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Online Learning Accessibility for Children with Disabilities in Rural Uganda: Lessons from COVID-19 Wave 1&2 Lockdown

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study examines the factors influencing access to online learning for disabled students enrolled in secondary school by school closure amid Coronavirus (COVID-19 wave 1& 2) lockdown in rural Uganda. Students with various disabilities were interviewed and their parents and caretakers to find their experience with online learning in the rural Kalungu district. The findings reveal that online learning cannot produce desired results in underdeveloped countries like Uganda, where most disabled students are unable to access the internet and data due to monetary and technical issues. Negative attitudes on disability and lack of support by parents and caretakers continue to pause challenges—the voices of disabled children matter. The study recommends online learning for disabled children and urges the government and its stakeholders to organize refresher courses for teachers in both government and private schools to enable them to cope with the 21st century of ICT.

KEYWORDS: Online Learning, Accessibility, Children with Disabilities, Rural Uganda

INTRODUCTION
Disability is not a new or rare phenomenon in Uganda society. As of 2014, one in every twenty-five persons in the country has some form of disability (Uganda National Household Survey, 2014). This trend does not appear to be changing, as the latest statistics show that 12.4% of Uganda's population lives with some form of disability. So, it does not surprise that the Uganda government and several humanitarian agencies have spent many resources on ensuring a better society for the disabled, where they can live a whole and fruitful life.

In 2017, the government of Uganda, through the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance (MoICT & NG), formulated an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for Disability Policy in the year 2017 aimed at enhancing service provision through the use of ICT and improving the lives of persons with disabilities (the Republic of Uganda, 2017). The policy guides the development and supply of accessible ICTs in Uganda. This intervention was a direct result of the realization (on the part of the government) that people with disabilities are lagging in accessing services and are disproportionately denied access to ICT services and the advantages it provides.

THE PROBLEM
The gap between the able- bodied and disabled access to infrastructure and other services was further widened by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdowns. All learning institutions (from primary up to University) were shut down, and learning continued virtually. The sudden shift to the online space is particularly worrying for disabled people. The 2017 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for Disability Policy aimed to address the ICT gap between the abled and disabled and the covid-19 restrictions and the resultant changes in society. This study, therefore, seeks to understand how accessible online learning is for school-age disabled children.

STATUS OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN UGANDA
Education is a right for every child irrespective of disability status, given its

multiple benefits, including preparing children for future life challenges (UNCRPD, 2020; UNCRC, 1989). Children need to have quality education irrespective of whether they live in an urban or remote setting. Although Uganda has a policy on the education of children with special needs, it is essential to understand the schooling status of disabled children, especially during this COVID-19 era when some schools have adopted online learning.
A report presented by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics at the World Population Day Celebrations on 11th July 2020 reflects that Uganda's population is projected at 41.6 million people and set to more than a 47million by July 2021(UN, 2021). This rise comes with likely consequences.

In addition, out of 7.3 million households in Uganda, 5,475,000 are in rural areas (UBOS, 2021). The population is dominated by the 15-24 year age group while 0-14 years is the majority. Uganda has an estimated number of 2,027,148 children with disabilities (Male=1,052,000 Female=974,488) (MOGLSD, 2016). Some of these children cannot attend school, while others fail to transit from one level to another (Marcia and Paula, 2010). Some disabled children work hard and excel in their academic life. For instance, in the recent release of the Uganda Primary Leaving Examinations UPE), it was noted that out of 749,761 candidates, there were 1,599 (M=752, F=847) learners with special needs of various categories (the blind, the deaf, the physical hand capped and the dyslexics) among others.

All categories of children had those that scored first grades except the deaf category. Partially blind children, those needing extra time and the people with dyslexia and those needing transcribers excelled. It does not mean that such children are not faced with challenges as they study. Instead, they chose to persevere with the support of their teachers, parents and communities.

Of the above special needs candidates registered, 20 were absent and did not sit for their 2020 PLE (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021). It is disturbing to note that primary school enrollment is high, but the completion rate is low. For instance, statistics show that in 2013, a total of 1,875,553 enrolled to start primary one by the end of primary seven in 2020, only 736,942 completed primary seven. Thus, the number of pupils that dropped out before completing primary seven was 1,138,611. These are the majority. To make matters worse, only 300,000 students complete the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE), and only 100,000 students complete the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) annually (Ministry of Education and Sports,2021). Although there is a lack of precise disaggregated data on the dropout rate for children with special needs, this indicates their low school completion rate given the intolerable challenges they experience.

