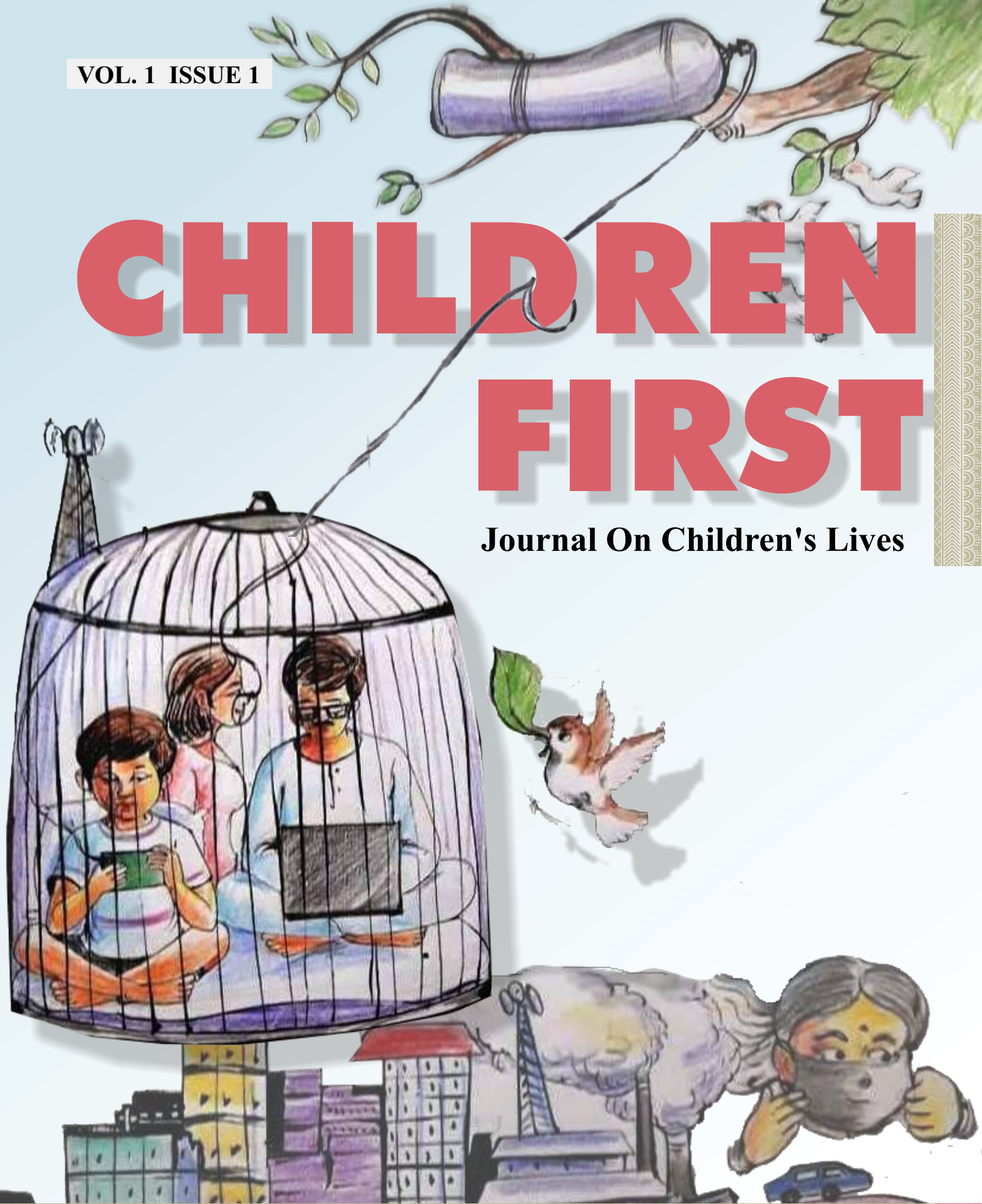# CHILDREN FIRST

Journal On Children's Lives

**Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic
on Lives of Children**

Aryanraj , 10 years

CHILDREN FIRST

Journal On Children's Lives

Volume 1 , Issue 1

(Theme: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Lives of Children)

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From the Chief Advisor

Children have not been given the importance they deserve. It is only over the last few years that their issues are being recognised and discussed - and there are many. Health, education and nutrition are only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It is unfortunate that the pandemic has taught us that we need to look closer at the lives of children and with greater sensitivity and compassion. Healthcare, particularly mental health concerns, are slowly being forced into the limelight in part due to the devastation of the second wave of the COVID-19 virus and the possible impact that a third wave may have on children.

While many children across the board have been adversely impacted, regardless of their family status – rich, poor or deprived – it is the marginalized who have had to bear the brunt of the pandemic, coupled with official apathy. Who can forget the images of an infant trying to wake up his mother and pulling at her cover, which eventually turned out to be her shroud? Or, a child sleeping on a suitcase wheeled by his mother on the long journey back home? The pandemic has taught us that quality medicare is unaffordable for the poor; education is not available to them due to the digital divide and despite technological advances, making online classes a bit of a charade. Food security and nutrition – less said the better.

In this background, various initiatives taken by the Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) are most welcome. One of these initiatives is the present journal. Our country has a large number of NGOs, other civil society organisations and individuals who have a keen interest on issues concerning children. Their efforts in various domains have produced several positive results but sometimes disaggregated. The question they often ask is: are my efforts yielding any results? If there is no clear answer to this question, motivation levels of these public-spirited groups and individuals begin to flag.

The journal provides the answer and gives a unique opportunity to all involved in the child rights sector to express their views on children's lives with the focus on children first. I believe this journal is the first such serious attempt at bringing together experts, professionals and lay views on the table for the betterment of the life and times of children and so the response to an invitation for contributions has been overwhelming. The editorial team has had to work overtime to critically examine each contribution and arrive at a final selection of writings. The team has done a wonderful job and deserves to be complimented for it.

The success of this journalistic venture undertaken by the DCPCR will be known only in the near future. But I have great hope and expectations that everybody who has the interest and welfare of children will take a step forward and contribute to the journal so that its high standard is maintained and we can then, collectively, bring about necessary changes in the lives of children keeping them, and not us, in the forefront.

Justice Madan B. Lokur
Former Judge,
Supreme Court of India New Delhi

From the Chairperson

Truth and hope are often adversaries. The truth that nearly one-third of our children are malnourished can be overwhelming and dilute our sense of hope. It is difficult to stay hopeful of a brighter day amidst the news of thousands of children losing their parents and turning orphan. The truth of India's education system is no different.

Five and a half years ago, I met a bright young VII grader in a government school in Sangam Vihar. He was frequently absent from school, with less than 30% attendance. So during recess time, I struck up a conversation with him and realised he could hardly read a single sentence in Hindi.

Being an "adult", I tried to "teach" the "child" why it was important to attend the school regularly. I emphasised how learning is linked with school attendance and reinforced that continuous absence from school explains his inability to read basic text.

There was a smile throughout my "lecture" which he patiently (or perhaps absent-mindedly?) heard. Then, he called up his friend from the same class. He introduced his friend to me and said, *"he attends school regularly, he cannot read either. At least I get to play."*

This was a hopeless expression rooted in bare truth. Clearly, the gap between the espoused values in right to education law and our reality is marked.

Despite that I believe truth and hope can also be allies; great ones. It is in the context of naked, sometimes ugly, truth that some of the most remarkable stories of resilience emerge.

It is through honest discussion about the truth that hope takes birth.

Neglect of children is also our truth which became particularly prominent during the pandemic; neglect not only in terms of governance but in the larger discourse itself. Barring school closures, very little of children's concerns found mention in the newspapers, magazines, government meetings and virtual forums. Even the school closures discussion was largely limited to board preparations and examinations. So complete was the absence of children's concerns from our discourse, that children related services were not even declared essential by the Governments across the country.

This was the context of my appointment as the Chairperson of the State Commission For Protection of Child Rights for Delhi.

Therefore, this journal is an expression of hope; hope that the journal serves as a platform to tell those stories, document the truth of lived experiences, and rigorously examine the policies that affect children and improve our governance.

I must compliment the Editorial Board for anchoring the journal through a very difficult phase and hope that the readers engage with it through agreement, disagreement, critique, and analysis.

Anurag Kundu
Chairperson, DCPCR

From the Chief Editor

It is with a sense of great excitement and pride that we are introducing the inaugural issue of DCPCR's (Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights) first journal "Children First-Journal on Children's Lives". This journal is proposed to be bi-annual and aims at not only broadening but also deepening the discourse on issues concerning children and their rights, by providing a platform to all stakeholders for whom every child matters.

This journal aspires to build an inclusive multidisciplinary space as a platform for academics, practitioners, grassroots workers, activists, and others who engage with child rights. The intent is to understand and find answers to the challenges being faced by children in India and around the world, particularly with respect to violation of their rights as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

The journal is envisioned in both print and digital format. It will cover peer reviewed research, best practices, voices from the field , book reviews, critique and commentary and invited interviews pertaining to policy and child rights. The intent behind this composite structure of the journal is to narrow the conventional gap between academic research and reflective practice. This will allow space for one to inform the other, thus enriching both with a more grounded understanding of the existing challenges and possibilities, in the context of striving to get children their due entitlements. Our effort will be to focus on topical themes for each issue. In the first issue of the journal, the theme is "Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on lives of children". In this issue, researchers, academics and organizations from across the country have highlighted the impact of two waves of COVID-19 on children from different parts of India and identified emerging issues that need to be addressed immediately. Papers included in this issue explore and explain the stark digital divide that has emerged due to the sudden shift to online learning mode in education; the plight and needs of children left orphaned by COVID-19 ; changes in the role of parents in the day-to-day life of children; why policies for children should be considered from a new perspective in post-pandemic situations; the impact of COVID-19 on the health of children; and how one should be prepared for the possible third wave of COVID-19 which is feared to affect children the most.

