



Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in the Pandemic mediated Socio-Psychological Emergency: Navigating Social Emotional Wellbeing Challenges

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Abstract

'Emergency' and 'Regular' are contrasting in nature in the sense of frequency of occurrence, but human civilization is going through a new discourse of experiences where emergencies are becoming regular phenomena, either natural or man-made. People have witnessed and suffered a different degree of social disaster leading to injury to emotional wellbeing. In the time when normalcy remains being seized off in an emergency, children who belong to the CWSN category with differential ability are becoming marginal among the vulnerable group. In recent pre-COVID years, challenges of emotional wellbeing of children is being acknowledged as global development issues. The wellbeing of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) was fragile enough even before the pandemic episode, and that has not been addressed for long. Social Emotional Wellbeing might be considered as a condition that is sustainable in nature empowers the individual to evolve and thrive and is thus correlated to the kind of accomplishment at personal and interpersonal space, allowing a person to adopt pro-social behaviours, which enable them to maintain positive relationships in the social ecosystem. Contemporary research suggests that the current level of challenges of emotional wellbeing in CWSN children is extremely acute. A narrative review technique has been employed in the present study to explore how the CWSN children have navigated during an emergency. The present researcher searched, identified and selected articles and policy advocacies which focused on the social issues of CWSN. The findings reveal that the nature of complexity of such a pandemic on social emotional wellbeing is extreme and unique for CWSN. It is high time to engage in formulation of new relevant policy and framework for capacity building of other stakeholders to ensure socio-emotional immunity to the children with special needs.

Key Words: Emergency, children with special needs, social emotional wellbeing, socio - emotional immunity

Introduction

'Emergency' and 'Regular' are contrasting in nature in the sense of frequency of occurrence, but the human civilization is going through a new discourse of experiences where emergencies are becoming regular phenomenon either natural or manmade. People have witnessed and suffered a different degree of social disaster leading to making injury

to emotional wellbeing. Whenever there is social disasters, children are the worst sufferers, especially children with special, kind of needs. After small scale and moderate scale wars, the world have recently experienced episodic social disasters due to contagious outbreak of SARS, Ebola and finally Covid-19. Any research approach excluding the differential representation of society is undesirable. So, it is appropriate time to focus and assess that how the unique groups like children of CWSN category have been navigated during such journey of storm and stress. It is time to bring the issues of CWSN learners experience in the body research knowledge.

When normalcy remains being seized off in an emergency, either natural or artificial, the children are the worst sufferers. In contrast, children who are differentially abled having special needs to navigate in life are marginal among the vulnerable group. In recent pre-COVID years, challenges related to the general wellbeing and, more specifically, the mental health of children and adolescents have been acknowledged as global development issues (Mukherjee, 2020). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the wellbeing of children with differential challenges, abilities, and needs was fragile enough, which has not been addressed, and only a very few research studies investigated the social-emotional immunity of CWSN learners.

Wellbeing is the combination of feeling good and functioning well; more specifically, SEW might be considered as a condition that is sustainable and empowers the individual to evolve and thrive and is thus correlated to the kind of accomplishment at personal and interpersonal space, allowing a person to adopt prosocial behaviours, and positive relationships (Davis, 2021). Recent research findings have suggested that the current level of behavioural and emotional problems in the CWSN group during the pandemic is higher than in the past (Asbury et al., 2020).

The increased need to protect the vulnerable within the vulnerable has been further prominent during COVID-19. The kind of impact and experience while raising demands of a focused policy programme and executing special care for CWSN in emergencies. At the same time, the system and governance have not shown much progress, and verifiable changes are yet to be made. The shortage of research data is also a big challenge for policymakers. The pandemic has forced children and adolescents to undergo different kinds of stress and related risks. Among the millions of children whose wellbeing and safety were challenged, the CWSN were further vulnerable. The previous experience of such emergencies, either for disease outbreaks, natural calamity, or war-like situations, has shown that CWSNs are differentially impacted in such extreme emergencies. Not attending regular school and education at home environment have given indulgence to create a stressful situation for the CWSN category of learners and their parents and other caregivers as normalcy was disrupted (Asbury, 2121). In India, while such CWSN children are forced to navigate through different kinds of trauma and stress, they are further deprived of social and unique support systems, which are basic needs for them. Parents

had shown higher degrees of anxiety and depression when they were worried too much about their children with special needs (Gruszka, 2023).

After a pause, it is time to re-look at this pandemic episode from a critical lens to the relevant challenges of the wellbeing of the particular social group of CWSN. Very few studies have explicitly focused on the emotional aspects of the wellbeing of CWSN. It is, therefore, pertinent to investigate how the pandemic's journey affected the wellbeing of CWSN children and the relevant challenges so that the authority of governance might adopt appropriate policy.

