Re-imagining Special Education in India

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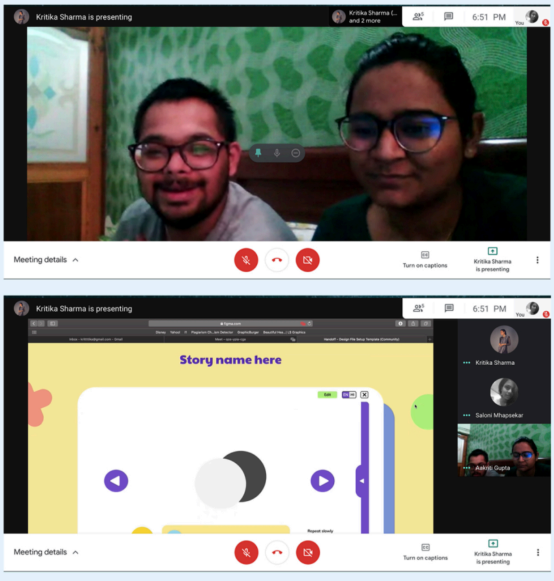
Children are often seen but not heard in the design process. Their participation as users occurs either at the beginning or towards the end. The inferior perspective of not looking at children as equals makes them excluded merely becoming puppets of tokenism. I'm Saloni Mhapsekar, a Master's design student studying in the Bauhaus University. My thesis especially aims to include children; listen to their voices by looking at them as co-creators and co-researchers. Play is generally associated with children and games. In my research, I look into it as a form of inquiry and tool to facilitate active participation. My key question explores " How can we evoke 'genuine participation' of children in the design process by making them 'Design partners'? What is participation good for, who should participate and when?" Being influenced by Participatory Design Scandinavian methods I got interested in Co-creation and Co-design. My interest lies in designing for intent with a hint of play and learn. In my thesis, I look into involving children as 'Design partners' and evoke genuine participation in future-making and world building.

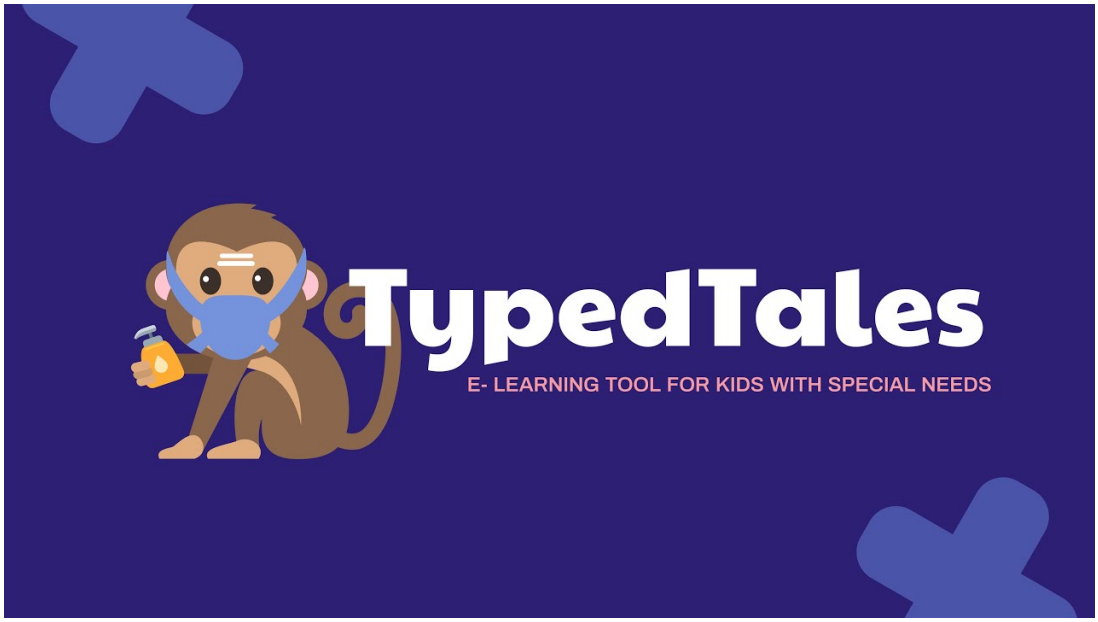
Co-design and Co-creation has evolved over the years in Human-centered design. The terms 'Makerspace' and 'Tinkering' have created buzz by promoting the idea of 'Learning by doing' in the educational sector. Now more than ever, organisations and companies are expanding and offering learning hubs and online workshops. The shift in providing customised education with making & building stuff differs from traditional schooling methods. With my earlier background in the Ed-tech sector of India I've seen a drastic boom in digital education space because of the recent developments in technology and pandemic. As a designer-researcher-practitioner, I wish to redefine and understand my role in participatory design research field facilitating workshops to generate knowledge with users i.e the children who are the experts in their own lived experience. I'm motivated to be part of the workshop as I'm fairly new in the field of Child Computer Interaction and wish to acquire knowledge in this field through active participation.



I launched my side-hustle project 'Typedtales' with Special Olympics Bharat, a nonprofit Paralympics in India for kids with intellectual disabilities making them aware about the new world changes through stories. I've been interested in 'Narrative inquiry' and understanding how children make sense of the world around them through stories. We conducted various workshops with children aged 9-12 years to understand the stories they'll be interested in telling. The workshops were conducted online with kids from various socio-economic backgrounds and learning differences like Autism spectrum disorder, Down Syndrome and Dyslexia in a remote setting during the pandemic.

I've also designed a visual toolkit for personal safety for young children to identify sexual predator behaviour of India. Designing for children happened naturally as I could empathise better and my visual style complimented my research. In my experience so far I've interviewed various stakeholders be it parents, siblings, caretakers, counsellors etc to understand the ecosystem of the child. My graduation project involved designing a goal tracking app for kids with learning differences. I worked with an early stage startup in India which provides special need therapy services online. My project exposed me to the foundational knowledge of Developmental Psychology and also ended up designing a screening tool for them. I closely worked with educators and parents that time listening to their needs.

Understanding the limitations and barriers designing for children with special needs have always been part of my job. I was never designing one size solution fits all. I believe in making education inclusive and accessible through the power of design. Being part of this interdisciplinary workshop will help me share my diverse perspective and learn from others to better design and research with children. Earlier, I've always designed *for* children in coming years, I wish to change this power dynamic and design along *with* them!



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