To add the perspective of children in this issue, paintings by children on this specific theme were invited for the inaugural issue. We were overwhelmed to receive over 1,000 illustrations depicting children's experience of the ongoing COVID-19 phase. Seven of these were selected by the Editorial Board members for the first issue. The submissions were selected for publication after careful review by a panel of eminent academics and researchers representing different disciplines. We are thankful to the Chairperson DCPCR, Advisory Board, Editorial Board and our panel of peer reviewers who spent their precious time in contributing to make this journal and its inaugural issue a reality.

Dr. Venita Kaul
Chief Editor
Children First : Journal on Children's Lives

Nandini Chanana, 17 years

RESEARCH

01

COVID-19
A Prospective Analysis of the Implications of School Closure on Children's Education and Nutrition

Mukesh Kumar, Pratap C. Mohanty

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 led health crisis has catastrophic implications on people's life irrespective of their age. The pandemic-induced school closure has made children more vulnerable to the crisis. In India, school closure has a direct bearing on children's rights to education and nutrition because, besides learning, schools have been the regular source of food/nutrition for children belonging to different sections and especially the marginalised groups. Therefore, this study attempts to analyse the implications of adopting online education—which has exposed the persisting digital divide—and school closure on children's rights to education and nutrition. The study uses a nationally representative household survey that collected information on access to digital infrastructure and utilization of Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme and the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) by children. We find a striking digital divide between rural-urban areas and among different socio-religious and economic groups. Children from disadvantaged sections have very low access to digital infrastructure, and thus, they have a higher risk of being excluded from the online learning process. However, children of marginalised sections are the largest beneficiary of MDM and ICDS, but these schemes are on a halt. Therefore, COVID-19 is expected to increase children's educational and nutritional inequality. To ensure the equality of children's rights to education and nutrition, it is critical to prevent the re-emergence in the learning gap and nutritional outcomes. This can be done by strengthening the digital infrastructure, enhancing children's and their parents' digital capability, and providing more diverse and nutritious food in MDM and ICDS.

Keywords: COVID-19 , pandemic, school closure, digital divide, nutrition, education, children.

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has a devastating impact on every sphere of life, including economic, social, political, and most importantly, education. The rapid transmission of the disease has upended daily life very quickly and in a way that has never been experienced in the past. After the announcement of countrywide lockdown in 2020, the schools are closed and have adopted the online mode to bring down the loss of learning hours. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights raised the concerns that online education may augment the existing educational inequalities if it is not coupled with affordable and equitable access to the internet and digital devices, especially for the poor and marginalised sections (Narayanan, 2020). Similarly, Mid-Day-Meal (MDM)—the world's largest school-based feeding program—and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which provides food, pre-school education, immunization, health check-up, and referral services for pregnant and lactating mothers and their children under the age of six years,

Mukesh Kumar, Ph.D. Fellow, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, Uttarakhand.
Dr. Pratap C. Mohanty, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, Uttarakhand.

were also put on hold. Thus, a sudden and unprecedented lockdown has posed many parallel challenges besides education, food, and nutrition security for the children and their parents.

Therefore, COVID-19 has direct implications and adverse impacts on children's rights. "Right to Education and Right to Food, including access and availability of adequate nutritious food and protection against malnutrition…", are prerequisites for the realization of other related rights and human development. In such a situation of lack of resources for development, the children from the poorer and marginalised sections of the society are the biggest sufferers because their unemployed parents do not have enough money or savings to spend on their children's education and nutrition. Further, they do not have access to various resources necessary for online education, i.e., digital devices and strong internet connection. Similarly, another most crucial aspect of child development is good quality nutritious food in adequate quantity. The World Food Program (WFP) projected that COVID-19 disrupted the food supply chain and social protection system, which may double the

number of people facing acute food insecurity by the end of 2020, globally (WFP, 2020). The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020 ranked India 94 out of 107 (index score 27.2), which comes under serious hunger situation and below the other neighbouring countries such as Pakistan (score 24.6, rank 88), Nepal (score 19.5, rank 73), Bangladesh (score 20.4, rank 75), and Sri Lanka (score 16.3, rank 64). Food security is a crucial factor that contributes significantly to child health and nutrition, which enriches and ensures the sustainability of the human capital of a country. The recently released phase1 fact sheet of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2019-20) for 22 states and union territories (UTs) also presents a worrying figure of increased child malnutrition in the majority of the states during 2015-16 to 2019-20 (Kumar and Mohanty, India Has to Intensify Nutrition-Related Action, 2021).

In India, school closure does not mean only deprivation of education but much more than this, especially for children from poorer and deprived sections of society. Sudden lockdown and closure of schools have also led to the discontinuation of feeding to the school children through India's MDM

scheme. This scheme is feeding approximately 100 million children (Krishna, 2020). A large swathe of them belongs to the deprived socioeconomic spectrum attending government schools up to class VIII. Thus, school closure poses additional shocks to the families and their children, having already been poised with food insufficiency and nutritional deficiency. Apart from eliminating hunger, the MDM scheme also addresses other health-related issues of micronutrient deficiency and deworming. Studies show that utilization of MDM results in better learning outcomes irrespective of wealth and gender and has a significant positive impact on school enrolment, attendance retention, and gender and social equity (Chakraborty and Jayaraman, 2019; Chowdhury, 2019; A. Singh et al., 2014; Afridi, 2011).

Therefore, it is pertinent to address how the government's decision of lockdown and resulting school closures affected the children's access to education and school-based feeding practices in India. By identifying vulnerable groups (those who lack access to digital infrastructure and the children deprived of food/nutrition at school), our study will help policymakers to formulate policies targeting these sections of the society. In this backdrop, the present study attempts to:

1. Analyse the availability of digital infrastructure to access online education at the household level in India.
2. Identify the socioeconomic spectrum from which children are deprived of education and nutrition due to institutional (school and ICDS) disruptions.

II. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the latest available National Sample Survey (NSS) 75th round (2017-18) data on Household Social Consumption on Education in India (MoSPI Govt. of India2020). The survey covered all (36) states and Union territories (UTs) and sampled 1,13,757 households and 5,13,366 individuals. At the household level, apart from socioeconomic information, questions on availability of the computing devices (such as desktops, laptops, notebooks, and tablets, etc.) and the internet were also asked.

In the data, block-5 provides information on particulars of the 1,52,992 household members aged 3-35 who are currently attending education. This block collected information on the level of current enrolment, type of institution, expenditure on education, and more importantly, the variable of our interest, whether the institute provided MDM/tiffin/nutrition.

The present study is contextualized in terms of children's rights to education and food; therefore, we restrict our final analytical sample to the 81,887 individuals in the age group of 3-14 years.

Based on questions, whether the household has a computing device, an internet facility, we constructed a categorical variable for the availability of digital infrastructure where '1' represents the non-availability of both computer and internet and '0' otherwise. Likewise, for food/nutrition, a binary variable, whether food/nutrition is provided by the institute or not, is constructed.

We analyze the patterns of availability of digital infrastructure at the household level and the status of children receiving food/nutrition in schools by different social groups and economic classes (income quintiles, from lowest (1) to highest (5) in India). Additionally, for robustness state and type of school (govt. vs others) dummies are also included in regression analysis (Supp. Table S2). However, the results do not change significantly with the inclusion of

these two variables. Appropriate sampling weight is applied to take into account the NSSO's multistage sampling design, because, of the binary nature of dependent variables, logistic regression models are applied to identify the underlying determinant of the non-availability of digital infrastructure and children receiving food/nutrition. Results are reported in odds ratios, and statistical significance is set at p< .05. All the analysis is performed using statistical software Stata 15.1 SE.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Education distortions and digital divide in education

Undoubtedly, the pandemic backseat the right to education, and meantime online classrooms are being heralded as Hobson's choice—taking it or taking nothing—but it is not a luxury, affordable to children of the poor socioeconomic spectrum (Narayanan, 2020). Educational institutions worldwide are adopting online/remote teaching to compensate for and minimize the loss of learning hours. Following the developed countries' practices, schools and colleges in India have adopted the remote teaching methods hitherto promoting the digital divide (Bheemeshwar Reddy et al., 2020). According to an estimate of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 320 million learners enrolled in primary, secondary, or tertiary education are affected due to disruption of unplanned lockdown in India (UNESCO, Education: From Disruption to Recovery, 2021). To minimize the learning loss, UNESCO Director-General recommended that countries should "adopt a variety of hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions to assure the continuity of learning"(UNESCO, With One in Five Learners Kept out of School, UNESCO Mobilizes Education Ministers to Face the COVID-19 Crisis, 2020). Although in

India, major emphasis has been given to adopting online education, many government schools do not have sufficient physical digital infrastructure and teachers' adaptability to online teaching without proper training (A. K. Singh et al., 2020). Table-1 shows the socioeconomic characteristics of the children who have computer/internet or both computer and internet in their household. In India, only 6.85 % of the children currently attending education in the age group of 3-14 years have any computing device in their home while internet access is 18.75 %. A scanty 5.97 % of children are fortunate enough to have both a computer and an internet connection in India. With such shallow access at the national level, a substantial digital divide is evident between rural-urban areas and different sub-population groups like caste, religion, and wealth groups. Only 2.41 % of children in rural India have access to digital infrastructure, while a little better 15.88 % of children have access to the same in urban areas.

In India, caste and religion are intrinsic determining factors of social hierarchy. Dumont (1980) in his book "Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications" described that Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) are the poorest and at the bottom on the ladder of the social hierarchy and while privileged castes are at the top. This is evident in our study, and children from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), have equally paltry access to digital infrastructure. Among STs and SCs, only 2.29 % and 2.33 % of children have access to both computer and internet, while 13.02 % of children have access to the same in privileged castes (others). The access is more than double among the economically advantaged section between advantaged social groups (others) and the highest income group (richest 20 %). Similar kinds

Table 1: Percentage of Children Attending Education Received Food/Nutrition in the School and Have Digital Infrastructure in the Home in India, NSSO 2017-18.