Background of the Study

On a global scale, one in every six children aged 2-8 years has some neurodevelopmental, behavioural or emotional difficulty (CDC, 2019). The CWSN population worldwide is estimated to be nearly 240 million, per the latest UNICEF report. According to UNESCO, India is home to 8 million children with certain kinds of disabilities. Recent research also evident that not only children having special needs not suffer during the extraordinary situation caused by pandemic-mediated school closure, but also parents and caregivers had similar experiences of loss worry, and they had also demonstrated mood and behavioural disorders (Asbury et al., 2021)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, severe restriction was imposed, and such sudden absences of essential services for CWSN learners have further destabilized CWSN children who were already deprived of appropriate care and resources. The economic backlash aggravated the family crisis, and school closure caused social isolation and special service and support systems for such marginalized CWSN groups. The level of stress in home social ambience has further negatively accelerated the frequency and magnitude of domestic abuse, conflicts and violence, culminating towards a kind of unrest situation (UNICEF, 2020b) that has also mounted a negative effect on such vulnerable groups. Approximately 72% of the CWSN children inhabited the rural part of India. (UNESCO, 2019). The poverty and the remoteness made it challenging to provide the needs of the service to such children during the pandemic. All such disruption further enhanced the vulnerability of such groups from the perspective of their social and emotional wellbeing.

The theoretical basis for researching the pandemic-mediated socio-psychological emergency of children with special needs (CWSN) encompasses theoretical underpinning and frameworks that address the unique challenges these children and their associates face during the pandemic-mediated crisis. The broader theoretical paradigm of research integrates concepts from psychological distress, parental burnout, and the need for psycho-social interventions. Conservation of Resource Theory posits that individuals struggle and strive to curate, retain, and protect essential resources. During the quarantine and other restrictive measures adopted during the pandemic, parents and other caregivers of CWSN experienced significant resource loss, leading to increased psychological

distress. Such experiences of parents and caregivers impacted the wellbeing of the CWSN children. (Ng, N. S., & Yeung, N. C., 2024). The research findings of such paradigms may highlight the coping strategies, including effective family communication, stress mitigation and resource management in extraordinary situations like a pandemic. Parent-child relationship dynamics is another significant framework that addresses the strenuous relationship between CWSNs and their parents and caregivers. This theoretical research established that parental stress and burnout correlate with children's wellbeing (Çimen et al., 2023). This theoretical approach is expected to illuminate how it can foster positive relationships in buffering the adverse effects of stressors during the paralysis of normalcy (Nurmukhamedova, 2022).

Wellbeing, Health and Developmental framework research on CWSN children has tried to emphasize the pattern of regular activities courses in terms of the overall health of CWSN, exacerbating issues related to cognition, mental health, and social interactions. Continuous research-based evaluation and conducive mechanisms might be the output of such research. It might help to navigate the challenges and ensure the wellbeing of CWSN during and after crises (Dost et al., 2023).

In the above context of frameworks of research addressing the challenges of CWSN children in terms of emergencies caused by pandemics, the research must also address the resilience and adaptability of these children and their families. Interventions to enhance coping strategies and resource management can foster resilience, enabling better outcomes in future crises (Gkatsa, 2023).

In the context of the above-discussed theoretical underpinning, the present research seeks to discover how this COVID pandemic impacted the social-emotional wellbeing of children with special needs, combining these approaches in the inquiry process.

Methodology

A narrative review technique has been employed for the present study (Demiris et al., 2019; Fins et al., 2000). The research literature, including research papers and policy advocacies collected, covers the social-emotional wellbeing aspects of the CWSN children during the COVID-19 pandemic. UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Repository are consulted as policy papers. The articles were explored online with specific keywords. The articles that were not directly related to the social and emotional issues of CWSN were rejected summarily.

Analysis of the findings

The detailed analysis revealed different layers of the crisis of CWSN children. The impact of a pandemic on social-emotional wellbeing is very complex for CWSN children. Such negative impacts are further differential for different social groups. The CWSN learners faced disruption of regularity in their everyday schedule, deprived of a logistic support

network, and loss of specialist advocacy and support apart from parental financial stress (Asbury et al., 2020). It is important to mention that the CWSN children are worst victim. The overall outcome of the qualitative exploration has been discussed in the following subsections.