Schooling of children with disabilities in Uganda is conducted through a) special schools that cater for children with disabilities b) mainstream schooling depending on options available in the school to support the child through inclusive education. Integrated education has been encouraged since 1997 when Uganda Introduced Universal Education at the primary and secondary school levels. Thus, children with special needs are enrolled in various schools in Uganda (Susanne & Sally, 2002). All these schools closed in March 2020 with the coronavirus outbreak, and some of them have utilized online media and social media tools such as zoom, WhatsApp, Google to ensure continued interaction and education during the pandemic (Kaur, 2020).

Although the use of online learning is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a new practice in Uganda, very little is written about its efficacy and effects (Muhammad & Kainat, 2020; McPherson & Bacow, 2015). The online learning practice has intensified in wave two lockdowns compared to wave one despite being expensive. Schools have specifically targeted semi-candidate classes. Students with disabilities are expected to comply with this trend. Families seem to respond differently depending on their situation. Susanne and Sally, 2002 assert that so often, the unique needs of children in the classroom setting are not met. Thus, one wonders the fate of disabled children concerning online learning with the COVID-19 Monster and a likelihood of wave 3.

As of 27th July 2021, there have been 92,795 confirmed cases and 677 active cases

(COVID-19 Response Info Hub, Uganda). These cases are exclusive of those in homes and cannot reach health facilities. This paint a picture that possibly there are more lockdowns ahead in case of failure to adhere to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

POLICY FRAMEWORK ON EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN UGANDA

Uganda is bound by the Human Rights Treaties such as the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020) prohibits exclusion from educational opportunities based on disability, socioeconomic status and sex. Similarly, several other international instruments guard against discrimination in education, namely, the convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1946), UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960). Uganda ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008).

The country is a signatory to additional international agreements that provide for learners with disabilities, such as the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. The instrument emphasizes the right for children to participate in quality education that is meaningful to everyone; the right for children with temporary and permanent needs for educational adjustments to attend school; the right of all children to attend school in their home communities in inclusive classes as well as the right of all children to participate in a child-centred education (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021).

The Constitution of Uganda (1995) and The Persons with Disabilities Act (1996) are critical instruments. In addition, Uganda's education system is also characterized by Universal Primary Education (UPE, 1997); Universal Secondary Education (USE, 1998), to which disabled children are beneficiaries. In order to meet these obligations, the Ministry of Education in Uganda has a distinct department in charge of special needs education.

Despite all these instruments in place, multiple numbers of disabled children continue to miss out on education, especially during the COVID-19 era, because they cannot access the education system through the use of ICT.

WHO ARE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES SHARING THEIR EXPERIENCE ON ACCESSIBILITY TO ONLINE LEARNING?

Generally, children with disabilities are the least visible among vulnerable children. This study singles out those most affected by the introduction of online learning during coronavirus wave 1&2 lockdown, as indicated in table 1.

Table 1: Category of Disabled Children Faced with Online Learning Challenges during Waves 1&2

- Children with difficulty seeing even with glasses
- Albino children
- Epileptic children
- Children with difficulty walking (Physically disabled children)
- Children with difficulty hearing even with hearing aid (deaf children)
- Children with difficulty in communication (dumb children)
- Children with difficulty hearing and talking (deaf- dumb children)
- Children with a disability to hear and see (deaf-blind)
- The little persons
- Children with a combination of two or more of the above

Source: Adopted from Washington Group Short Set (WGSS)

Although disability is experienced differently depending on the social norms of a given society, this study looks at the environment in which children with disabilities live, hindering them from accessing education through online learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social model of disability and the critical disability theory (1937) provide a theoretical framework for this study. The social model provides for the realization of a right to education for disabled people and a theoretical understanding of disability from a socio-political perspective. It seeks to explain

the relationship between people with disabilities and their ability to participate and contribute to society (Oliver, 2009). The theory emerged in the UK during the political activism of disabled people in the 1970s.

The Union of Physically Impaired People Against Impairment (UPIAS) argued that disability is imposed on disabled people by society as an oppressive and discriminating institutional structure (UPIAS 1976). Based on this new understanding of disability, scholars like Michael Oliver, who was influenced by Marxist sociology, developed the social model. In this ideology, disability is understood as an inability to contribute to or participate in society due to economic, social and cultural limitations imposed on the disabled by society (Barnes & Mercer 2010).