Background	Availability of Digital Infrastructure in the household (%)			Received Nutrition in school (%)	Children attending govt. school (%)
Place of Residence	Computer Only	Internet Only	Both Internet and Computer	Children received food / nutrition	
Rural	3.14	12.57	2.41	65.54	72.39
Urban	18.8	37.36	15.88	30.25	31.33
Social Group					
STs	3.23	9.60	2.30	74.95	81.65
SCs	3.12	12.09	2.52	66.44	73.09
OBCs	5.68	17.34	4.56	54.83	59.81
Others	14.77	32.48	13.17	42.53	46.85
Religion					
Hindu	7.00	18.77	5.86	56.35	62.24
Muslim	5,93	17.47	5.23	58.54	61.74
Others	12.11	30.26	10.14	46.15	48.77
Income Quintiles					
Lowest Quintile	1.82	7.45	1.30	72.26	79.73
Lower Quintile	3.21	12.38	2.38	62.95	69.31
Middle Quintile	4.49	18.99	3.55	54.72	59.49
Higher Quintile	12.04	33.04	10.13	36.64	39.07
Highest Quintile	34.94	57.93	31.75	15,14	15,81
All India total	**7.08**	**19.12**	**5.97**	**56.20**	**51.52**

Note: As our primary focus is on children, we consider only (3-14 years)children currently attending education.
Source: authors' estimation from NSSO 75th round (2017-18) data on social consumption of education.

of within-group inequality exist among disadvantaged social groups, i.e. poorer children within these (STs and SCs) groups have very low access to digital infrastructure (in an additional analysis).

The pandemic has ravaged many sectors, including education in India. Nonetheless, there are some positive changes observed in the present period. These are (i) an increase in the scope of blended learning; (ii) adoption of modern learning management systems; (iii) access to improved learning materials; and (iv) better collaborative decisions, etc. (Mathivanan et. al., 2021). As it is important to identify the key determinant of access to digital infrastructure, multivariable logistic regression analysis results are displayed in the lower segment of Figure-1in terms of odds for non-availability of digital infrastructure.

These results indicate that the children in the rural area compared to urban, deprived social groups compared to privileged castes and in low-income quintiles compared to highest-income households have a higher probability of not having the digital infrastructure in their homes. These results should be interpreted carefully— as the odds ratio in favor of non-availability of digital infrastructure— because our outcome variable in this model is the non-

availability of both computer and internet in the home. Children of STs (ORs, 2.65) and SCs (ORs, 3.03) have approximately three times higher chances than 'others' that they do not have access to computers and the internet. Among income quintiles, children in the lowest income quintile have a more than ten times (ORs, 12.50) probability of not having access to digital infrastructure. Among the religious groups, Hindu and Muslim children have a lower probability of access to computers and the internet than others. This implies that, on the one hand, school closure distorted children's education, and on the other hand, the 'digital divide' might have further aggravated the problems.

Mid-day-meal: right to food and nutritional shock

The significance of children's food and nutrition security can be understood as "with every passing week of missed meals, a generation of children is at risk of decreasing their potential contributions in the future(Jayashree and Gopinath 2020)". A fundamental drawback of school closure

is that apart from the loss of learning, children attending government schools will face a loss of their daily source of nutrition because MDM is provided in government schools only. We estimated that approximately 100 million school-going children are not availing food/nutrition due to COVID-19 induced school closure that directly affects child's right to food (Kumar and Mohanty, COVID-19: Concern for Children's Education & Nutrition, 2021). Most of these children are from socio-economically deprived sections of society. Good quality nutritious food in adequate quantity is one of the key factors for a child's overall growth. The last column of Table-1 displays that 56.20 % of school-age (3-14 years) children have been provided food/nutrition (MDM) by the institution (schools/ICDS, Anganwadi) they were attending. More than double of the children of the rural areas (65.54 %) compared to urban (30.25 %) benefited from school-based food/nutrition programs. Among these children availing food/nutrition, the highest percentage was of STs (74.95 %), SCs (66.44 %), and 54.83 % and 42.53 % were from OBCs and Others, respectively. It
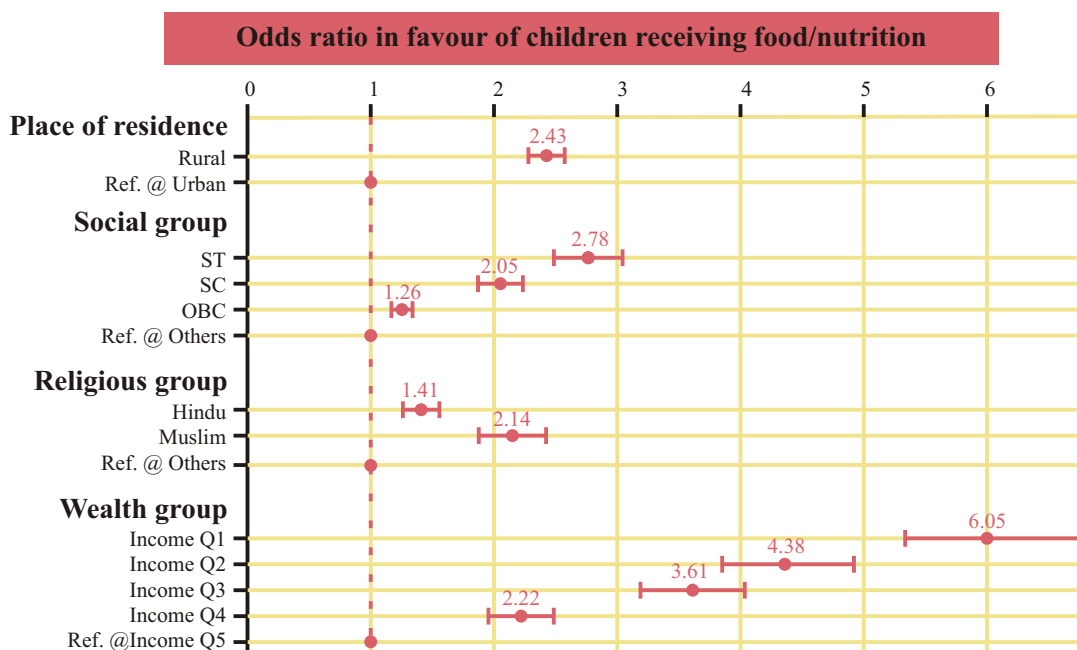
Figure 1 : Multivariable logistic regression results for non-availability of digital infrastructure and children (3-14 years) receiving food/nutrition in school in India

Odds ratio for non-availability of digital infrastructure
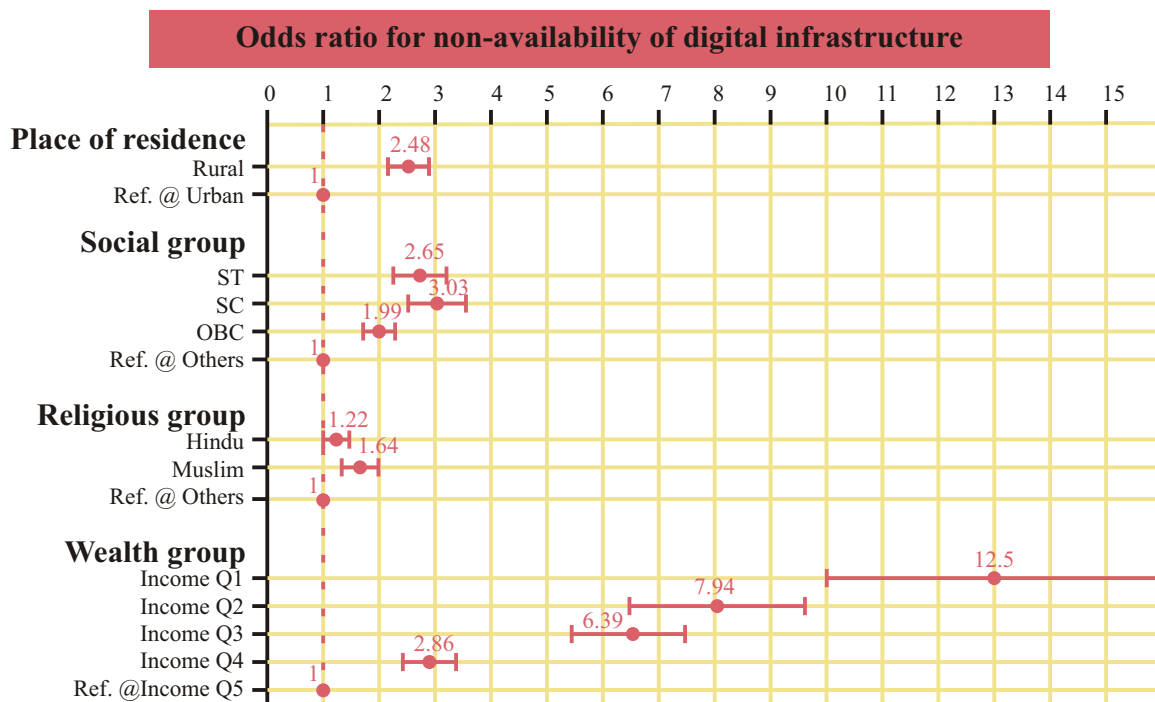
Note: Odds ratio are mutually adjusted for residence, socio-religious groups and economic status
Source: Author's own estimates from NSSO 75th (2017-18) round data on social Consumption and Education

indicates that due to school closures, the food/nutrition security of children across all the social classes is at risk, and the vulnerability of the children from existing vulnerable sections increased sharply. As the MDM is majorly provided in government and government-aided schools, a large proportion of children from poor families are attending government schools irrespective of their social class. Against the 15 % from highest income group families,72 % of children from poorest families receive MDM. Here again we find that like access to 'digital infrastructure,' socio-economic disadvantage is an important marker for receiving MDM benefits.

