

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

# Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association | Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

## ***Canadian Journal of Disability Studies***

**Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association  
Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap**

**Hosted by The University of Waterloo**

[www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca](http://www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca)

## **Digital Education of Children with Disabilities in the Context of COVID-19: Challenges of Online Education in Lagos State**

### **L'éducation numérique des enfants handicapés dans le contexte de la COVID-19 : défis de l'enseignement en ligne dans l'État de Lagos**

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#### **Abstract**

The paper examines the digital learning provisions available to children with disabilities in Lagos state and their challenges. The author argues that technology not only offers the means to advance education, but it also creates new problems related to the right to education that must be faced and solved. Technology-based learning changes the educational tradition from conventional education to internet-based. Although the laws and policy of Lagos State, Nigeria provide for inclusive education, the non-provision of digital education for children with disabilities during crises like the COVID-19 epidemic constitute an infringement on the right to education. This study used a qualitative methodology interviewing teachers, parents, and children with disabilities, and found that the non-provision of digital education during COVID-19 created the need to assess Lagos State's inclusive education policies, to examine the provision of contingency educational plans. This paper concludes that accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, and unstable educational policies are some of the challenges that affect online education.

#### **Keywords**

COVID-19, Children with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Lagos, Nigeria

#### **Résumé**

Cet article examine les dispositifs d'apprentissage numérique accessibles aux enfants handicapés dans l'État de Lagos, ainsi que les défis auxquels elles et ils sont confrontés. L'autrice soutient que la technologie offre non seulement des moyens d'améliorer l'éducation, mais qu'elle génère aussi de nouveaux enjeux liés au droit à l'éducation, qui doivent être reconnus et résolus. L'apprentissage fondé sur la technologie transforme la tradition éducative, faisant passer l'enseignement d'un modèle conventionnel à un modèle reposant sur Internet. Bien que les lois et politiques de l'État de Lagos, au Nigéria, prévoient l'éducation inclusive, l'absence de dispositifs d'éducation numérique pour les enfants handicapés lors de crises comme

la pandémie de COVID-19 constitue une atteinte à leur droit à l'éducation. S'appuyant sur une méthodologie qualitative, l'étude a mené des entrevues auprès d'enseignantes et enseignants, de parents, ainsi que d'enfants handicapés. Elle montre que l'absence d'éducation numérique durant la COVID-19 a révélé la nécessité d'évaluer les politiques d'éducation inclusive de l'État de Lagos, notamment en ce qui concerne l'existence ou l'absence de plans de contingence en éducation. L'article conclut que l'accessibilité, l'abordabilité, la flexibilité, la pédagogie d'apprentissage et l'instabilité des politiques en matière d'éducation figurent parmi les principaux défis qui affectent l'éducation en ligne.

**Mots-clés**

COVID-19, enfants handicapés, éducation inclusive, Lagos, Nigéria

## Introduction

Children with disabilities deserve access to the same opportunities to participate in society as their peers. A key aspect of this is how they are included in schooling to access the curriculum and learn to socialize. Importantly, this entails the use of digital technologies. Evidence has shown that digital technologies like computers, laptops, and mobile devices have transformed children’s lives around the globe (Bond, 2014). These changes have impacted education and learning, particularly the development of digital skills needed to participate effectively and safely online (Ferrari, 2012).

There were challenges confronting digital education for children with disabilities during COVID-19, a family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe respiratory syndromes, and that the World Health Organization Director-General declared a public health emergency of international concern in March 2020 (WHO, 2022). Many countries closed their borders, various economic and educational activities around the world were disrupted, and necessary adaptability to the “new normal: way of life transpired. Digital education programs were therefore advanced with the aim of curtailing the spread of the virus. Education of children with disabilities is especially at risk during crises like the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (ECW, 2022). The pandemic has shown that children with disabilities can rely on digital education to learn at home or from wherever they are, instead of missing school; yet the closure of schools occasioned by COVID-19 produces adverse consequences on education in general, inclusive education in particular – including psychological trauma and social isolation (UNESCO, 2021).

