	0	19
		Video from online source	6	31.57	13	68.42	19
		Teacher made audio file	0	0	19	100	19
		Audio from internet	0	0	19	100	19
3	Students' perceived advantages of online learning	I can learn anytime according to my convenience	18	94.73	1	5.26	19
		I can learn from anywhere	12	63.15	7	36.84	19
		I can access materials provided by instructors	15	78.94	4	21.05	19
		It is highly flexible for me	17	89.47	2	10.52	19

		I feel more				
		autonomous while learning online	18	94.73	1	5.263 19
		Teachers are more friendly online than face-to-face teaching	11	57.89	8	42.10 19
		Proper guidance for online safety and security is given	2	10.52	17	89.47 19
		Others: Save travelling expenses	16	84.21	3	15.78 19
4	Students' perceived disadvantages of online learning	Poor connectivity	4	21.05	15	78.94 19
		Lack of time	0	0	19	100 19
		Lack of support	0	0	19	100 19
		No opportunity for interaction	4	21.05	15	78.94 19
		No clarification of doubts and queries	0	0	19	100 19
		No supportive materials are provided	7	36.84	12	63.15 19
		No guidance is given for online platform	0	0	19	100 19
		Lack of				

comprehensibility of the concept	2	10.52	17	89.47	19
Learning is teacher directed only	16	84.21	3	15.78	19
Learning is one-sided	16	84.21	3	15.78	19

When students were asked to rate their comfort level in online learning mode the responses showed that 64% students showed comfortable in online learning mode. The responses of students regarding comfort and enjoyable experiences students considered it as positive experience. Students stated a satisfied and comfortable experience provided by teachers and university. It was found encouraging that students were satisfied and were also enjoying their learning during online learning experience. As this enjoyable experience may lead to more practical and meaningful learning for students.

Students used different devices for online learning such as mobile, computers, and laptop and tablet computers. Students were supposed to provide their feedback and perceptions for all of these devices. Findings proved that 73% students were using mobile phone for joining, attending and responding to online classes for online learning while none of them used desktop computer. Laptops and tablets were also rarely used by students. Multiple platforms were used by different institutions for conducting online classes. Rather students were encouraged to get used to all platforms. Frequency table for using these platforms showed that majority of students (84%) respondent students were using Zoom video conferencing application for online learning. All of them were aware about the use of devices and platforms.

Findings showed that majority of the students were facing problem in availability of good internet connectivity. This resulted in problems as difficulty in accessing content materials, incomplete comprehension, and less chances to interact properly with teachers and students. The findings supported that mostly liked aspects of online learning included online learning interactive with peers and teachers during COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, majority of the students found online classes schedule more flexible in terms of time and specially place as they were not supposed to be physically present in specific rooms of university rather, they were even able to join their classes during traveling, shopping and job as well. When students were asked to give open ended responses about disliked aspects of

online learning mode. Findings showed that some students were not found comfortable due to inaccessibility of internet facilities. They mentioned the high level of difficulty in getting good signal strength, and speed of internet in rural areas. While 61% students responded as they considered online learning mode more distracting due to unavailability of proper environment at home, environmental distractions, noise, and family distractions.

As far as content delivery of content by teachers and instructors is concerned, it was reported that 69% teachers were providing their students with teacher prepared, text-based material. While 100% students agreed that teacher's voice-based material was useful. Students also shared that a combination of PPT and teacher's oral explanation was considered as useful in their learning. Least popular and useful modes included audio messages through email or another source. Students presented the idea that written text (either on PPTs or messages) along with the audio explanation of the teachers were designed according to the requirements of the students. Some students also suggested that teachers need to utilize many platforms for distribution of materials. When students were inquired about the most preferred mode of content delivery. Mostly student's preferred teacher made texts and videos recorded by teachers along with textbooks and links of online resources were considered as most preferred. Students preferred audio files least.

Table 2 aimed at presenting students' perceptions about advantages of online learning mode. The majority of students (19%) considered as online learning mode provides freedom of place. They value the benefit most that in online mode they do not need to go anywhere.

