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Digital Learning, Access Barriers and Mode Preferences of Secondary and Senior Secondary Students in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Implications for Inclusive Education

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Abstract:

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic moved teaching online almost overnight and left behind a lasting expansion of digital and blended provision. Whether this legacy supports or undermines inclusive education depends on how students themselves experience access, use and the learning modes now on offer. Objective: To examine secondary and senior secondary students' pandemic-time online learning experience, present use of digital resources, access barriers and preferred modes of learning. Method: A descriptive, cross-sectional survey was conducted with 600 students in Classes IX–XII, comprising 300 mainstream students and 300 students with disabilities, selected through stratified purposive sampling. A structured 45-item questionnaire was administered on paper or digitally. Pooled responses were analysed using frequencies, Wilson confidence intervals, one-sample t-tests against the scale midpoint and chi-square goodness-of-fit tests.

Results: Although 67.0% had taken part in online classes regularly or frequently during the pandemic, only 47.0% rated the experience good or very good and 25.0% rated it poor. Infrastructure-related problems (connectivity, devices and data cost) were the primary difficulty for 47.0%. At present, 68.0% use digital resources at least several times a week and 64.0% want digital learning to continue, yet 54.0% prefer mostly or completely face-to-face instruction, 26.0% prefer blended learning and 20.0% prefer online-oriented learning. Connectivity (26.0%), device shortage (16.0%), weak digital skills (15.0%) and inaccessible content (11.0%) remain the leading barriers. Conclusion: Students endorse digital learning as a complement to classroom teaching rather than a replacement for it. Inclusive digital provision therefore requires sustained investment in connectivity, devices, digital skills and accessible content within a blended design.

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Keywords: digital learning; inclusive education; post-COVID-19; digital divide; blended learning; students with disabilities; learning preferences

1. Introduction

The closure of educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic was the largest disruption to schooling in living memory. At the peak of the closures, well over a billion learners in more than 190 countries were out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Institutions responded with what Hodges et al. (2020) call emergency remote teaching: a rapid, improvised shift to online delivery that differed fundamentally from carefully designed online learning. Reviews of this period describe uneven access to technology, limited teacher preparation and strained student engagement across systems (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

The pandemic has since receded, but its pedagogical legacy has not. Learning management systems, recorded lectures, digital textbooks and messaging-based communication have been retained in many schools, and blended provision is now an accepted part of mainstream practice. In India, the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020) explicitly links the integration of technology with the goal of equitable and inclusive education, while the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 obliges educational institutions to provide accessible education. Whether the post-pandemic digital turn advances these commitments is an empirical question that cannot be answered from the perspective of policy alone.

Inclusion is at stake because digital provision is never neutral. Van Dijk (2020) describes the digital divide as a sequence of barriers that begin with motivation and material access, continue through digital skills and patterns of use, and are followed by unequal outcomes. Warschauer (2003) similarly argues that technology promotes social inclusion only when physical access is combined with digital content, human skills and social support structures. For students with disabilities a further layer is added: platforms, documents and videos that were not designed to be accessible can exclude learners even when devices and connectivity are available. Evidence from the pandemic shows that school closures intensified existing inequalities for students with disabilities, particularly where adaptive materials and technology were lacking (Espinoza, 2025; Mwamakula, 2024; Hunt et al., 2024).

Much of the available evidence draws on the views of teachers, administrators or parents. Students' own accounts remain comparatively scarce, and studies that place mainstream students and students with disabilities within the same instrument are rarer still (Poikola et al., 2024; Young & Clerke, 2024). This article contributes student-voice evidence of that kind. Using data from a larger doctoral survey of 600 students, it asks four research questions: (RQ1) How did students participate in, and experience, online learning during the pandemic, and what difficulties predominated? (RQ2) How extensively do students currently use digital resources, and how do they rate their access to devices and institutional online materials? (RQ3) Which learning modes do students prefer, and do they want digital learning to continue?