The social model argues for removing a disabling environment to ensure equal participation for people living with disabilities (Oliver, 2009). In general, the social model of disability hypothesizes that impairment and disability are different. Disability is both social oppression and social construction and is culturally produced and structured, while impairment is not. The theory suggests that people are made disabled by society and that impairment should not hinder their participation in society and access to opportunities.

Because of this, the right to participate in online education programs for the impaired requires an inclusive approach to online learning, which involves producing equal opportunity of access to online learning regardless of one's disability (Reiser, 2012). To ensure that everyone achieves equality, factors that cause inaccessibility to online learning and discrimination against disabled students should be addressed. Juxtaposing the social model of disability with inclusive online learning in education for the disabled, it can be deduced that disabled students are excluded from online learning in education not because of their disabilities but because of the current home and community environment that cannot take care of the students' needs. Therefore, for true inclusiveness in online learning, families, communities, and schools need to be reformed so that they can respond positively to the varied needs of disabled students. This will enhance their full participation in online learning for multiple benefits.

In addition, while exploring children's experiences, we built upon the argument that "disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power (lessness), power over, and power to" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). This standpoint thus challenged the 'traditional' able-bodied supremacy and the oppression that arises from restricting economic and social benefits to persons with disabilities, which are then redistributed as privileges to be negotiated (Oliver & Barnes, 1993; Rioux & Frazee, 1999).

While working with the critical disability theory, we moved away from the individual pathology of disability (based on the biomedical model) and beyond liberalism towards a social-political relationship. This enabled the development of a political and structural analysis of the exclusionary practices that disempower and marginalize disabled students by revealing their challenges, opportunities, implications and effects, and recommendations to improve their access to online learning.

It is mesmerizing to note that the critical theory according to Hosking (2008) adopts a version of the social model centred on principles explicitly that:
(a) The attitudinal, physical and institutional barriers cause social disadvantages experienced by disabled individuals thus, failure to meet their desires
(b) Disability reflects a complex connection between impairment, response to impairment by the person, as well as the social environment and
(c) Disability is a social construct not the inescapable consequence of the impairment (Hosking, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light challenges faced by disabled students in accessing online learning as a majority of the interventions by the government of Uganda has not taken into consideration the limitations imposed on disabled students, especially by their families and communities.

Students with disabilities have arguably been more affected by the pandemic and its resultant lockdowns in both waves 1 &2. This model helps us understand the need to reform online learning and the education system, in general, to ensure a more inclusive approach as the education system is obliged to advance due to the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach of In-depth Interview. During the COVID-19 lockdown with no register, snowball sampling was used to recruit a convenience sample of 42 disabled children in the Kalungu District of Uganda. Factors affecting children's access to online learning were assessed through individual in-depth interviews using an interview guide. Children were aged between 13 and 18 with different impairments, with different levels of family household income and were enrolled in secondary school at the time of wave one lockdown.

Parents and caretakers of the children were purposively selected and interviewed. These gave written consent to participate in the study. Adult consent was received on behalf of children that could not assent to participate by themselves while children that could do so assented on their own. In the Local council area, one chairpersons and community volunteers aided the process. The COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures such as hand washing, sanitizing and social distancing were strictly followed during data collection. Significant themes and quotes were selected to explain and show relevant themes. Identified themes were discussed and checked with the participants in follow up conversations conducted on the phone.

FINDINGS

First, the findings reveal that most disabled children are unable to access online learning. Their reasons vary from one individual to another, even among children that have similar forms of disability.

Internet network connectivity is a problem in the rural setting and worse during the afternoon hours, as reported by the study participants. Connecting to lessons in the morning hours when the network could be stable between 8:00 am-12:00 noon was an option for many, but this did not mean success with connectivity to all study participants. Others referred to it as just trying, and by luck, if it works, one can study that day.

Furthermore, from the findings, Albino students expressed how the challenge with eyesight deters them from using phones or computers for a more extended period, even in instances where they could afford to have access. They preferred that a friend or caretaker/ parent help read the material as they listened to the teacher. As expressed, this was a good approach but time-consuming for the second party. More so, many albino students needed magnifiers, caps, sunscreen lotion as some would take the option of moving to friends in the neighbouring homes to find smartphones and access online learning, but these items are unaffordable for their families. The findings showed that some respondents suffering from albinism could not move far away from home due to heightened fear of abduction and victimization due to their condition. These fear stemmed from the belief that people with albinism have some spiritual power that can unlock untold riches if harvested (through ritual killing). So, they fear being captured along the way.