COVID-19 response and recovery programs present a unique opportunity to reconsider the design and delivery of distance learning through the lens of inclusion, to avoid exacerbating educational and social inequalities especially as it relates to children with disabilities. Due to the particularities of the children with disabilities who have various educational and special needs, factoring their needs into the digital learning that operated during the pandemic was an afterthought in Lagos State; this paper will assess the digital learning provisions available to children with disabilities in Lagos State, the legal obligations to make these provisions available, and the challenges encountered in implementation. This paper concludes that Lagos State does not sufficiently provide for digital learning and techniques to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities during crises like that experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and will point to how Lagos State can improve before the next crisis.

## **Digital Educational Methods Applied During the COVID-19**

### **Period in Lagos State**

Many countries around the world employed technology-based solutions to maintain the continuity of education through digital delivery modalities, including online and distance learning (UNESCO, 2021). Nigeria, and Lagos State in particular, towed the same line of ensuring that the long period of lockdown did not leave academic programming unattended to. On 19 March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria approved school closures as a response to the pandemic. States in the federation contextualized

this, with the Lagos State Ministry of Education releasing a schedule of radio and TV lessons for students in public schools. Digital methods were explored and developed to provide continuous education. Pupils and students continued learning via online media channels and broadcast remote learning which included the use of the internet with laptops, desktops, phones (Boniface, 2020).

For example, Molan High School principal Mr. Akin Afolarin, while addressing parents through his school's WhatsApp Chat group and calls, said his school adopted this method of teaching and learning to fill the gap created by the lockdown, and to keep children busy (Awa, 2022). According to Afolarin, "the process allows for feedback, because teachers send their presentations and learning materials as voice recordings to the school's WhatsApp platform to the children via their parents" (unpaginated). The children listen, carry out given instructions, and do their assignments. He added that these assignments were scored and then sent back to the children through the same process. For learning with the internet, pupils and students were required to procure laptops or desktops at home or with the use of phones. Where students did not have phones, they were expected to make use of their parents' phones with data. Parents were expected to be by their children for guidance during the learning. The use of webinars via Zoom for groups was also used in teaching and learning during the pandemic.

Due to the suddenness of the pandemic leading to the shutdown of schools, inclusion of children with disabilities in digital programs for continuous learning was not initially contemplated in Lagos State until concerns were raised by Nigerian education coalitions, including Human Development Initiatives Nigeria and ActionAid Nigeria (Salau,

2020). To ensure no child was left behind in accessing basic education in Lagos State during the pandemic, the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), organized a stakeholders' meeting on ways to meet the needs of children with disabilities (Olasunkanmi, 2020). In his address at the meeting held at the Lagos State Universal Basic Education Board (LASUBEB) office, the Executive Chairman of the Board Mr. Wahab Alawiye-king disclosed that the meeting became important to keep critical stakeholders abreast of policy formulation, especially in adopting new strategies to ensure that students' needs are served.

Children with disabilities have unique needs in relation to rates of learning, memory, retention, and learning environment requirements. Interpreters and sign language translators especially on television and radio programs were required for hearing-impaired children. Children with visual impairments were expected to rely on radio programs alone for their learning. Online education and remote learning practices created challenges due to a lack of internet access, adequate teaching-learning content, teachers lacking ICT skills and knowledge for teaching online, and the necessary support to pursue their online school education (Omiegbe, 2024; Opoola & Ajobiwe, 2023). As a result, many children with disabilities were left behind.

## **Digital Learning Challenges Lagos State Children with Disabilities Confronted During COVID-19**

Children with disabilities are taught by professionals who understand their unique differences, information processing, and learning styles. With the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and guardians – who neither had the time nor the expertise – had to step into the shoes of the teachers. Parents and guardians of children with disabilities would not necessarily know how to use some of the virtual platforms. Some virtual platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp also need subscriptions which posed affordability barriers. Parents who do not have digital devices like computers and phones or even televisions were forced to purchase them and children with disabilities whose parents could not afford the devices were left without digital learning during the lockdown (Asemota et al., 2022; Azubuike et al., 2021). Many parents who did not already own digital devices purchased or subscribed to additional devices and internet data so their children could participate in remote learning; children whose families could not afford such devices were left without access.