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(RQ4) Which barriers to effective digital learning persist, and do students believe that technology can make education more inclusive?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framing

2.1 From emergency remote teaching to blended provision

Studies of post-pandemic preferences generally find that learners and teachers value the classroom more than the extensive online provision of 2020–21 might have suggested. In a large Iranian cross-sectional survey of 9,395 students and 964 educators, Akbari (2025) found that both groups preferred traditional classroom instruction to hybrid or online alternatives, although students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with prior academic failure were more favourable towards online and hybrid learning. At Birzeit University, Morrar et al. (2024) reported that students experienced in-person teaching as more welcoming but concluded that a blended approach could best foster diversity and inclusion. Kauffman et al. (2022) argued that the disruption might yet prove a "silver lining" if it prompts schools to improve their methods and generate stronger evidence on new learning aids. Hlatywayo et al. (2024) documented how platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp and Moodle-based systems improved access to educational materials in an open and distance e-learning context.

2.2 Layered divides in access, skills and content

A systematic review of 25 publications concluded that learning from home was largely unsuccessful in under-resourced settings and widened the digital gap for students with special needs (Mwamakula, 2024). Multi-country qualitative evidence from low- and middle-income countries indicates that schools were already failing many students with disabilities before the pandemic and that barriers to access deepened during it (Hunt et al., 2024). Many pandemic-era responses simply reproduced conventional instruction online without adapting content for diverse learners (Espinoza, 2025), and families of children with special educational needs reported heightened emotional strain when suitable materials were unavailable (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2024). Within India, a systematic review of 29 empirical studies identified inadequate facilities, limited curricula and pedagogy, shortages of trained teachers and flawed assessment among the persistent obstacles to inclusive education (Kumari et al., 2024).

2.3 Accessible design and assistive technology

Technology can mitigate these barriers when it is designed for variability. A systematic review of assistive technology in inclusive education reports consistently positive effects, while noting that insufficient staff training and limited physical accessibility constrain its benefits (Mais & Yaum, 2025). Universal Design for Learning offers a principled framework: multiple means of engagement, representation and action and expression are built in from the outset rather than added as individual accommodations (CAST, 2018; Rose & Meyer, 2002). The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (World Wide Web Consortium [W3C], 2018) provide technical criteria for digital content, including text alternatives, captions and keyboard operability. Policy analysis for autistic learners has similarly examined digitised instruction and gamification as ways of supporting self-study and personalised lessons (Reijnders et al., 2023).

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2.4 Conceptual framing

Drawing on this literature, the study treats digital inclusion as a chain of linked conditions: (a) material access to devices, connectivity and affordable data; (b) skills and technical support; (c) accessible content; and (d) a learning mode that fits the student's needs and preferences. A break at any link weakens the experience of the whole. The survey indicators analysed here map onto this chain. Device access, pandemic-time difficulties and present barriers describe links (a) to (c), whereas frequency of use, perceived change and preferred mode describe link (d). Because the survey records students' own judgements, the analysis is concerned with perceived rather than objectively audited access.

3. Method

3.1 Design and participants

The study used a descriptive, comparative, cross-sectional survey design within a quantitative approach. Participants were students enrolled in Classes IX–X and XI–XII of secondary and senior secondary schools. Stratified purposive sampling was used: eligible institutions were first identified, respondents were then classified into two strata (mainstream students and students with disabilities), and equal numbers were recruited from each. The final sample comprised 600 students (300 per stratum) after incomplete, inconsistent or duplicate questionnaires were removed. Students took part voluntarily and were required to be able to understand the questionnaire and give meaningful responses. The instrument did not classify students by type or severity of disability. Table 1 summarises the sample.