The findings reveal that disability comes with an extra cost if any disabled student is to benefit from online learning, yet some families were found not in a position to afford assistive devices like hearing aids for the deaf and sign language interpreters. Some families expressed that they are poor and can only afford basic needs relating to the entire family, such as food and not catering to individual needs. Thus, some students with hearing impairment whose schools had online lessons missed studying during the lockdown. Others had their assistive devices spoilt earlier before the lockdown, and their families are just planning to replace them after the covid-19 Monster is out of the picture.

One parent of a seventeen-year deaf student voiced:

- *A well-wisher gave my daughter an assistive device. These spoilt seven months ago. The school has been giving her what she uses in a classroom, but the*

device is kept at school. When coronavirus started and the lockdown was initiated, she had no more access.

The findings also show that online learning is costly for families of disabled children, as explained by one guardian of a male student with hearing impairment:

- *I have been paying UGX 10,000 (Ten thousand shillings) every week as fees at school, then my son uploads about UGX 3,000 per day. As a parent to a disabled child, I am more financially constrained than my counterparts with non-disabled children. This is so stressful and traumatizing for me. It is also likely to result in post COVID sickness on my side. It is hard to get this money, yet I also buy books and pens. I thought that online learning was a short time measure when the lockdown started. I have chosen to have my son stop learning on the phone.*

In addition, findings show that some disabled students were unlikely to continue with lessons during the lockdown without parents providing the necessary devices such as smartphones. A few students with physical impairment were found not possessing any device despite being in semi-candidate and candidate classes. They continue to read notes from their teachers as they pray for school reopening.

Noteworthy, some of the students needed wheelchairs to move quickly to their colleagues who had smartphones. In most cases, their fellow students were non-disabled and from middle-income families that could afford to buy a smartphone for children in the home to share but did not mind much sharing with the disabled students. However, even when this was a possibility, the transport was a hindering factor. Their guardians were unwilling to transport them daily to their friends due to fear of contracting covid-19. Others see it as an opportunity to rest during school closure and resume daily transportation when schools open.

A fifteen-year-old senior- four girl with a physical disability shared:

- *Last week, my twelve-year-old brother went rolling me on a bicycle to go to my friend's home because she has a smartphone. This is a one-kilometre journey. I was a heavy mass for my brother, and he went sweating. On the way, we knocked a pawpaw tree, and up to today, my knees are still paining. I have given up until school opens again.*

Although the government seems to have put effort and trained teachers for different forms of disabilities, findings reveal that some students are not interested in continuing with school. Even when a well-wisher provides a smartphone, there is poor concentration.

One parent of a 17-year deaf-blind girl explained:

- *My daughter has been advised to go to her friend who has a smartphone in the neighbourhood and study with him. She only went there twice during the first lockdown and had not gone during wave two. Instead, she keeps demanding a braille machine. I do not have money.*

The findings reveal that social stigma and prejudice discourage parents from providing their disabled children with gadgets and logistics necessary for online learning. For instance, none of the minor persons and the deaf-blind interviewed was aware of lessons going on through online learning. None of them had a smartphone, nor did any of them have access to the computer.

Noteworthy, out of the few students interviewed, more boys than girls had access to smartphones. The majority of these were physical disabilities. Parents, friends and relatives provided moderate, intelligent phones. Some parents and caretakers agree to gender discrimination and prefer to buy smartphones for male students with disabilities instead of girls because the boys do not get money wasted as they will study to the end. Some parents felt it was a waste of additional resources to buy a smartphone for a girl who will get married soon, even before completing school. Although some families

advised their children to share the smartphone and access online classes, girls were inclined to engage more in household chores that they could manage rather than accessing online learning all the time. Thus, their pattern of access to online engagement was inconsistent.