Loss of Social Emotional services for CWSN learner

The abrupt closing of schools has impacted several aspects and surfaced several concerns regarding the vulnerability of children (Imran et al., 2020) in general and for CWSN in particular. They are exposed to hazardous and exploitative conditions in the home environment and face severe negation from parents and caregivers in many cases. Parents mostly failed to accommodate the minimal needs of CWSN and also failed to afford the continuation of their children's education, even after school reopened. The COVID-19 economic crisis is currently wreaking havoc on people's professions and vocations; where impoverished families, especially children having different kinds of challenges and differential needs, are obviously the first victims of the situation, more children are at risk of being forced into labour of hazardous (Kaur & Byard, 2021) in few cases. As the special schools and daycare centres were forced to close, these CWSN children were denied access to institutional infrastructure, resource gadgets, peer group associations and interactions. In many cases, these CWSN children did not receive the regular expert assistance of special educators and trained staff, and such loss of services leads to minimizing the learning opportunities.

Impact on social emotional wellbeing

The children representing different categories of CWSN having multiple kinds of behavioural and emotional difficulties faced severe challenges through the journey of the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC, 2019). They have perceived this paralysis of social design in manifolds higher in degree than their standard counterpart. Irrespective of the nature of the challenges, the CWSN children showed aggravated symptoms of a unique kind due to the restrictions forcefully enforced upon them, as such restrictions caused an unfriendly environment, hampering their routine. CWSN learners with existing emotional problems are not habituated to co-exist with the variation in the social climate. Thus, there is a high chance of aggravation of behavioural problems.

The situation suddenly posed a threat to their ability to follow instructions to manage life and learning. They found it extremely difficult to understand the severity and complexity of the pandemic-mediated situation, and therefore, they utterly failed to accomplish their task independently.

Lack of unique receive and expert assistance leads to challenges in significant social and behavioural abilities and skills. In due time, such challenges lead to regressive dynamics of their behavioural pattern and, more clearly speaking, their symptoms of behavioural challenges relapse (Lee, 2020) in most cases. The parents became puzzled and traumatized

about handling the situation. The parent-children relationship suffered further, in turn impacting the social and emotional life of both parents and the children having differential needs. Factually, even prior to the experiences of lockdown life, these children with special needs were facing different kinds of difficulties in attending special schools. At the same time, the course pandemic triggered lifestyle further dismantled the good habits they had developed in attending academic institutions (APA, 2020 & Cortese et al., 2020). These findings also revealed that the present global policy has created a situation where parents depend mainly on experts, special educators, and therapists. In such emergencies, they become helpless as they are highly inadequate in managing CWSN learners (Dalton et al.).

The CWSN learners have different kinds of challenges, and hence, they have differential needs that need to be met. Some of the research revealed that children with autism faced severe challenges in adapting to the changing social environment behaviorally. Such autistic children show restlessness and agitation and are agrarian as they are forced to adjust altered schedules. In addition to that, this kind of learner has shown a tendency to self-harm. The most important finding is that the denial of facilities for speech and occupational therapists has negatively impacted the skill development of such CWSN learners. As such, learners are primarily unable to learn through virtual mode (UNICEF, 2020a).

The learners who had been suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) suffered the most in interpreting the ongoing social development around them, as the cues they were receiving were somewhat different from the usual pattern. The imposed lockdown and confinement induced an increase in hyperactivity as the parents and caregivers failed to manage their impulses (Cortese et al., 2020).

The CWSN learners with Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), having symptoms of obsession compulsions and somatic preoccupation, had experienced severe distress during the COVID pandemic journey.

So, the overall influence of the COVID pandemic on social-emotional wellbeing is negative, and the severity is severe. Most research revealed that low mood, emotional imbalance and behaviour changes were pre-dominant among CWSN learners. The significant impacts of the CWSN learners, as reported by parents and caregivers, improvised by Asbury et al. (2020), might be represented as follows:

Some research is based on systemic self-organization approaches, emphasizing complex, non-linear interactions between children, adolescents, and their environments. This research reveals the need for differentiated models and instruments for pedagogical-psychological diagnostics to address the psycho-social impacts of the pandemic. (Baumann, 2021). Some of the research provides a theoretical basis for research on the pandemic's socio-psychological impact on children with special needs. It focuses on empirical findings regarding changes in the psycho-social characteristics of children with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Rachel et al. 23). Few studies also focus on perceived social support, mental health, and socioeconomic status during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Geweniger et al. 24). The pandemic-mediated disruptions significantly affected the wellbeing of children with special needs, primarily due to school closures and social isolation. As far as parents' and caregivers' reflections are concerned, they are worried about their children's social and emotional health, emphasizing the critical role of in-person schooling in fostering peer relationships and social skills development.