Table 1- Profile of the Sample (N = 600)

Characteristic	Categories, n (%)
Student group	Mainstream students 300 (50.0); students with disabilities 300 (50.0)
Age group	15–17 years 276 (46.0); 18–20 years 324 (54.0)
Gender	Male 312 (52.0); female 288 (48.0)
Class	IX–X 270 (45.0); XI–XII 330 (55.0)
Type of institution	Government 210 (35.0); government-aided 150 (25.0); private 180 (30.0); other 60 (10.0)
Area of residence	Rural 210 (35.0); semi-urban 174 (29.0); urban 216 (36.0)

3.2 Instrument

Data were collected with a structured 45-item questionnaire organised in seven sections. This article uses Section A (items 1–7, background characteristics including access to digital devices), Section B (items 8–14, post-COVID educational experience) and Section E (items 35–37, access to online educational resources, barriers to digital learning and the role of technology in inclusion). Items used multiple-choice, frequency, preference, satisfaction and five-point Likert-type formats, and the same items were given to both groups so that responses could be analysed on a common footing. Wording was kept simple and

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experience-based for students in Classes IX–XII. Content and face validity were established through review by experts in research methodology, educational psychology, inclusive education and general education, and the instrument was refined after a pilot with students who were not part of the final sample. Internal consistency was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha using a criterion of 0.70 or above.

3.3 Procedure and ethics

Permission was obtained from the participating institutions after the study's purpose and scope had been explained. Students were told that participation was voluntary, that they could decline any question, and that responses would be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes. Questionnaires were administered on paper or in digital form according to institutional resources and student preference, with identical items, sequence and response options. Reasonable steps were taken to ensure that students with disabilities could access and complete the questionnaire.

3.4 Data analysis

Responses were coded numerically, entered into statistical software, and screened for entry errors, duplicates and missing values. Ordered response categories were scored from 1 (least favourable) to 5 (most favourable). Following common practice for five-point items with adequate sample sizes (Norman, 2010), means and standard deviations are reported alongside the more transparent distribution of categories. For each indicator the "favourable" percentage combines the top two categories and the "unfavourable" percentage the bottom two. Ninety-five per cent confidence intervals for proportions use the Wilson score method (Wilson, 1927). One-sample t-tests compared each mean with the scale midpoint of 3, with Cohen's (1988) d as effect size, and chi-square goodness-of-fit tests examined whether single-choice distributions departed from equal allocation across categories. All analyses were conducted on the pooled sample of 600 respondents, and summary statistics were computed from the item-level frequency distributions.

4. Results

4.1 Access to devices and pandemic-time participation

Most students reported adequate access to digital devices for their studies: 22.0% rated access as very good, 33.0% as good, 25.0% as average, 13.0% as poor and 7.0% as very poor (M = 3.50, SD = 1.17). Favourable ratings therefore reached 55.0% (95% CI [51.0, 58.9]), but one student in five (20.0%) rated access as poor or very poor (Table 2; Figure 1). During the pandemic, online classes were widely attended. Regular participation was reported by 38.0% and frequent participation by a further 29.0% (combined 67.0%, 95% CI [63.1, 70.6]), while 15.0% participated rarely or never.

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Table 2 - Summary of Digital-Learning Indicators
(Five-Point Scoring, 1 = Least Favourable to 5 = Most Favourable)

Indicator	n	M (SD)	95% CI for M	Fav. %	Neut. %	Unfav. %	d
Access to digital devices	600	3.50 (1.17)	[3.41, 3.59]	55.0	25.0	20.0	0.43
Participation in online classes (pandemic)	600	3.84 (1.20)	[3.74, 3.94]	67.0	18.0	15.0	0.70
Overall online-learning experience (pandemic)	600	3.30 (1.16)	[3.21, 3.39]	47.0	28.0	25.0	0.26
Current vs. pre-COVID-19 learning experience	600	3.20 (1.19)	[3.10, 3.30]	44.0	26.0	30.0	0.17
Current use of digital resources	600	3.81 (1.20)	[3.71, 3.91]	68.0	14.0	18.0	0.68
Ease of access to institutional online materials	600	3.71 (1.15)	[3.62, 3.80]	65.0	19.0	16.0	0.62
Digital learning should continue after COVID-19	600	3.68 (1.17)	[3.59, 3.77]	64.0	18.0	18.0	0.58
Technology can make education more inclusive	600	3.89 (1.10)	[3.80, 3.98]	72.0	15.0	13.0	0.81

Note. N = 600 for every indicator. Fav. % = top two categories; Neut. % = middle category; Unfav. % = bottom two categories. All one-sample t-tests against the midpoint of 3 were significant at $p < .001$ ($df = 599$). d = Cohen's d.