The findings further revealed that parents made some salient mistakes during wave one lockdown. In female-headed households, the feeling that the children have matured and no need to waste more time and resources such as data into studying were frequently stated. The perceptions of parents of children with disabilities and their difficulties in helping their disabled children are also exposed. A parent of a 16-year-old deaf girl explained:

- *During wave 1, my daughter appeared young. Now she is bigger than me and much taller. One might think she is over 20 years. She does not fit to be in lower secondary school. There is no need to waste resources. Let her keep home.*

The findings revealed that the learning environment at school is much different from that at home. The majority of the study participants expressed how they found it difficult to concentrate in a home environment where they were interrupted by fellow siblings listening to the radio. Others were disrupted by parents sending them to do some household chores. One seventeen-year-old girl of short stature explained:

- *My Auntie always tells me in the middle of the lesson to go and buy salt or onions, wash plates or cups, and send me for any activity, especially when it is close to lunchtime when she needs to hurry with cooking food. Also, many children come to play with my fellow siblings, and they make much noise. This is the most distressing.*

Students who shared smartphones to study found it more frustrating when the school teachers gave weekly Google classroom work. It meant more cost in terms of data and time to do this individual work amid the challenge of charging phones that was done a distance away from where there was electricity. In the initial stages, some students did not know how to create personal email addresses and had to panic finding those who knew how to do so. This was another service at a cost that frustrated some of their guardians. To make matters worse, the installation of zoom was yet another cost. Beginning to operate a smartphone was trial and error for many study participants.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The finding that most of the disabled students interviewed did not have access to online learning during covid-19 lockdown affirms the trend of access to online learning in Uganda, not only in the rural where the majority of Uganda's population also live in an urban setting. In a study conducted in low developed countries such as Pakistan, where digital and distance learning were made compulsory, some scholars assert that online learning cannot achieve results where students cannot access the internet due to monetary and technical issues (Muhammad & Kainat, 2020). This relates to Uganda, as indicated in the findings. Many schools cannot afford to implement online learning, while those that try to do so are constrained by resources and cannot deliver effectively. Parents and guardians also find it hard to meet the necessary costs, such as buying smartphones and computers for the students and data bundles that are expensive.

Moreover, some parents in the rural setting earn very little income while others do not earn during this lockdown period because they have no access to markets for their surplus produce. Scholars such as Clever assert that lack of financial instability is prevalent during crises; thus, access to resources is vital (Clever, 2017). It partly explains the low completion rate of disabled students significantly worse during a crisis. This view is associated with the findings of some scholars that have tried to explore the challenges of online learning during pandemics and suggested that students' voices are significant (Mailizar et al., 2020; Muhammad & Kainat, 2020).

Findings also divulge the multiplicity of factors hindering children with disabilities from accessing online learning. These factors

are found to have an interconnection. Traditional beliefs and practices over persons with disabilities significantly affect children's access to online learning. This includes the fear of being grabbed and taken to witch doctors for sacrifice; thus, the academic, social and security status of children with disabilities, especially albinos, remains at stake. Sam and Jon assert that people with albinism in Africa are often murdered and injured; thus, they need to confront this challenge (Sam and Jon, 2018).

Moreover, this has a lot to do with lowering the self-esteem of disabled children. As portrayed by the findings, other factors such as poverty are not surprising. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics, through the National Household Survey report of 2019/2020, affirms that poverty in Uganda is at 20% and more pronounced in remote settings (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021)

The finding that online learning is costly and frustrating for families of disabled children is unquestionable; moreover, it is also found to be quite costly for families with moderate income, some of which are based in an urban setting and can earn either daily or monthly income (Clever, 2017). The fate of students with disabilities in a remote setting is not surprising as many of these are from poor households earning seasonally from the farming output. Bannink et al. (2020) agree that poverty is widespread among families of disabled children. It should be noted that the cost of smartphones in Uganda continues to be expensive given the shutdown of business internationally. As well, data is not anywhere near to being free in Uganda.

Although the learning environment is key to the learning process, it is not pumping knowledge to disabled students through online channels. Now the bedrooms and sitting rooms have become a classroom for online learning. Providing this kind of environment for a child with a disability is more challenging, especially for hearing impairment. As helpers of the learning process, one wonders how the reorganization of the rooms is being done to turn them into classrooms to make life much easier for the disabled child to cope and learn.

The general attitude of society on disabled children is reflected when some parents and guardians decide to ensure access to smartphones by their none disabled children, especially boys and inclining girls, to engage actively in household chores as these are expected to marry any time. This is demotivating. Scholars such as Kristensen et al. assert a negative attitude toward disabled children in their community, partly explaining limited parental support (Kristensen et al., 2006). It also affirms the stigma associated with disability (Moyi, 2012; Kristensen et al., 2006). These are pretty demotivating factors, yet online learning can be more effective when there are motivational factors, as affirmed by some scholars (Lambert & Schuck, 2020; Hartnett, 2016).