The upper segment of Figure-1shows multivariable logistic regression results for children's access to food/nutrition in schools. Results indicate that if a child is living in a rural area, his/her probability of benefitting from school-based feeding practice is more than twice (ORs, 2.43) of those living in the urban area. In other words, due to school closure, the risk of not

availing of MDM- or ICDS-based nutrition is twice among rural children. Similarly, children from disadvantaged socio-economic groups are the worst sufferers due to COVID-19 -induced disruption in ICDS and school education in India. Among different wealth groups, children from the poorest households—classification is based on monthly per capita consumption expenditure—are at the highest risk of not getting food/nutrition in schools. Compared to their most affluent counterparts, economically disadvantaged children have more than six times (ORs, 6.05) higher probability that they will remain underfed due to school closures. Among social groups, children from SCs and STs are affected the worst because they have a substantially higher probability of getting benefits from these ICDS and school-based nutrition programs. Children of the socio-economically disadvantaged sections of society benefit from such a scheme; therefore, they are the worst sufferer due to any disruption. More importantly, a large proportion of these children attend government schools where digital

infrastructure is in a poor state and MDM is suspended, at least until schools are reopened, due to COVID-19 . As per our estimates from the same data, about 73.59% of students live in rural areas, and 61.19 % attend government schools.

Besides these direct obstacles (lack of digital infrastructure and halted ICDS and MDM schemes) in assuring the children right to education and health, increased household food insecurity, parental job loss, rise in household chores, and domestic violence against women are some of the other structural barriers which will have long term impact on the realization of child rights. These barriers may lead to issues like rising school dropout rate, child labour, child marriage, etc. In this vicious circle of violation of child rights, girl children are more vulnerable because of higher son preference in Indian society (Kaur and Vasudev, 2019). All these have an adverse intergenerational impact on the health and education of offspring. Some Indian states initiated the home delivery of dry ration/meals to students, but there remains much more scope for such initiatives. The state-wise differences concerning access to digital infrastructure and nutrition are presented in Appendix Table-S1.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Education

The current COVID-19 crisis is a major hindrance in India's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and securing child rights to universal and equitable education and good health and well-being. Online education is bound to have a knowledge gap among haves and have-nots because children of well-to-do families have higher capacity, access, parental support to adopt online education. At the same time, children from disadvantaged sections are left in limbo due to their resource-constrained capabilities (Ahmed and Siddique, 2020; Bheemeshwar Reddy et al., 2020). Besides others, we find three key challenges in online education in ensuring the children's right to education, which require serious attention. First, exacerbated inequality in access to online education; second, the pedagogical problems that may result in poor quality educational outcomes; and third, unnecessarily greater reliance on online education in the COVID-19 period with persisting digital divide. Of course, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools is useful in explaining concepts and ideas, but that requires a well-functioning system.

Unfortunately, in India, we do not have a robust public school education system, therefore, any hurried adoption of online mode may result in further devastating effects on children's right to equality of quality education. ICT-based substitutes should not be taken as a panacea for all ills in the education system, at least if we follow the principle of equality in the right to education. Whatever little benefits that online education has, cannot be ignored. Even if the institution works less than optimally, children themselves create a learning environment that helps in their intellectual, moral, social, and physical development. All these opportunities are foreclosed in virtual classes, which have several implications for child rights (Dhankar, 2020; Sood, 2020).

In a right-based approach, the government should strengthen the digital infrastructure via distributing the digital learning devices (mobile, tablet, computer, etc.) to the needy learners and after that, making the internet and broadband or Wi-Fi services universal public goods. Launching massive digital learning programs could be the other options to enhance the digital capabilities

and to narrow down the digital divide in India.

Nutrition

We can speculate a more precarious future disparity in a child's health and nutrition due to disrupted food and nutrition networks. To revive the economy from COVID-19 shock, the government announced a $250 billion *'AatmaNirbhar Bharat Abhiyan'*, but no special attention has been given to address disrupted education and food systems (GoI, 2020). After that next hope was the union budget 2021-22, but health and education were not at centre stage (Sinha, 2021; Right to Education Forum, 2021). In the present unprecedented crisis, direct support, social protection, and universalization of food safety programs, i.e., public distribution system (PDS) in India, are urgently needed. In light of worsening child malnutrition as per NFHS-5 data and disruptions caused by COVID-19 , the government should universalise the child health and nutrition services without any conditional eligibility to mitigate the COVID-19 caused adverse impact on children's right to health, nutrition and education.

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APPENDIX

Background	Availability of Digital infrastructure in the household (%)			Received nutrition in school (%)	Children attending govt. school (%)
Supplementary Table S1: Percentage of Children Attending Education Received Food/Nutrition in the School and Have Digital Infrastructure in the Home in India, NSSO 2017 -18.					
State	Computer only	Internet-only	Both computer and internet	Children received food / nutrition	-
Goa	21.44	68.03	16.01	82.77	
West Bengal	5.93	11.75	5.18	76.57	84.10
Assam	5.61	12.62	4.46	75.13	87.67
Chhattisgarh	5.62	13.24	4.74	75.10	80.35
Bihar	3.76	13.67	3.04	73.92	87.62
Odisha	3.71	6.72	2.66	73.05	84.93
Jharkhand	2.47	14.38	1.89	72.67	77.43
Karnataka	5.23	11.37	4.13	65.65	63.07
Madhya Pradesh	3.99	13.82	2.89	58.38	67.99
Gujarat	7.91	27.85	6.81	57.25	65.88
Maharashtra	10.17	30.68	8.75	55.81	54.22
Kerala	20.58	52.17	17.70	54.26	38.60
Tamil Nadu	11.05	15.96	8.68	53.71	53.68
Andhra Pradesh	3.72	14.48	2.51	50.44	51.62
Rajasthan	8.99	20.05	8.01	48.97	55.75
Jammu & Kashmir	5.16	31.09	4.54	44.54	54.51
Uttarakhand	11.09	42.31	8.55	43.20	53.87
Himachal Pradesh	11.69	51.28	10.61	41.93	51.97
Telangana	7.26	19.85	5.98	41.91	41.47
Uttar Pradesh	5.03	12.92	4.36	41.33	45.89
Delhi	32.83	57.84	30.55	37.54	45.00
Punjab	12.81	42.05	10.84	31.47	39.18
Haryana	10.74	39.60	9.85	29.12	34.14
Tripura	2.53	7.34	2.05	80.04	86.50
Arunachal Pradesh	10.40	9.99	5.21	62.98	90.05
Sikkim	17.08	68.23	15.89	59.47	71.96
Meghalaya	7.10	11.98	5.42	56.58	65.58
Nagaland	22.81	43.17	20.41	48.03	68.24
Mizoram	25.64	44.70	19.31	47.64	56.55
Manipur	8.66	35.23	7.35	32.21	35.74
Lakshadweep	21.5	65.99	21.50	91.88	90.87
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	7.34	40.42	7.29	57.57	71.83
A & N Islands	9.98	1.95	1.48	56.80	64.80
Puducherry	14.60	39.33	11.64	49.33	52.76
Daman & Diu	30.97	70.47	30.97	40.15	36.13
Chandigarh	32.17	37.86	31.46	39.32	55.85
All India total	**7.08**	**19.12**	**5.97**	**56.20**	**61.52**

Source: Author's estimation from NSSO 75th round (2017-18) data on social consumption on education

Supplementary Table S2: Multivariable logistic regression results for children receiving food/nutrition in school and not having access to digital infrastructure in India, NSSO 2017-18.					
Odds ratio for non-availability of digital infrastructure			Odds ratio for children receiving food/nutrition in school		
	Odds Ratio	[95 % C I]		Odds Ratio	95 % C I
Residence			Residence		
Urban	2.10***	1.85 - 2.4	Urban	1.26***	1.13 - 1.4
Rural	Ref	-	Rural	Ref	-
Social group		-	Social group		-
Scheduled Tribes	2.59***	2.05 - 3.27	Scheduled Tribes	1.63***	.39 - 1.91
Scheduled Castes	2.70***	2.24 - 3.24	Scheduled Castes	1.45***	.27 - 1.65
Other Backward Classes	2.07***	1.82 - 2.36	Other Backward Classes	1.20***	.97 - 1.35
Other	Ref	-	Other	Ref	-
Religion		-	Religion		-
Hindu	0.91	0.75 - 1.11	Hindu	Ref	-
Muslim	1.22	0.95 - 1.57	Muslim	1.46***	1.3 - 1.65
Others	Ref	-	Others	1.16	.91 - 1.49
Income quintile		-	Income quintile		-
Lowest	10.37***	8.19 - 13.14	Lowest	3.24***	.64 - 3.98
Lower	6.76***	5.59 - 8.17	Lower	2.67***	.19 - 3.26
Middle	5.71***	4.80 - 6.71	Middle	2.19***	1.8 - 2.67
Higher	2.79***	2.43 - 3.2	Higher	1.68***	.38 - 2.04
Highest	Ref	-	Highest	Ref	-

Note: Odds ratio are mutually adjusted for residence, socioeconomic status, type of school and states.
***, ** represent 1 % and 5% and level of significance, respectively.
Source: Authors' estimation from NSS 75th round (2017-18) data, social consumption on education.

Effects of COVID-19 on Children's Lives: Early Evidences based on an Online Survey in India

Varun Sharma, Shreya Ghosh

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has had a profound effect on various aspects of life and its direct and indirect impact can be seen disproportionately across the globe and across age groups. To understand the effects of COVID-19 on children, this paper draws inferences from an online survey conducted by CRY – Child Rights and You– in April 2020. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect information. Findings suggest that the impact of COVID-19 on children is multifaceted. During the lockdown, only half (51%) of parents of children under the age of five were able to access immunisation services for their child. On the education front, 41% of parents with school-aged children (5-18 years) said their children attended online classes regularly and 88% reported an increase in their child's screen time. More than half of the parents reported that their child became more agitated and anxious. Combinations of measures are suggested such as household-level tracking, immunisation and check-ups at the doorstep for child health development. Accelerated learning programmes should be developed to cover up the academic loss. Also, teachers should be trained for online teaching. The paper also suggests providing resources to parents to develop effective age-appropriate communication with their child. Information on psychosocial support for children should be developed and disseminated to minimise COVID-19's negative impact on adolescents.