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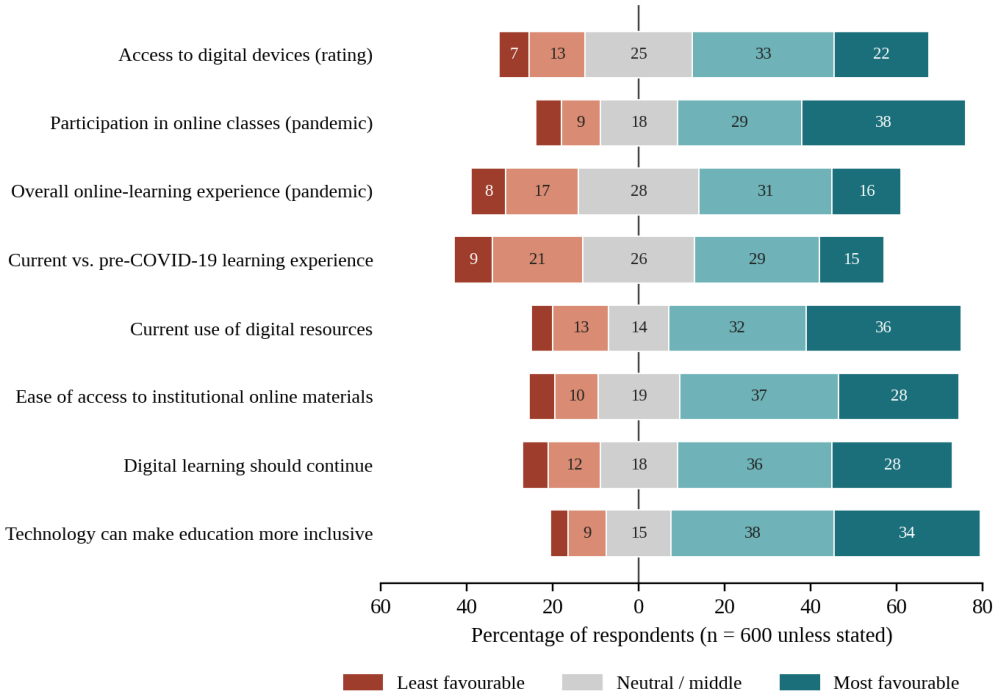


Figure 1. Distribution of responses on eight digital-learning indicators (N = 600). Bars are centred on the middle category; darker shades show the extreme categories. Response labels differ by item (see Table 2). Percentages below 7 are not labelled.

4.2 Experience of pandemic-time online learning and its difficulties

Participation did not translate into satisfaction. Overall, 16.0% described their online-learning experience as very good and 31.0% as good (combined 47.0%, 95% CI [43.0, 51.0]), 28.0% as average, and 25.0% as poor or very poor (M = 3.30, SD = 1.16). The 20-percentage-point gap between regular or frequent participation (67.0%) and a favourable experience (47.0%) indicates that attendance overstates the quality of the experience.

Students were asked to identify the single most significant difficulty they had faced. Poor internet connectivity was the most frequent response (25.0%, n = 150), followed by difficulty understanding lessons (15.0%), lack of digital devices (12.0%), lack of motivation (12.0%), lack of interaction with teachers (11.0%), high internet or data cost (10.0%) and lack of interaction with classmates (8.0%); only 7.0% reported no major difficulty (Figure 2a). Grouping the responses shows two nearly equal clusters: infrastructure and cost problems (connectivity, devices, data cost) accounted for 47.0% of students (n = 282; 95% CI [43.0, 51.0]), and pedagogical, relational and motivational problems (understanding, interaction with teachers and classmates, motivation) for 46.0% (n = 276). The distribution was far from uniform, $\chi^2(7, N = 600) = 106.6$, $p < .001$.