On the part of the students, virtual learning may not suit their individual needs. For instance, schools using the Zoom platform cannot accommodate visually impaired children, and schools using radio and television cannot accommodate hearing-impaired children. According to Cassandra Nwokoporo, a visually impaired student in Yaba: "There are no audio lessons for us who are not sighted and it is usually very difficult to get along. YouTube is an extremely data-consuming application and the fact that I don't get the most out of the lessons makes it quite painful" (Afolabi, 2013, p. 390). There are also challenges

in the information and communication technology system used for digital learning, ranging from inadequate hardware and software provision to aesthetic design. Digital services did not guarantee Braille translation. Mainstream technological platforms ran into compatibility issues with assistive technologies (Amorighoye, 2020). Teachers were not ready for the sudden change to digital learning to work with children with disabilities already limited by lockdown – facing gaps in training in relation to Inclusive Education as well as online course design and execution. The COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized digital and online education in Lagos State but children with disabilities in rural and under-served communities were left behind as they were not equipped to adapt or transition to the new methods of learning.

Internet speed posed further complications. Online education is all about interaction between instructor and student via video calls, so video lectures require high speed internet that is stable. 5G as well as broadband speed are lacking in most towns and villages of Lagos state. Therefore, unavailability of proper digital tools, internet connections or Wi-Fi connections caused student setbacks. Further, the application of digital technology in the education system is capital intensive. Aggregation of needed infrastructure, software, and associated manpower training collectively call for state budgetary provisions. Power supply, lack of reliable network from service providers, and paucity of funds for subscription pose different levels of challenges. Finally, the learning environment outside the classroom, rife with distraction, affected students’ – and students with disabilities in particular – ability to concentrate (The Conversation, 2020).

## **Lagos State Legal Regime for Inclusive Education**

This all begs the question: how does Lagos State ensure its education system is better prepared for the next crisis? The challenge of addressing diversity among learners continues to be a major concern in education, spelled out in international declarations to which Nigeria is a signatory, such as the 1990 World Declaration for Education for All report (EFA, 1990) which affirmed that the learning needs of all must be met, underscoring the obligation of States to design inclusive systems responsive to learners with diverse backgrounds and abilities. The 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reinforced this principle in binding treaty form, particularly Article 24, which obliges States Parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. Similarly, the 2006 Education for All Global Monitoring Report (EFA, 2006) highlighted that achieving "literacy for life" requires specific attention to marginalized groups, warning that millions of children, especially those with disabilities, remain excluded from quality learning opportunities. Finally, the 2015 Millennium Development Goals Report (UNDP, 2017) acknowledged that despite progress, substantial inequalities persisted in education outcomes, particularly for vulnerable groups, thereby confirming that diversity among learners remained a major global concern.

Lagos State derives its powers to make laws from the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which came into effect when civilian government took over in 1999. The Constitution guarantees citizens equal rights to education (section 18) and gives power to the states to make laws (section 4(6)). Lagos State developed an Inclusive

Education framework, including the instruments found in the table below (with key instruments described in depth in sections that follow):

*Table 1. Summary of the Lagos State’s Inclusive Education law and policy.*

<b>Name of Policy or Statute</b>	<b>Description and Relevance</b>
Lagos State Education Law, 1983	The law provides free education to all qualified students in the state.
Lagos State Education Policy, 1988	The policy aligns with Nigeria’s National Policy on Education. It defines the educational structure, strategies for its provisions, guidelines, and standard of delivery of education in Nigeria.
Lagos State Child Right Law, 2007	The law provides free, accessible, and compulsory education for children of all ages in the state, including children with disabilities.
Lagos State Special People’s Law, 2011	The law establishes the office of disability affairs in Lagos State to safeguard people living with disabilities against all forms of discrimination (section 3, 1-9). It also provides for the education of children with disabilities in the state (section 18).
Lagos State Inclusive Education Policy, 2015	The policy that guarantees Universal Basic Education (first 9 years of education) to all school age children and adults in the state and commits to meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities in the state.