Keywords: COVID-19, children, India, lockdown, pandemic.

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to the human race (WHO, 2021). Studies mentioned that multifaceted impacts of the pandemic may put millions of children at risk of psychological, mental, physical, health and education, social and cultural degeneration (Dalton, Rapa, &Stein, 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic, children were less affected clinically than adults (Dong et al., 2020). Nonetheless, children are impacted by the pandemic's indirect effects (Roberton, T., Carter, E. D., Chou, V. B., Stegmuller, et al.).

Governments and communities around the world are battling the COVID-19 virus, which has the potential to reverse decades of economic and social progress (United Nations, 2020a). It has caused a global catastrophe, but for many children, especially from marginalised communities, the consequences could last a lifetime. Furthermore, the pandemic's detrimental effects will not be spread evenly. The spread of infection has had a negative effect on the macroeconomic environment, as well as the household economy. Measures such as countrywide lockdowns and restricted mobility were taken to control the spread of the virus in India and elsewhere. Though

Varun Sharma, Associate General Manager, Research, Child Rights and You (CRY)
Shreya Ghosh, Associate General Manager, Policy, Child Rights and You (CRY)

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

these measures were critical to contain the spread, they also left people with potentially limited access to essential services. Children are also affected as a result of these measures, with limited or no access to regular classroom schooling, limited social and recreational opportunities, and limited opportunities for outdoor play (United Nations, 2020a).

Along with these direct impacts are other probable effects such as threats to children's mental well-being due to various reasons like fear and anxiety and over thinking, which could directly impact their routine life (Singh et al., 2020). Limited outdoor opportunities are resulting in increased screen time for children and increased tendencies towards internet overuse are noticed among children and adolescents (Montag & Elhai, 2020). Increased time spent on the internet could exacerbate risks of online sexual abuse, cyber bullying and exposure to inappropriate content (UNICEF, 2020a).

Additionally, the pandemic's aftermath can be unduly severe on children from disadvantaged communities, with projections estimating that 42-66 million

children may plunge into extreme poverty, on top of the projected 386 million children who are already in extreme poverty in 2019 (United Nations, 2020b). Moreover, nationwide school closures may restrict access to and reach of the education system for the most disadvantaged children, potentially resulting in learning losses for today's youth. Likewise, it is estimated that, within a single year, the pandemic may have reversed gains achieved in the previous 2-3 years in lowering child mortality, which may affect the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2020a). As stated by the United Nations, around 368.5 million children in 143 countries normally rely on school meals for daily nutritious meals (United Nations, 2020a). Hence school closure may have a negative impact on the nutritional status of children. The pandemic would have far-reaching and long-term consequences for children. Hence, it is critical to document children's concerns to develop strategies on time to minimise adverse consequences that could jeopardise children's development.

Given this context, the paper aims to understand the challenges parents faced in providing childcare (education, health,

nutrition and psychosocial wellbeing) during COVID-19 lockdown, and outlines the data gathered using a child-centric perspective.

II. METHODOLOGY

CRY – Child Rights and You, India conducted a cross-sectional online nationwide survey in April 2020. A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather information from targeted respondents, who were adults aged 18 and above.

Data collection

A self-administered questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Hindi, Bangla, Kannada, and Marathi. The questionnaire was remodelled to an online form, and links for each language were generated. The questionnaire link was circulated using different online modes such as CRY's official social media sites. People were encouraged to share the links with their social groups. The survey aimed to receive a response from around 1000 participants across India. The data was gathered between April 10th and April 20th, 2020.

Following an informed consent form, participants were asked about their knowledge and understanding of COVID-19 , source of information, and family's preparedness to cope with any adversity.

Those with children were probed further about their perceptions on COVID-19 's effect on their child's health and nutrition, education, their relationship with the child, time management, and engagement with the child.

Data analysis

The questions were pre-coded and for categorical response options, the percentage of participants who selected each response

was computed. Due to the study's timing, which took place amid a nationwide lockdown in 2020, there was only a small window of opportunity to gather limited data.

To define and summarise characteristics, descriptive statistics were used. For data cleaning and maintenance, the online responses were compiled in an excel sheet. SPSS was further used for analysis purposes.

Ethical considerations

Those who participated in the survey gave their informed consent. The survey was voluntary, and no personal identifiers were collected, such as their name, phone number, email address, or correspondence address. The questionnaire was designed in a manner to collect minimum sensitive information. Questionnaire was pre-tested and based on the responses received, certain questions were reframed.

Limitations

The survey instrument collected data from the participants who had access to the internet or internet-enabled mobile devices. Since internet connectivity and literacy were prerequisites to participation, it was difficult to get an equal number of parents/caregivers' responses from the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the society especially from remote areas or from those who did not have Internet-enabled smart mobile phones. Due to the lack of random sampling, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The scope to follow-up a response was limited due to the very nature of the data collection tool i.e. self-administered online questionnaire. Time and resources were limited. Thus, besides Hindi and English, the questionnaire was translated only into three other regional languages, which may have impacted the overall reach of the tool.

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III. FINDINGS

Participants characteristics

There were 58 percent males and 42 percent females among the total 1102 participants. Twenty-three Indian states and union territories (UTs) were represented among the participants. The responses of the 2 percent of participants whose geographical location could not be determined were omitted from further analysis.

Characteristics	N (%)
Gender	
Female	461 (42%)
Male	641 (58%)
Having Children	
One	369 (33%)
Two	338 (31%)
More than two	295 (27%)
None	100 (9%)
Age categories of children at home *	
Under 5 years of age	332 (34%)
5-10 years of age	445 (45%)
10-14 years of age	399 (40%)
14-18 years of age	235 (24%)
Occupation demands to work for providing emergency services during lockdown	
Yes	506 (46%)

multiple responses and conditioned on having children at home
Table 1: *Sample characteristics*

One out of every ten participants (9%, or 100 participants) reported that they did not have a child. Of the majority of those who had a child, 33 percent had only one child. In further analysis, participants with children are referred to as parents. Children of 45% of parents were in the age group of 5 to 10 years. About 34 % of parents said they have small children under the age of five, and one in every four said they have an adolescent aged 14 to 18.

Forty-six percent of total participants said their job requires them to work through the lockdown to provide emergency services to the family; the nature of emergency services in which the participants were associated was not collected in the study. Although the larger study gathered information on knowledge and awareness of COVID-19 , this paper focuses on the findings specific to children.

Effects on education and screen time

Parents of school-aged children were probed further about how the pandemic induced lockdown had affected their children's education.

More than half of the 670 parents (58%), who had a child aged 5-18 years, said their child did not attend online/virtual classes during the lockdown regularly. Provided that the study was done in the early months of the pandemic, it did not aim to investigate the reasons for this.

However, it should be noted that around 45% of all parents stated that the total screen time had increased for their child. Although the findings were provided for children of all ages, the percentages were comparable for those who have children aged 5-18 years, (45 %- to a great extent; 44% - to some extent; 11% - not really). Even if the children were not attending online classes, opportunities available to them may have decreased significantly and thus, a dramatic rise in screen time.

Increased screen time may lead to psychosocial issues, hence, supervision of child's online activities and behaviour is critical. According to the responses received 43% of parents said they keep a watch on their child's online activities. However, 18 percent stated that they never supervise their child while she or he is online. Supervised internet access was stated by more than half

Characteristics	N (%)
Online/Virtual classroom attended by the child*	
Yes	277 (41%)
No	388(58%)
Lockdown has increased screen time for the child/children	
Yes, to a great extent	452 (45%)
Yes, somewhat	429 (43%)
Not really	115 (11%)
Do parents keep a watch when child is online	
Always	433 (43%)
Sometimes	371 (37%)
Never	177 (18%)
Measures taken While Child is Online @	
Keep a track on web/phone history	306 (31%)
Child lock	214 (21%)
Promote access only in your supervision	519 (52%)
No measures are taken	209 (21%)
Others	29 (3%)

*For those who have children at home aged 5 years to 18 years @Multiple responses possible

***Table 2:** Child education and screen time*

Characteristics	N (%)
Able to access basic healthcare (immunisation for the child)$	
Yes	166 (51%)
Had to cope with children's illnesses/health issues without medical help	
Yes	265 (27%)
In your opinion, has the lockdown impacted the eating pattern of your child	
Yes, to a great extent	347 (35%)
Yes, somewhat	416 (42%)
Not really	235 (24%)
Impact on Behaviour#	
Child/children have become more agitated/ anxious.	523 (53%)
Child/children have become more sensitive	433 (44%)
Child/children have become more playful/ happier	265 (27%)
No change has been observed	170 (17%)
Any other	20 (2%)

$ conditioned on have children aged less than 5 years (n=332) , # Multiple responses

***Table 3:** Health care access and wellbeing*

of the parents (52%). Furthermore, two out of every five parents (21%) stated that they had taken measures to protect their child when online, such as using a child lock. One-fifth of parents (21%) said they didn't take any such measure.

Effects on children's health, nutrition, wellbeing

Access to healthcare was limited, with half of the parents of children under the age under five reporting that they were unable to access basic healthcare, such as immunisation for their child. Similarly, one in every four parents (27%) said they had to deal with their child's illnesses/health problems without medical help. One-third (35%) of parents reported that the lockdown had a significant effect on their child's eating pattern.

More than half of the parents mentioned that lockdown made children agitated or anxious. Only 27% of parents reported positive results such as their child being playful and happy due to lockdown.

Daily routine and child's time management

The majority of parents indicated that the lockdown had disrupted their child's routine life in many ways. During the lockdown, three out of four parents believed their child was left with no outdoor play (74%) and no social interactions (73%).

More than half of them stated that their child's daily routine was hampered as a result of no access to classroom services (59%).