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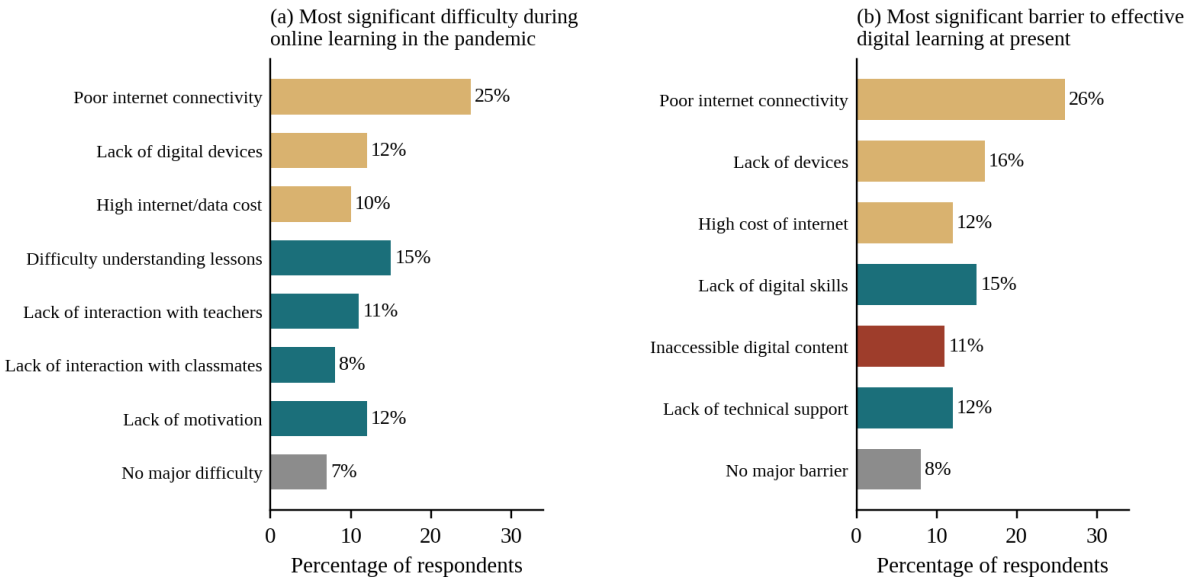


Figure 2. (a) Most significant difficulty during pandemic-time online learning and (b) most significant barrier to effective digital learning at present (N = 600; single-choice items). Sand = infrastructure and cost; teal = skills, support, pedagogical, relational and motivational factors; red = inaccessible digital content; grey = none.

4.3 Present use and perceived change since before COVID-19

Digital resources are now routine. Daily use was reported by 36.0% and use several times a week by 32.0% (combined 68.0%, 95% CI [64.2, 71.6]), with 14.0% using them weekly, 13.0% occasionally and 5.0% never. Students were more divided about whether learning has improved since the pre-pandemic period: 44.0% judged their current learning experience better or much better (95% CI [40.1, 48.0]), 26.0% about the same and 30.0% worse or much worse, a net balance of +14 percentage points. The mean (M = 3.20) was significantly above the midpoint but the effect was small (d = 0.17), the weakest of any indicator in Table 2.