Students that had an opportunity to have access to online learning used intelligent phones provided by friends relatives and borrowed or shared from the neighbourhood. None of the interviewed students owned or accessed a computer for online learning during the lockdown. It could imply that people that used a computer in their lifetime have done so through the schools if they are lucky that their schools own computers. Moreover, this is further explained in the National Household Survey Report, 2019/2020, where only 2% of the population in Uganda own computers while 74% own phones. The latter is not necessarily intelligent phones, thus the limited access to online learning, especially disabled students. There is no doubt that access to smartphones may be mainly by individuals in an urban setting instead of the rural setting where this study was conducted. Noteworthy, internet usage is at 83% in Uganda, mainly for social networking (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Most disabled children are from low-income families. It is slightly fulfilling that at least a few interviewed have access to online learning. It should be noted that some of the students access online learning by sharing gadgets with colleagues from the neighbourhood that happen to possess one.

Furthermore, it is most likely that the few disabled children engaged in online learning are getting used to learning on a tablet and may find listening to teachers a bit boring but may have to cope with the routine again.

In addition, sharing smartphones with their non-disabled counterparts during online learning is advantageous to disabled students. Among the many pros is the fact that there are higher chances of disabled children gaining confidence and increasing self-esteem as they continue to interact with their non-disabled counterparts. Maureen et al. (2002) assert that social acceptance of disabled children boosts their self-esteem. They are also likely to become more alert, and when given an opportunity, they go far to deliver on assignments.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has impacted learning for disabled children across the globe, especially in this 21st century of ICT, where many schools, including those in rural areas, are trying to adopt online learning. Also, children with disabilities face significant obstacles to online learning because this is entirely a different learning experience for them. In addition, a strong interconnectedness of the factors affecting accessibility to online learning is evidence ranging from economic, social and environmental. Limited resources, high cost of online learning requirements, negative community perceptions over children with disabilities and lack of parental support were pronounced. Therefore, it can be deduced that education is a human need and a struggle for disabled children who managed to have access to online learning in such a rural setting.

There are hard lessons gained in terms of educating disabled children in the 21st century, which require consideration by parents and guardians and stakeholders interested in the plight of children, especially the education sector. A multidimensional approach is also required in addressing the needs and promoting the rights of children with disabilities if they are to meet their educational goals and aspirations. The need to redefine education and what it means for disabled children and their caregivers cannot be underestimated. There is no more comprehensive education as usual. Education is required to enrich learning for disabled children. It can also be concluded that resilient character is vital. Disabled children, their parents and caretakers can be resilient by building on what they have at hand, as evidenced by their creativity amid the many hindrances. The spirit of sharing resources such as smartphones shows how the human spirit is more resilient and overcomes challenges together.

The acquisition of life skills is vital to strike a balance. Thus the education of disabled children is also for character building, formation and looking ahead!

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government needs to build infrastructure and reduce the cost of data charges that are too high. This strategy will see more students' access online learning and its benefits, especially in cases of crisis such as COVID-19. It will also reduce parents' anxiety, resulting in health-related complications.

- Facilitating access to online education during crises will highly support the inclusion and integration of disabled children in many ways.
- It is vital to improving the identification of children with different disabilities, especially in a rural setting, for better planning and service provision.

- Addressing attitudinal barriers through community awareness programmes on disability cannot be underestimated. Community members need to appreciate disability and improve relations with disabled persons.

- In order to support online learning for disabled children, the government and its stakeholders need to organize refresher courses for teachers in both government and private schools to enable them to cope with this 21st century of ICT. The focus could be on teaching-learning methods and supporting disabled children with various special needs to engage better in online learning.

- The creation of a barrier-free environment such as providing transport and wheelchairs to ease movement and assistive devices like braille would aid many disabled students to access education through online learning.

- Representation of parents of children with disabilities on the school management committee must be made mandatory. These will be better positioned to engage in education planning and suggest better ways of benefiting children with disabilities.

- Parents of disabled children must be encouraged to be proud of their children. This will increase the self-esteem of children and come with other multiple benefits, including improved academic performance and increasing the school completion rate for disabled children.

FUTURE WORK:

We hope to explore the effects and efficacy of online learning on disabled children in rural Uganda during the COVID-19 lockdown.

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