Parents said their children spend their time assisting with household chores (51%), watching movies (57%), or playing games with other family members (56%). According to the parents, time spent on

"Screen time" is a term used for activities done in front of a screen, such as watching TV, working on a computer, or playing video games. Screen time is a sedentary activity, meaning being physically inactive while sitting down. Very little energy is used during screen time

Characteristics	N (%)
Impact on Daily Routine^	
No access to classroom services	587 (59%)
No social interaction	720 (73%)
No outdoor play	738 (74%)
No timings are maintained so daily routine is hampered	461 (47%)
No – the daily routine has not been impacted	101 (10%)
Others	15 (2%)
Child time engagement*	
Doing homework from school	421 (42%)
Reading Story books	442 (44%)
Developing new hobbies	363 (37%)
Helping in household chores	504 (51%)
Online games	382 (38%)
Watching movies	562 (57%)
Extra-curricular activities such as singing/ playing instruments/ dance	306 (31%)
Playing games with family members	556 (56%)
Others	37 (4%)

^ Multiple responses possible

Table 4: *Daily routine and child's engagement*

Characteristics	N (%)
Time Spent with Child [@]	
Reading story books	457 (46%)
Playing online games	342 (34%)
Watching movies	563 (56%)
Recreational activities – art and craft etc.	481 (48%)
Household chores	535 (54%)
Family games	478 (48%)
Teaching children/helping them in studies	502 (50%)
Not able to spend much time with children	97 (10%)
Any other (specify)	35 (4%)
Communication with Child [$]	
Sit with the child and discuss the issues	541 (54%)
Try to divert her/his mind to other activities	488 (49%)
Ignore it	55 (6%)
Access help from outside	42 (4%)
This situation hasn't happened yet	323 (33%)
Any other (Specify)	8 (1%)

[@][$] Multiple responses

Table 5: *Parental engagement with child*

instilling a new hobby (37%) and other extra-curricular activities (31%) was comparatively low.

Parental engagement with child

In terms of spending time with the child, a similar trend emerged. More than half of parents said they preferred spending time with their child over household chores (54%) and watching movies (56%). Conversely, one out of every ten parents (10%) mentioned that they were unable to devote quite enough time to their child. Parental communication with the child in difficult times is critical to resolving the issues and calming the child. As previously noted, more than half of parents believed their child suffers from anxiety or irritability; thus, how parents interact with their children is critical. Half of the parents stated that they attempted to draw the child's attention away from problems by indulging her/him in other activities, and 54% considered addressing the problem with the child as a constructive way of communicating with the child.

Overall impact on children's life

More than half of the parents reported that lockdown hampered their child's education

Characteristics	N (%)
Impact on child's life due to lockdown [@]	
Children's education and learning	768 (77%)
Children's extra -curricular activities	600 (60%)
Play time and recreation	590 (59%)
Children's friendships and social lives	593 (60%)
Impact on health due to inadequate nutrition	259 (26%)
Impact on regular care of children due to added household responsibilities for family members	220 (22%)
Children's relations with other members of the family due to social distancing	265 (27%)
Children's mental well -being and happiness	363 (37%)
Other (specify)	15 (2%)

[*] Multiple responses

Table 6: *Overall impact on child's life*

(77%), extracurricular opportunities (60%), and friendship and social lives (60%).

One out of every four parents also stated that their child's health had been affected due to inadequate diet (26%). According to every third parent (37%), the lockdown had a bearing on their child's social and emotional wellbeing.

IV. DISCUSSION

This paper examines parents' perspectives on various facets of a child's life at the beginning of the pandemic. The effect of COVID-19 on school education has been unparalleled. Due to the existing digital divide, school closures and shift of traditional classrooms to digital platforms the learning gaps are increasing and pushing a large number of children out of school. The findings of this study revealed this digital divide, with more than half of parents reporting that their child did not attend online classes regularly. At the macro level, 320 million students in India have been impacted by school closures (UNESCO, 2020). Only 37.6 million children in 16 states, on the other hand, are continuing their education through various educational initiatives (UNICEF, 2020b). These statistics illustrate how the pandemic has affected a large number of children. Remote learning is challenging for many children due to wide disparities in access to basic digital services. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) round 75th, only 10.7 percent of Indian households have a computer and only 23.8 percent have Internet access. (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019a). A recent study also suggested that online learning tools are heavily skewed toward the upper urban quintile, potentially widening the learning divide (Bhandari, Jain, & Sahu, 2021). Moreover, the increasing trend of digital learning or other online activities has resulted in increased screen time for children (Ozturk Eyimaya & Yalçin Irmak, 2021).The study found that 45% of parents believed that their child's screen time has increased significantly. This trend is concerning, because of the low digital literacy in the country, parents are often ignorant of appropriate online behaviour and therefore unable to provide adequate supervision to their child when they are online. Due to this, the risk of a child being exposed to inappropriate content and online predators has grown manifolds (United Nations, 2020a).

The paper emphasises the need for accelerated learning programmes for children, in order to make up for academic losses. Furthermore, as education has shifted to online modes, teacher capacity building is critical to ensure effective online teaching. Attempts should be made to improve digital infrastructure in order to reach out to vulnerable children. Also, the government must establish robust online protection mechanisms.

During this period of crisis, child welfare is crucial. According to the United Nations, hundreds of thousands more children could die globally in 2020 (United Nations, 2020a). Vaccines, as stated by UNICEF, are the best way to protect children from life-threatening diseases. Governments have worked significantly to reduce child mortality around the world (Bustreo, Okwo-Bele, & Kamara, 2015). In the Indian context, even before the pandemic, only 59.2 percent of children aged 0 to 5 years were fully immunised (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019b). The findings indicate that it was difficult for parents to access regular vaccination for their child. Around 27 percent of parents also stated that they were not able to get medical care for their child in an emergency. The results highlight the importance of ensuring essential child healthcare services. Alternative arrangements, especially for

vulnerable communities, must be implemented and strengthened. The findings also revealed that during the lockdown, parents believed that eating patterns of their child had changed significantly. Earlier studies have established an association between eating patterns and behaviours and children's nutritional status (Nicklas, Baranowski, Cullen, & Berenson, 2002). Indirectly, eating patterns are linked to stress levels (Tate, Spruijt-Metz, Pickering, & Pentz, 2015), as shown by the findings that more than half of the parents reported their child acting distressed or nervous. As a result, parents should be encouraged to monitor their child's behaviour and eating patterns in order to keep them healthy. To resolve these concerns, the government, schools and NGOs may develop awareness materials, tools and techniques for parents.

The study revealed a noticeable change in the daily life of children. Close to the findings of this study, other studies have shown that restricted mobility hinders a child's routine life (Dunton, Do, & Wang, 2020).Parents may be advised to create a flexible timetable for their children, which would help them stick to their daily routine and instil discipline.

Findings also suggested that ten percent of parents could not spend enough time with their children due to work demands. Thus, the lack of contact between parents and children can be damaging to relationships and cause distress or agitation as cited by earlier studies also (Chung, Lanier, & Wong, 2020). Parents can be provided online training on how to interact constructively with their children. Government and civil society must work together to build forums for offering psychosocial support to children, raise awareness, and teach parents how to communicate effectively with their children in an age-appropriate manner. Positive parenting and the development of

social and emotional intelligence in children are also essential factors in ensuring their well-being. Proactive means of communication with children may yield positive outcomes and assist them in overcoming behavioural and psychosocial issues (Pajovikj Mishevska Snezhana & Tanja, 2018).

V. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world's economies, causing even the most essential services to be disrupted. Furthermore, the pandemic's adverse impacts are not distributed equally, with marginalised communities bearing a disproportionate burden. Children are at risk of becoming one of its most vulnerable victims, especially those from vulnerable communities who rely heavily on government programmes for health, nutrition, schooling, and protection.

This paper aims to reflect on those vulnerabilities and provide measures to mitigate them. Nonetheless, the results should be interpreted with caution. The survey instrument collected data from parents who had access to internet-enabled mobile devices, hence, restricting the scope to reach out to parents from the most marginalised sections that live in remotest areas or do not have access to internet-enabled mobile phones.

Similarly, since the survey was carried out at the beginning of the pandemic, only selected questions were asked to the potential participants based on the assumption that the people were under a lot of stress at that moment and a long questionnaire wouldn't be feasible to collect information on different facets. The research did not collect any demographic data, such as age, educational attainment, occupation, or income level. Furthermore, the study did not go further into the explanations for

answers, hence, narrowing the space for further investigation into the "whys" and "hows."

Nonetheless, the paper reflects some of the important facets of children's lives. In addition, given the magnitude of the issue, the study recommends that solutions be developed at three levels: self, society, and system. This entails empowering the child and her family by building agency and linking them to appropriate social security measures, creating a supportive safety net at the community level and supporting the system to effectively identify and respond to the needs of children. Only then children can have a healthy, happy, and safe childhood. Individuals, states, and the larger community will benefit from the pandemic's experiential and documented learnings in the future when dealing with such type of pandemic, natural calamity, or conflict situations.

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Students' Perception of the Online Teaching-Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: Case Study of a Sarvodaya Vidyalaya in Delhi

Neha Yadav

ABSTRACT

Educational systems across the globe saw a dramatic shift in the teaching process during COVID-19 induced lockdown. With schools getting closed for extended duration, students were put into the online classes unexpectedly. The paper employs a qualitative approach to study the students' perception of the online teaching-learning modes and also highlights the benefits and challenges that students face. It also seeks to understand students' perception of giving tests online. Sixty (60) students from Class X and Class XII were selected for the study from a government school in New Delhi. The data was collected online using a questionnaire, which was distributed to the students using Google form, during the lockdown period. The responses received from the students were then analyzed thematically.

Keywords: COVID-19 -19, teaching, learning, students, online education, Delhi.