Along with positive aspects students were asked to enlist negative aspects of online mode of learning. Majority of students (85%) considered online mode as non-engaging. These students considered as one-sided flow of communication as teacher was more dominant in this mode. The reasons these students considered were shortage of time in online classes, but this created a further problem that their queries and questions left unanswered. Students also suggested that teachers need to make arrangements for decreasing the workload of students as in the time of crisis it students need to retain their mental as well as emotional energy to cope up with the ever changing situations. A sense of support and togetherness, guidance and planning of engaging activities can also be helpful. Students had the idea that gifted students feel more difficulty in adjusting with this new scenario as teachers were unable to accommodate all the students. It created more challenging situation to visually impaired students as when

teachers were sharing their screens with power point presentations, they assumed that all students could gain required information. Though some teachers tended to read the text but sometimes for saving their time they may not read every word on the screen.

When students were asked to respond to the question about their willingness to continue with online learning mode after COVID-19 situation, their responses varied. Majority of students (84%) favored blended mode or hybrid mode than purely online learning mode. As face-to-face learning was considered as still the favorite mode. In face-to-face mode students enjoyed working in groups and interacting with their peers boosts students' motivation and involvement. This mode also helps in cultivation of social skills, collaboration, and interactive skills of the students.

Students' perceptions about the negative aspects of online learning activities students felt ignored by teachers specially classes where majority of students was normal. Students considered online learning mode that it misses the element of engagement, successful and involving due to distracting activities involved in it. Students demanded more interactive and social way of learning rather than isolated activity of sitting alone and listen the one-way communication of teachers.

Conclusions and Discussions

Special students' learning requires special arrangements as modification in environment, course learning materials and teaching mode. In this way it requires special care for teachers and institutions to make such arrangements that can facilitate gifted students in their academic learning course. Especially in the time of the crisis as COVID-19 universities are trying to alter hybrid and blended learning mode. But this scenario is challenging in the way that it requires two types of arrangements to make. 1. Physical and equipment provision 2. Motivational and training arrangements for individualized needs. Shah et al ,(2004) states that disability is not a static term rather it is relative and varies on the basis of time period, location and social settings of the gifted person. The term disability is described in convention on Human Rights (2008) as "physical, mental, psychological or sensory" impairment in any individual who needs support to contribute to the development of the society in social, economic or political manner (Matonya, 2016).

Students with disabilities are commonly denied participating in

social, educational, economic and cultural activities. Groce, (2004) calls them “most disadvantaged” and poor people as they cannot participate in the activities that may be would not be considered as a problem for them. Though charter of human rights clearly declares that education is “extremely important” for every member of society irrespective of age, gender, socio economic status ethnicity and abilities.

Gifted students are often considered as useless or burden on the society. As a result, their chances to participate in the social, economic and educational activities are blocked. So, they are unable to enjoy the social status and advantages that are their right. Barnes, (2010) considers it a social and educational loss. Lack of infrastructure, and shortage of professional and educational opportunities are another reason for such negation of gifted students. Another issue that mostly gifted students were facing and highlighted was the lack of identification and solution of problems faced by gifted students. Mantonya, (2016) stated that similar situations are also faced by special students even in Sub-Saharan African Countries. World Health Organization, (2011) states that in spite many treaties gifted students still face difficulty in access to the right of education.

The findings of the present study also support the same idea that though gifted students are suffering more than normal ones but still they are making more effort to cope up with this new educational emergency and also seeking motivation by enjoyment of new learning scenario. It was encouraging to find that students considered the brighter side of the scenario in which they considered the advantages of online learning even in the disappointing times of social isolation and distancing during COVID-19. Khan et al, (2020) several gifted students reported to face difficulty during a paradigm shift in the traditional learning environment to digital learning environment and also requirements of additional skills in this scenario. These difficulties include missing the physical presence and support from their friends, lacking of social skills, coping up with complexities of academic and social life, and modification in social behavior during online classes. Students also reported to feel difficulty in organization of life activities as well as their economic affairs.