4.4 Preferred mode of learning and views on continuing digital learning

Preferences leaned towards the classroom (Figure 3). A completely face-to-face mode was preferred by 29.0% and a mostly face-to-face mode by 25.0%, giving 54.0% with a face-to-face orientation (95% CI [50.0, 57.9]). Blended or hybrid learning was the first choice of 26.0%, while 13.0% preferred mostly online and 7.0% completely online learning (combined 20.0%). The distribution differed significantly from equal allocation, $\chi^2(4, N = 600) = 108.0$, $p < .001$. Yet most students also wanted digital learning to remain available: 28.0% strongly agreed and 36.0% agreed that it should continue after COVID-19 (combined 64.0%, 95% CI [60.1, 67.7]), against 18.0% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. Support for

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continuing digital provision therefore exceeded preference for online-oriented modes by 44 percentage points.

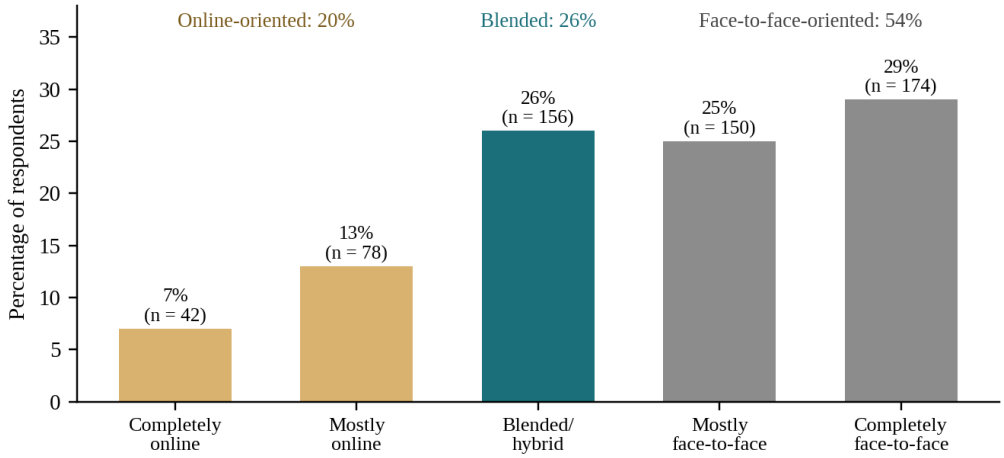


Figure 3. Preferred mode of learning (N = 600).

4.5 Present barriers, access to online materials and the inclusive potential of technology

Institutional online materials were easy to reach for most students: 28.0% accessed them very easily and 37.0% easily (65.0%, 95% CI [61.1, 68.7]), whereas 16.0% reported difficulty. When asked to name the single most important barrier to effective digital learning, students again put connectivity first (26.0%, n = 156), followed by lack of devices (16.0%), lack of digital skills (15.0%), high cost of internet (12.0%), lack of technical support (12.0%) and inaccessible digital content (11.0%); 8.0% reported no major barrier (Figure 2b). Infrastructure and cost barriers made up 54.0% of the total (n = 324; 95% CI [50.0, 57.9]), skills and support 27.0% (n = 162), and inaccessible content 11.0% (n = 66), approximately one student in nine. The distribution was again non-uniform, $\chi^2(6, N = 600) = 84.6$, $p < .001$.

Despite these barriers, belief in the inclusive potential of technology was strong. A total of 34.0% strongly agreed and 38.0% agreed that technology can help schools accommodate students with different learning needs (72.0%, 95% CI [68.3, 75.4]), and only 13.0% disagreed. This was the most favourable indicator in Table 2 (M = 3.89, d = 0.81).

5. Discussion

Three findings stand out. First, participation and experience diverged. Two-thirds of students took part regularly or frequently in online classes during the pandemic, but fewer than half rated the experience positively, and one in four rated it poorly. This is consistent with the distinction between emergency remote teaching and planned online learning (Hodges et al., 2020): access to a screen secured presence, but not necessarily comprehension, interaction or motivation. The near-equal split of primary difficulties between infrastructure (47.0%) and pedagogical–relational–motivational factors (46.0%) shows that solving connectivity alone would not have produced a good experience. Students also named reduced

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contact with teachers and classmates, a theme that the inclusive education literature associates with weakened social participation during remote learning (Mwamakula, 2024; Hunt et al., 2024).

