

The teaching-learning process is a continuum of experiences with the teacher in class and homework and learning at home. Pauses in an academic year are usually structured and, more often than not, they are partial. These periods offer unique opportunities – many a time in a fun way – to reinforce what was taught in class, making sure that children can seamlessly continue with the academic sessions when our school resumes. However, the pandemic brought upon us a pause which was both unplanned and with no end in sight! The impact on academics has been significant, more so, for children with dyslexia.

At the outset, the teaching-learning process for a child with dyslexia is based on the philosophy *teach me the way I learn*. This is best done by making the process gainful as well as fun, using the multi-modal approach. Through this, the child receives inputs through auditory, visual, kinaesthetic and tactile channels – either through all or an appropriate combination which is aligned to the child's learning style. Implicit in this approach is that the teaching methods are never one-size-fits-all.

When the pandemic struck, special educators at the Madras Dyslexia Association (MDA) got into action quite early to devise remedial sessions which leveraged technology yet stayed as close as possible to the ways best suited for reaching out to children with dyslexia. To quote Mrs Savitri Krishnan, Head of our After-School Remedial Centre, 'Ingenuity, creativity and adaptation is the need of the hour'. Exuding confidence in the special educators, she said, 'They do their best as always and make a difference and reach out to every child in need'.

Mrs Gouri Ramanathan, Principal of Ananya Learning and Research Centre, our full-time remedial learning centre for children with dyslexia, shared similar thoughts. She described the various innovative methods that the special educators employed to cope with some typical issues, for example, deficits in attention and sitting tolerance, faced while teaching a child with dyslexia.

In one instance, a child was encouraged to do some fun, physical exercises within the frame of

the camera, which enabled the special educator to encourage the child and make sure that he got back to the classwork at the stipulated time. Sometimes, the two of them would play interesting online games so that the child could relax, and the teacher could then get her attention back to the lesson!

However, all the special educators felt that verbal encouragement could not compensate for a gentle pat on the back or an encouraging touch to reduce the frustration that builds up.

At the start of the pandemic, students, teachers and parents had divergent opinions and expectations of the online sessions, varying from the excitement of trying out something new to scepticism. Hurdles were posed by technology, connectivity issues and sudden change-over to a no-paper, no-text scenario. Both teachers and children adapted themselves to the new norms very quickly and teachers and parents were relieved that remedial sessions could continue without a break, continuity being an important peg to ensure reinforcement in the teaching-learning process for children with dyslexia.

The experiences, involvement and reactions of the parents have been varied. If not for the trust vested in the special educator, the quick realignment may not have been possible, though there were incidents of over-zealous parents doing the homework and sometimes even classwork within plain sight (of the camera)! There were some parents who looked forward to significant improvements in the child's skill levels in this short duration. Both special educators and the senior teachers counselled the parents on these aspects. There were a few occasions when the special educators had to bring to the notice of the parents the distraction caused by activities going on in their homes during the class. (Of course, some of them provided comic relief and helped diffuse some frustrating moments too!). In some cases, the COVID-instilled anxiety in the parents rubbed off on their children too.

For many parents, these online sessions were an eye-opener: they saw the effort their children put in and the struggle they faced to achieve small goals

set during the class. This brought in the realisation that the child was not being lazy nor is he stupid - the two common perceptions about children with dyslexia.

Educational technology (Edtech) was an esoteric term till the pandemic struck, but with the passage of these few months, special educators have become willing users of various software, computers, web camera and other devices for effective teaching. The integration of these into the lesson plan is now very smooth. Mrs Surekha says, 'I am looking forward to trying out features of the e-classroom software to enrich the teaching process.' Gouri Ramanathan expressed eagerness to continue the integration of Edtech in remedial teaching when in-class teaching finally resumes. Both of them concurred that the special educators were a closely-knit group, sharing their experiences and learning from each other. However, there are some aspects that could not be addressed, for example, mechanical aspects of writing, extra-curricular activities like yoga, dance and music sessions for the holistic development and counselling sessions for the children.

Online sessions for Occupational Therapy (OT) were planned based on individual needs and were able to

help the child cope with the difficulties in fine motor, gross motor, attention and executive function. However, children themselves unanimously missed the ambience of a school and the classrooms. The opportunities to participate in fun-filled activities planned around Multiple Intelligences (MI) were sorely missed. The online version of the activities was good, but in-class activities were better! Parents and special educators, however, worry about how children would adjust to returning to school later.

The management perspective was centred around the operational issues. Face-to-face assessments have not been possible since the start of the pandemic. This has led to fewer admissions implying, fewer children have received the benefit of full-time remediation. There has been an impact on the revenue too. Online awareness programmes and training sessions are being conducted to ensure that we continue to strive to work towards our mission of enabling a dyslexia-sensitive society. The Madras Dyslexia Association hopes to take forward the positive outcomes of the teaching-learning process from this pandemic and bridge the gaps once the in-class sessions resume.

Acknowledgement

The writer thanks Savithri Krishnan, Gowri Ramanathan and Harini Ramanujam for their inputs for this article.



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