Discussion

Social-emotional wellbeing is a significant physical and mental health dimension in crises or emergencies, thus contributing to ensuring society's meaningful and desirable functioning (Pancani et al., 2020; Zhang & Ma, 2020). All the existing programs which are being designed and executed for school children, especially for the CWSN for the social and emotional protections, are found to be ineffective and inadequate in terms of the gravity of the crisis (Mukherjee et al., 2021)

In the policy documents titled 'Protection of Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic', UNICEF (2020c) explicitly advocates for children especially vulnerable, including CWSN learners. As the majority of the research findings have hinted that the social and emotional wellbeing of the children of the marginal section, especially the CWSN category, are at risk in the prevailing pandemic and immediate post-pandemic social context, it is the urgent need of the hour to develop the design and implement service programme for protecting the overall mental health of this vulnerable group. The CWSNs who were enjoying the relevant training, therapy, and other treatments are at higher risk of being denied such services and derailed from therapeutic measures and special education. Children detached from the societal atmosphere and rigid confinement might develop a higher

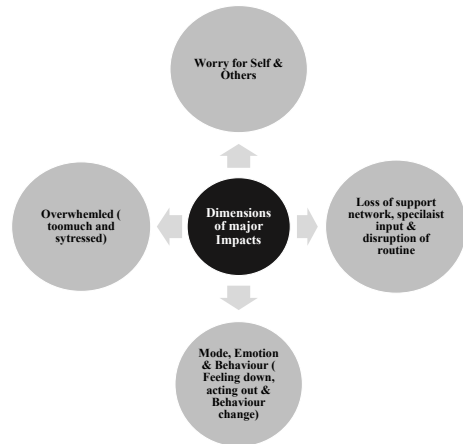


Figure 1: Impacts of COVID pandemic on SEW of CWSN learners

risk for wellbeing-related challenges. In rare cases, it has been found that few learners with special needs were not affected at all or even if affected not severely because they had either limited or no regular socialization before such COVID-induced confinement or maybe because their lives had not seen any radical shift in their daily practice of life, as revealed from the research conducted in the context of Japan (Asaoka et al., 2023)

In most recent research, parents and caregivers noted that children faced communication barriers, leading to emotional difficulties and reduced peer interaction (Osman & Whitley, 2024). At the same time, research also revealed that limited social contact inhibited the development of essential social skills, with many children experiencing increased anxiety and loneliness (Castle et al., 2024). All these kinds of obstructions lead to a negative impact on wellbeing. Not only that, but that systematic review reveals an overall decline in mental health among CWSN children, with varied experiences based on individual differences rather than specific disabilities (Castle et al., 2023).

Common issues included heightened anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems, exacerbated by the lack of structured routines and support systems (Dost et al., 2023). Children with special needs experienced more significant hyperactivity, peer problems, and behavioural difficulties during school closure and quarantine. Over one-third of parents reported insufficient IEP services, contributing to higher parent depression symptoms and unmet academic needs, exacerbating overall wellbeing challenges (Torres et al., 2024). In addition, the research revealed that children with developmental disabilities experienced behavioural and emotional deterioration during the pandemic, causing disruptions due to service disruption, transition to telehealth, and social isolation. These factors and increased family stress significantly impacted their wellbeing during the pandemic.

The pandemic-mediated crisis is unprecedented and affects almost every sphere of human life, while the mental health of children is probably the worst affected and might have a sustained impact if not addressed with immediacy (Mukherjee, 2021). Contemporary research findings established that the children with special needs and their families have gone through a higher degree of negative experience in terms of social-emotional wellbeing than the less vulnerable section. It has come to the surface from the pandemic experience that we were not prepared enough to address the gravity of crisis if encountered on a large scale. There is still a lack of networking among all relevant stakeholders for such CWSN learners.

Conclusion

The collaborative network of parents, psychiatrists, different kinds of therapists, medical practitioners specialized in the field, volunteers, and NGOs needs to be built and strengthened. This would be crucial to prevent post-pandemic wellbeing challenges and prepare a system for the future crisis of CWSN learners, a vulnerable section of society. The public mental health policy needs to be rebuilt in such a fashion that it could serve

the needs of CWSN learners by taking the regional contextual parameters into account to ensure social-emotional immunity for such CWSN learners. In conclusion, it could be said that there is a need for a 'resilient system' which can respond to the CWSN learners in any emergency to ensure social-emotional immunity as follows:

1. There is a need to develop a system by consultation with parents of CWSN to assess modes of instruction used for accessibility, quality, and engagement of children to provide social-emotional immunity during emergencies.
2. We need to develop a system for tracking the CWSN learners who are at risk of discontinuing education by dropping out.
3. Ensure the mobility of such CWSN learners so they have social interaction, which is a key factor in maintaining their social and emotional wellbeing.
4. The capacity building of Teachers, caregivers and parents must be on the agenda.
5. We need a revision of the Policy for CWSN learners so that social and emotional wellbeing is at the epicenter of every learning-teaching programme.

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