Second, material barriers remain first-order problems. Connectivity, device shortage and data cost together were the principal barrier for 54.0% of students at present, compared with 47.0% for pandemic-time difficulties. The two questions were worded differently and the figures should not be compared formally, but the persistence of this cluster is clear. It fits Van Dijk's (2020) argument that access barriers must be removed before skills and use can matter, and it echoes Indian evidence that inadequate facilities remain a leading obstacle to inclusion (Kumari et al., 2024). The second tier of barriers, lack of digital skills (15.0%) and technical support (12.0%), points to the need for human as well as material provision. Of particular relevance to inclusion is the 11.0% who identified inaccessible digital content as their main barrier. The sample is evenly divided between students with and without disabilities, and pooled data cannot show who reported this barrier, but the finding underlines the argument that devices and connectivity are necessary yet insufficient without accessible design (Espinoza, 2025; Mais & Yaum, 2025). Content designed to UDL and WCAG principles is the most direct remedy (CAST, 2018; W3C, 2018).

Third, students favour a digitally supported classroom over a digital replacement for it. A majority (54.0%) preferred a face-to-face orientation and only 20.0% preferred online-oriented learning, yet 68.0% used digital resources at least several times a week and 64.0% wanted digital learning to continue. This pattern parallels Akbari's (2025) finding that both students and teachers favoured traditional classes while remaining open to new methods, and Morrar et al.'s (2024) observation that in-person teaching is experienced as more welcoming while blended models hold promise for inclusion. The modest net improvement relative to the pre-pandemic period (+14 points, d = 0.17) suggests that students regard the digital legacy as useful but not transformative. For inclusive education, the implication is that digital tools are best positioned as flexible supports (recorded lessons, accessible notes, assistive applications) that widen participation in a classroom-centred model, rather than as an alternative to it. Students' strong belief that technology can make education more inclusive (72.0%) should be read as conditional on resolving the access and content problems identified above.

6. Implications for Practice and Policy

The results suggest five priorities. First, institutions should treat connectivity and devices as basic learning infrastructure, for example through subsidised data, school computer laboratories and device-lending schemes. Second, digital content should be accessible by default: captioned video, transcripts, text alternatives for images, screen-reader-compatible documents and flexible formats, tested before platforms are adopted. Third, students and teachers need structured digital-skills support and a reachable technical help service. Fourth, blended designs should retain a strong face-to-face core and use online elements to extend flexibility, with students given a voice in how the two are combined. Fifth, schools should routinely

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collect student feedback on digital access and report it separately for students with disabilities, so that barriers invisible in aggregate figures can be identified and addressed.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. The analysis is based on pooled responses, so it cannot show whether mainstream students and students with disabilities differ in their access, difficulties or preferences; disaggregated analysis is a necessary next step. The design is cross-sectional and the sample purposive, which limits causal and statistical generalisation. All data are self-reported, and judgements about the pandemic period are subject to recall bias and social desirability. Most indicators are single items, and treating ordinal categories as interval scores is an approximation. The instrument did not record disability type, so differences between, for example, visual, hearing, physical and learning disabilities could not be explored. Finally, the difficulty and barrier items used different wording and category sets, which precludes formal comparison across time. Future work should combine disaggregated survey analysis with qualitative interviews, objective accessibility audits of platforms and longitudinal follow-up of mode preferences.

8. Conclusion

In the post-COVID-19 period, students in Classes IX–XII use digital resources routinely and want them to stay, but they do not want them to replace the classroom. Their pandemic-time experience was uneven, material barriers persist, and a notable minority encounter digital content they cannot readily use. For inclusive education to benefit from the digital legacy of the pandemic, schools must pair a classroom-centred blended model with reliable access, skills support and accessible-by-design content. Listening to students, including students with disabilities, is essential to getting that balance right.

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