### ***The Lagos State Special Peoples’ Law, 2011***

The Lagos State Special Peoples’ Law (LSSP) of 2011 took the objective to safeguard people with disabilities against all forms of discrimination, and to ensure equality of opportunity in all aspects of living in society, including education (Preamble). The LSSP ensures that every person living with a disability have an unfettered right to education without discrimination or segregation in any form (section 33(1)); entitles children with disabilities to free tuition at all levels in all public educational institutions and ensures their education is accessible (section 33(2). It is the opinion of this author that these provisions in facilitating equal opportunities like education apply to digital learning and need specific language to articulate what that entails. The provision that the education of children with disabilities shall be delivered in a manner that will ensure effective and efficient learning cannot be achieved without factoring in digital learning in a post COVID-19 world.

The LSSP makes provision for children with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies and provides that in all situations of risk, including situations of violence, emergencies, and the occurrence of natural disasters, the government shall take all necessary steps to ensure that the interest of children with disabilities are protected taking cognizance of their peculiar vulnerability (section 30(1)). The law equally provides that children with disabilities shall be entitled to equal rights, treatment, recreation, maintenance, and training with other children in society (section 31(5)). In all matters concerning children with disabilities, the best interest of the child shall be the primary consideration (section 31(11)). This provision presupposes that during crises when the education of children is at stake, children with disabilities shall be given priority on how to be accommodated in their digital learning. It should therefore empower and obligate Lagos State to pay particular heed to children with disabilities in coming global crises.

### ***The Lagos State Inclusive Education Policy, 2015***

In order to ensure the effectiveness of the LSSP, Lagos State developed the Lagos State Inclusive Education Policy (IEP), a legal instrument that will help in the achievement of Universal Basic Education objectives and help in achieving education for all in the state. One objective of the policy is to practicalize the state's IE in accordance with the National Policy on Education, a statement of the government's regulations, anticipation, expectations, goals, requirements, and standards for quality education delivery in Nigeria. Further policy objectives entail ensuring that all school-age children that are excluded are enrolled back in schools; and providing in-service training and allowances for teachers and

caregivers. The policy also provides for necessary teaching and learning resources in schools to enhance the quality of education; creates opportunities for curriculum adaptation that will help accommodate all learners and their needs' and involves parents and community members in the management of schools (IEP, 2015, para. 4.1). The policy provides needed guidelines for accommodating children with disabilities with different learning conditions, to be implemented in the 20 local government areas and 37 local council development areas across the whole of the state (KIND, 2015, p. 6).

The policy enumerates strategies for achieving the objectives of inclusive education policy (IEP, 2015, para. 5). Some of the strategies recommended for achieving these objectives include the creation of awareness of IE, for community leaders, religious organizations, and parents (para. 5.1). It also calls for the development of key messages for handbills, posters, and the placement of jingles on radio, television, print media public enlightenment, and campaign rallies. Rallies should be held in places with Out-of-School Children e.g. motor parks, markets, and sundry locations. Parents and teachers should be sensitized on the need to learn sign language and other means of enhancing bonding and flow of teachings.

The policy provides that state government should ensure that children are enrolled, retained, and able to transit to higher schools (para. 5.2). It equally provides for making teaching interesting and recognizing the ability and needs of all children (para. 5.5). The policy makes clear that the state is committed to working toward making teaching and learning interesting and fun, overcoming resource barriers through a problem-based approach, training and retraining teachers to teach diverse learners, providing access to

relevant information on how to implement inclusive education, and encouraging teachers to use collaborative problem-solving. This teaching method cannot be employed without the necessary and relevant tools for digital learning for children with disabilities. The state is also to provide appropriate specialized facilities to address identified learning difficulties, and the provision of basic instructional materials based on the challenge of each child, e.g. Braille materials, sign language materials, etc. By the provision of instructional materials, digital learning can be said to be part of instructional materials, but it is not included in the IE policy nor is it mentioned anywhere in the policy.