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions across the world as well as those in India were shut down due to the pandemic-induced lockdown. As a result, over 91% of the world's student population refrained from attending schools or colleges to avoid spreading of the virus (UNESCO, 2020). With the spreading of COVID-19 and subsequent shutting down of schools, colleges and universities for an indefinite time, there has been an increasing move towards online teaching as it's the only option left (Martinez, 2020). Technological advancement has changed the lives of people tremendously and has also brought a huge change in various fields, especially in the education system. E-learning is now an important tool for the teaching-learning process during the lockdown (Nadikattu, 2020). Lederman (2020) was of the view that teachers and students both find themselves in the situation where they feel to accept the digital academic experience as the highest good of the online teaching-learning process during COVID-19 crisis. In India too, the burden of online classes has been put on students involuntarily; so it becomes pertinent to know about their opinions and their perception regarding online teaching and also to understand the problems they are facing.

Article 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), states that all children deserve the right to voice their opinions, free of criticism or contempt. Even though children's opinions may not be factual, but they are important and should be considered. In this regard, this study was conducted to understand students' opinions and experiences of the online classes

Neha Yadav, Lecturer Biology, SarvodayaVidyalaya (Rani Durgawati), Kidwai Nagar , New Delhi

imposed on them during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will further help teachers to become more understanding and develop their online pedagogical approach.

To understand the students' perception, following questions were asked from them:

1. What are the students' preferences for the duration, frequency and mode of online teaching and learning?

2. What is the student's opinion about giving tests online?

3. What are the benefits of online teaching and learning according to the students?

4. What challenges do students face during online teaching and learning?

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE

Data sample

A qualitative study was used to examine the online learning experiences of 60 students of classes 10 and 12. All students belonged to Sarvodaya Vidyalaya, Kidwai Nagar. It is a government school located in South-East Delhi under the Directorate of Education. The school was selected as the author is a teacher in this school. The students of Class 10 were chosen for the study as they were old enough to be able to express their opinions freely and also, they were to give their board exams so for them, online classes were a necessity. Out of 60 students, 34 were boys and 26 were girls.

Data collection procedure

Data was collected after a few months since the online classes started. Students were administered an online questionnaire using Google forms to understand their perception of their online classes. The questionnaire consisted of nine multiple choice questions to garner their responses. Four subjective questions were also included to further probe students' perceptions of their online classes.

Data analysis

The data collected using the multiple-choice questions was organized into pie charts and accordingly analyzed. The data collected using subjective questions were analyzed qualitatively by reading, coding and

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categorizing the filled narrative responses of the students in different themes as per the words and phrases used by the students.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

a) Results

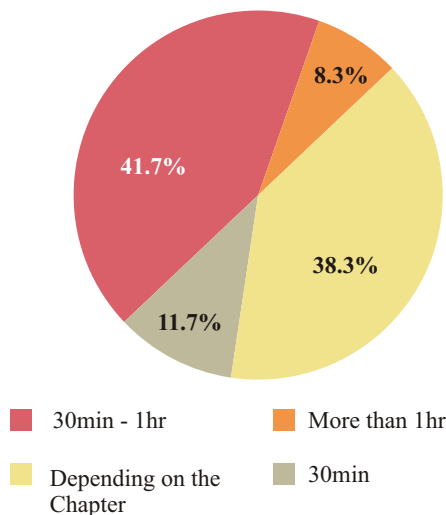**Students' preference for teaching and learning during online classes**

Figure 1: Preferred duration of online classes

The majority of the students (n=25) were of the view that a class of 30 minutes to 1 hour is enough for one day and almost equal number of students (n=23) felt that the classes should be taken depending on the chapter and they could vary in their duration. Seven (7) students were of the view that the classes should only be of 30 minutes and 5 students were of the view that the timings of the classes are short and they should be of more than one hour. Muthuprasad et al (2021) have suggested that to enhance the productivity of the learners, one should refrain from long-duration classes and sufficient breaks should be given between two consecutive classes. It avoids cognitive load as well as the physical strain due to the extended use of electronic gadgets. Thompson (2014) had also suggested work for 52 minutes and break for 17.

Preferred frequency of online classes per subject
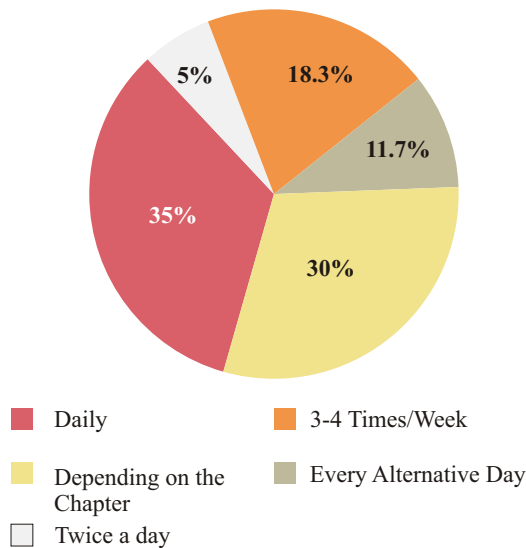
Figure 2: Preferred frequency of online classes

The majority of the students (n=21) were of the view that the classes should be taken daily while 18 students held the view that the classes should be adjusted according to the chapter being taught. Around 7 students said classes should be held every alternate day; 11 said that 3-4 times per week was enough for any subject while 3 students suggested for two classes each day.

Preferred mode of online teaching
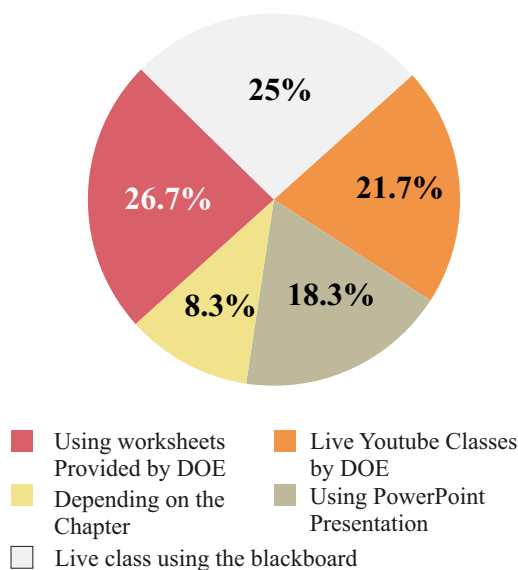
Figure 3: Students' preference of a mode of online teaching and learning

When asked about the methods used by different subject teachers, students listed a lot of methods their teachers employ for conducting online classes. Some of these were: Teaching live through Google meet and Zoom, PowerPoint presentations, Online teaching using NCERT PDF, discussion of the worksheets provided by the schools in Google classroom, Google forms, YouTube classes.

Following responses were obtained when students were quizzed about their preferred mode of teaching :-

The majority of the students (n=16) preferred worksheets provided by the Directorate of Education, Delhi, and their explanation as a preferred mode of online teaching. These subject-wise worksheets provided by DoE, Delhi focused on a single concept or a single topic each day and explained it in simple terms and bilingually, which makes it easy for the students to grasp the concept. It also provides some important questions from that concept at the end as students' homework, so that students could prepare for exams as well. Also, worksheets of a single subject are given on alternate days providing ample time to the students to revise and hence, do not overburden them. A similar number of students (n=15) preferred live classes using blackboard, which imitates their classroom teaching. Thirteen (13) students preferred live YouTube classes organized by the Directorate of Education, Delhi. Although these classes are only for XI and XII as of now, students are finding them quite useful as some of the best teachers of DoE are taking these classes in their respective subjects. As these classes are live, students could clear their doubts by asking questions in the comment section and also by answering to the questions asked by the teacher in the videos.

As many students were not able to join these classes live because of various family issues like unavailability of a phone at the time of the class, recorded lectures could be accessed by students later on. This provided them with a single channel for all their subject videos rather than getting lost in the plethora of videos available on YouTube, which creates further confusion in the minds of the students. Students (n=11) also selected PowerPoint presentation as the preferred mode.

One student explained, *"During online classes with PowerPoint presentations, the use of visuals makes the learning very interesting. Also, the teacher sometimes shows videos in the lectures which help us understand the topic easily".* The least number of students (n=5) preferred teachers using only NCERT PDF to teach them. This may be because students feel NCERT can be covered through self-study and the teacher should provide extra knowledge to them. A few students, however, selected this option as their preferred mode of teaching. One student shared her opinion and said, *"I like when the teacher teaches us through NCERT PDF because then we can understand line by line from the textbook and we know what the teachers are teaching, from which chapter or from which topic."*

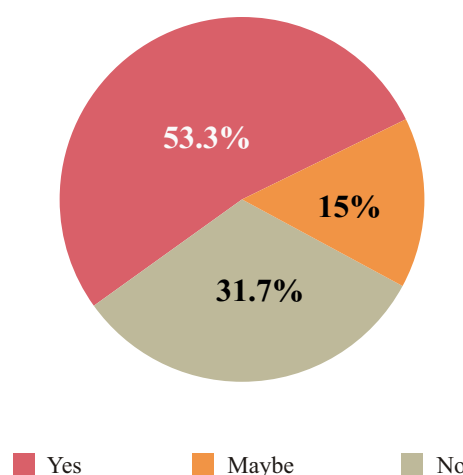**Students' perception of giving tests online**

Figure 4:Students' preference for taking tests online

A majority of students (n=32) like taking tests online and prefer online tests over offline tests. However, some students (n=19) still prefer giving offline exams while a few students (n=9) remain undecided.

To further understand students' opinions about giving online tests, they were asked to elaborate on the reasons for their liking or dislike for the same. Students shared both positive as well as negative views concerning online tests. A few students were not attending the online classes and were not regular in their classes but they still gave tests regularly because they thought that they were being marked and taking tests was less time consuming and they could manage these.