Many studies supported the view that physical presence of students in their classrooms with their peers creates satisfaction and supportive environment, while lack of physical support and isolation can create feelings of loneliness among students in general and gifted students specifically (Bullen, 1998; Hara and Kling, 2000; Zembylas et al., 2008). Tinto, (1997) presented the view point that collaborative learning opportunities can play important role in motivating students’

encouragement and can enhance their involvement in their learning. Robert, (2005) concluded that majority of gifted students do not get chance to get engaged in learning. They inferred that in online learning adjustment of students becomes even more challenging for teachers and there are more chances that some students may be neglected or overlooked, and majority of such students were gifted or impaired students. This situation resulted as feeling of dis-satisfaction and happiness among students especially online learning mode.

It is suggested by many studies that, to involve students more actively and efficiently during online classes proper training of both teachers and pupils, awareness sessions about the functions and modes of online teaching and learning tools, and motivational speeches by teachers and other speakers can play an important role. Madriaga, (2011) stated that teachers and institutions and teachers need to ensure true and active inclusion of gifted students in learning and co-curricular discussions in online mode as it is helpful in creating sense of normalcy among gifted students. Madriaga, (2011) further states that ensuring the involvement of students in interaction can enhance the quality of online learning. For this purpose, it is necessary to build customized online platforms with more possibilities and modes of student's involvement during online classes (Phipps, 2015). Another report that supports the findings of the present study reported that 4.5% students from rural area while 24% of urban students own their personal computers but still it is not very encouraging figures NSO (2019). Lack of electricity, internet or other equipment related to conduction of online classes can be another reason for non-involving behavior of gifted students in online learning mode.

During their interview some students stated that using computer without special software designed for visually impaired students becomes difficult for them. They required specially designed computers or applications that made it easy for these students to use normally designed computers. As most of the information available on internet was in text form and the use of applications as WhatsApp or SMS required textual mode of transfer of knowledge. Students suggested that teachers need to keep this problem in mind while sharing any kind of information to avoid any inconvenience for students and families.

Hehir, (2002) stated that to enhance the access of students to all the resources, it is suggested that specially designed content and equipment is required for both gifted and normal students. Education can be helpful for parents and students themselves for arranging accessible language and other sources to the gifted students.

During the pandemic of COVID 19, internet accessibility was used as most effective tool as savior for educational institutions to overcome effects of worldwide lockdown and sudden closure of educational institutions. Along with being responsible for closure of educational institutions around on global level, COVID-19 also created rather introduced the opportunity of practicing online and digital platforms for teaching and learning activities. Sudden closure of institutions for safeguarding life and health of students and teachers affected educational activities in a drastic way. Findings of the study showed that this situation created some tension but along with this student took it a positive opportunity and enjoyed online learning mode. It would become more positive and enjoyable if proper facilities and sometime technical support was provided to students.

Recommendations

In the light of findings, it is recommended that institutions, with special students need to be closed as these are on high risk of becoming sick but along with these institutions need to detain some teachers or every teacher with some special students for provision of academic and technical support required by these students.

Universities need to conduct need analysis surveys to find out more acceptable platforms of connecting and attending online classes such as telephone, Whats App, e mail, and other institution based facilities as LMS and CMS etc.

Teachers may design and adopt trainings for online teaching strategies and assessment in more dynamic and individualized manner. In this way they will get more confident in dealing with students and specially students with physical and mental disabilities.

Creation of student-centered learning environment in online classes may also be helpful for involving all types of students. Teachers need to be careful for involving all students in interaction as they try to provide opportunities to all students in face –to-face classroom activities. In this way attendee sheets of lists of students may be used to call students' name for different activities.

Teachers and institutions need to devise a flexible schedule of classes for students with less technological knowledge. Teachers can record mini clips for guidance of students in using different functions during online classes. Further teachers and institutions can make arrangements for providing recorded lectures to students through e mail or USB on weekly or monthly basis.

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