## **Gaps in Lagos State's IE framework**

The IE legal regime of Lagos State prohibits discrimination in all situations and ensures the protection of children with disabilities, as seen in the language of the LSSP; and Lagos State policy provides for strategies of achieving IE including the provision of instructional materials. While these provisions are meant to be true in all times and the LSSP acknowledges provisions must be made in times of emergency, COVID-19 presented a significant, global-wide stress test. In a crisis like the 2020 pandemic, and even as a standard accommodation, digital means of learning can be deployed to teach the children with disabilities. Digital learning has become such a staple since COVID-19 that law and policy language needs to be adapted to make direct reference to its use. So far, the legal and policy framework described above that make up Lagos State education has not contended with this new world order to guarantee children with disabilities education through proper management of digital technologies.

Firstly, when it comes to developing education policy, it should be noted that what works for some students may not work for others. Lagos State could draw inspiration from, for instance, the American *Individuals with Disability Education Act (2023)*, which establishes personalized learning that aims to customize teaching for each student's strengths, needs, skills, and interests. This approach is an alternative to "one-size-fits-all", where instead the teacher guides each student on an individualized journey that includes an individual education plan. Regulation of virtual or digital learning would benefit from at least a cursory review of what individualized education plans are and how they usually work.

Secondly, Lagos State policy did not provide for digital learning facilities to aid children with disabilities in their learning through COVID. The policy states that there will be opportunities for "twinning" between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, but fails to explain how, when, and the frequency. The policy does not mention that they will be educated in the same classrooms and hold to the same standards as their non-disabled peers, which the Education for Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA) clearly made provisions for under accountability measures. So teachers and families were left to fend for themselves in the provision of facilities for digital learning. In cases where families cannot afford the digital instruments to help their children with disabilities learn at home, children with disabilities were left out without education. children with disabilities in rural areas in Lagos State were left behind as they were not equipped to adapt or transit to new methods of learning.

## Recommendations

The exclusion of digital learning in IE laws and policy of Lagos State brought challenges through COVID-19. Considering these challenges, this author recommends a review of Lagos State’s IE regulatory framework to include digital learning, and a review of how this framework has been deployed through emergencies to ensure continuity of education. Lagos State has committed to teacher training and effective learning tools and assistive technologies – which could serve as entry-points into direct policy engagement with digital technologies. Teachers need regular training for capacity building in modern teaching technology. Increased use and experimentation of ICT teaching methods will support the learning of children with disabilities and will also prepare teachers for future education disruptions.

The law should provide for the review of the school curriculum to include online learning at every point in time where children with disabilities are unable to attend physical learning. Situations involving unforeseen circumstances like ill-health or a medical condition, or when parents are unable to take children with disabilities to school due to a breakdown in their vehicle, are common beyond global emergencies. Digital technologies can enable a student to join online classes, and are being used far more frequently since COVID, only benefitting nondisabled and privileged students.

If Lagos State also hopes to ensure consistent education of children with disabilities through crisis, financial support for impoverished families is necessary, including the supply of the devices, platforms, and internet connection to make digital

learning possible. The State government has the option of providing broadband connection to rural areas, so that internet connectivity does not pose a barrier to learning.

## **Conclusion**

The catastrophe posed by COVID-19 on education in Nigeria has revealed the benefits, but also the shortcomings, to online teaching. Lagos state IE was undoubtedly affected by the lockdown. At that time, there was no other option than to apply adaptation, proactive, and deliberate actions to adjust to the occasion. The importance of online education since the end of lockdown truly cannot be overstated. The learning from COVID can be beneficial to the education sector and can bring a great deal of surprising outcomes if well utilized. However, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, and unstable educational policies are some of the challenges that require deliberate actions to improve. Though digital education may be expensive, it is obvious that the stakeholders; government, teachers, and parents of children with disabilities should do something different to ensure that no child is left behind in the area of education. A clear, and consistently implemented, regulatory framework for digital education needs to be put in place to ensure equality.

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