Some students were of the view that tests are important because they test your knowledge, your understanding, and how much you have learned. To quote a few students' responses: *"Tests, whether they are online or offline, boost our knowledge by checking how much we have learned so far"; "Yes, it is a good way to just look at yourself that how much have you learned"; "By giving tests even online, we get to know about new questions or how a question can be asked in an exam and we also get to know about how much we have understood"*

Although some students were in favour of giving tests, a few thought that giving tests online is a bad idea as it is open to students for cheating and many students are getting good marks even if they are not good in studies. One student said, *"Whenever we are giving tests online, many students are getting good marks and many students are cheating also. When we were in the school, the option of cheating was not there and the teacher used to know the real result of the student".* Another said, *"I have no problem giving online tests, but many students are giving the tests by cheating only".* Another

problem with the students was that the scope of questions was limited to multiple-choice questions or short answer types but in the exam, they are supposed to write long
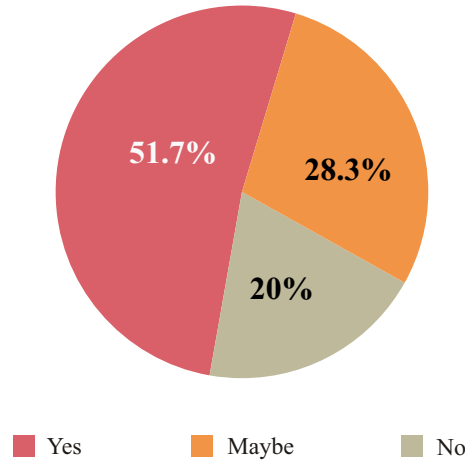
Figure 5*:Students' perception about assignments being given during online classes*

questions also. So even after attempting and getting good marks, students don't feel confident enough. One student said, *"It's good that we are giving tests and getting to know what we have learned, but in online tests, only short questions or MCQ or fill in the blanks are asked. In the board exam, we have to write long questions, we have to draw diagrams and we have to solve numericals also in science. I have given many tests but I am still scared for my board exams".*
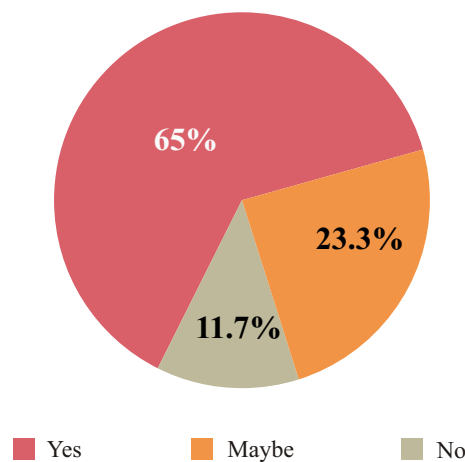
Figure 6*: Students' perception about tests being taken during online classes*

On being asked whether students would like to take assignments at the end of each class, a vast majority of students (n= 31) agreed that they want assignments at the end of the class, while some students (n=12) disagreed with the statement. This means that the students are interested in having a follow-up

Figure 7:Students' preference for the type of online tests

in the form of an assignment so that they can understand how much they have learned and how much they have understood according to the concept being taught in the online class. Some students (n=17) were unsure about it.

Responding to the statement whether students would like a small test of 5 to 10 minutes during each class, an overwhelming majority of students (n=39) agreed to this statement while some (n=14) were unsure and only a few students (n=7) disagreed with the statement. This shows that students

want to take tests during online classes to assess their understanding of the concept being taught by the teacher. Also, students can clear their doubts while they are on that particular concept.

On being asked about the preferred type of test students would like to take, an overwhelming majority of students (n=42) chose objective type questions as a preference while only a small number of students (n=6) chose subjective type questions. Some students (n=12) thought that the type of test does not matter and any of the tests would be critical for their understanding. This shows that the majority of the students are more inclined towards the objective type of test, which includes MCQ, One word, etc. This might be because these types of tests are less time-consuming, require less studying and are helpful while using unfair means of giving the tests. Students might also feel that it is cumbersome to type long answers and, therefore, might be not interested in writing answers to subjective questions.

b) Benefits of online teaching-learning according to the students

The majority of the students think that online teaching has been helpful to them because they initially thought that their classes would come to a halt due to the continuing pandemic. The second option

Figure 8:Benefits of online teaching-learning according to the students

selected by the students was that they find these classes give them the comfort of home without worrying to dress up for school or travel to school. The third most selected option was a better understanding of concepts in online teaching as there are visuals and videos. To further understand why students selected a particular option, they were asked to elaborate on the reasons for the same. Following themes emerged from the responses obtained from the students:

Fighting pandemic

Some students thought that they won't be able to study anything because of school closure. They needed to continue their studies at any cost for their upcoming board exams this year. In such a situation, online classes proved to be a boon for them. One student responded, *"The good thing about online classes is that we have already faced loss of studies because of the pandemic and we don't know when this pandemic will end. Whenever I think about it, I feel thankful to our teachers who started these online classes so that we can continue with our education and can give our board exams properly".* Few students were also of the view that online classes are important for them to avoid COVID-19 infection, as they will remain protected inside their homes while studying. This is in tandem with Martinez's (2020) view that there has been an increasing move towards teaching online as educational institutions remain shut due to pandemic induced lockdown.

Comfort level of the home with flexible pace

Another good thing, according to the students, was that they can attend the classes from the comfort of their homes. Students find that the schedule is very flexible and they do not feel overburdened. In a study conducted by Muthuprasad et al (2021), a similar result was obtained wherein flexible schedule and convenience were ranked as the major benefits of the online learnings as it offered students the opportunity to study at their own pace and time of their convenience.

A better understanding of concepts

Many students agreed that online teaching has a lot of advantages, which they feel are missing in offline classes. Students think that many concepts have become more interesting because of the visuals that teachers are using in the class. Students have become aware and have been able to upgrade to the new technology that they are indulging in. One student shared: *"In online classes, we see visuals and we can also Google at the same time for clearing our concepts. This has made the classes fun".*

One of the advantages that students feel is that they are having an opportunity to study from different teachers at the same time resulting in an amalgamation of the expertise and experiences of multiple teachers. One student shared: *"We get teachers from so many different schools. This helps us get the varied perspectives of a single concept. When we study during online classes, we can also see the questions other students are asking from teachers".*

Another advantage that students shared was that during online classes, they can take a screenshot of important pictures and they can record the video of the teachers during teaching. Teachers also share the presentations with them, so students have the opportunity to revise and watch the video again and again. Even the live classes conducted by the DoE on YouTube are available on the DoE channel for students to watch again and again and clear a specific concept.
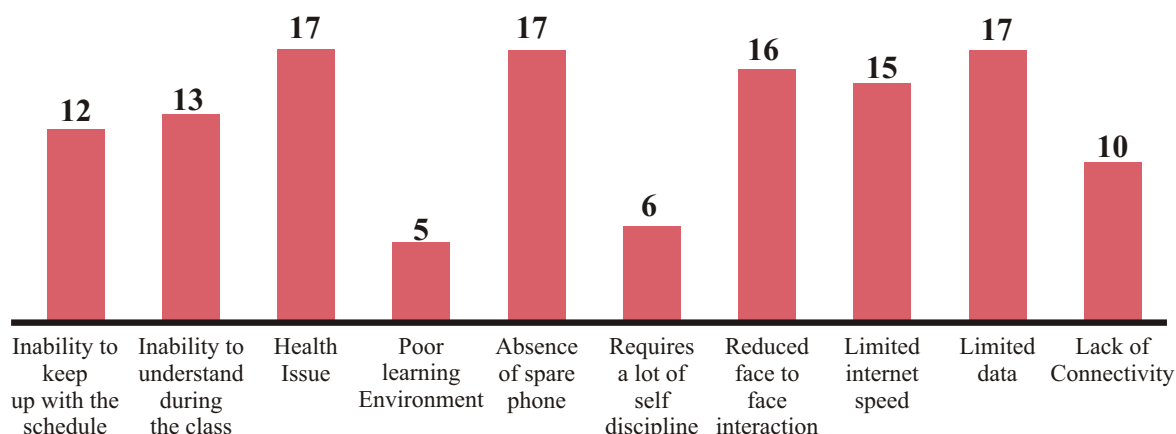
Figure 9*:Challenges faced by the students due to the process of online teaching-learning*

Less time-consuming

Some students also cited that online classes are less time-consuming as many topics are covered in a few minutes. One student responded, *"Online classes save our time as we are not travelling to school and we have recorded lectures, which we can see and clear our doubts without wasting time on YouTube for searching videos"*. According to students they get more time for self-study now.

c) Challenges faced by the students due to online teaching

The top three reasons that students find challenging in case of online classes are that they lack a personal phone; even if they were having a phone they had limited data; and health issues such as problems in the eyes and headaches due to prolonged use of phones. To further understand why students selected a particular option they were asked to elaborate on the reasons for the same. Following themes emerged from the responses obtained from the students:

Technical issues

Students faced a lot of problems while studying online like the abrupt ending of the call, slow internet connection, unclear sound, interruption of background noise, etc. One student responded:*"I face a lot of problems during online classes, for example, sometimes my phone battery is dead in between the class and sometimes I am not able to hear or understand the teacher clearly as her voice breaks because of a poor network connection. Sometimes, we lose a connection even for 10 minutes due to the usage of all the data and it becomes difficult to understand what the teacher is teaching after 10 minutes."* Other students, too, resonated with this view that the network issue is the major cause of not understanding the concepts properly. Another student shared: *"Sometimes, we have classes for 2-3 subjects in a day and when we start with one class, our data is exhausted for the day. Even if we try to recharge the data and join the classes again, sometimes we get late by 15-20 minutes and get lost"*. This is in agreement with the study conducted by Muthuprasad et al (2021) in which lack of connectivity was ranked as the major hindrance in online learning followed by data limit and data speed, indicating India's digital divide.

Family issues

At times, students faced disturbance from their family members and had to request them to maintain silence and not interfere. One student said, *"Television is always on at my home. So, I get disturbed during my classes and I am not able to concentrate on what the teacher is teaching"*. Most

students were having problems because of the availability of a single phone in their homes and at many times phones were not available to them. One student shared her problem and said that *"Many of us cannot take a class because we don't have a phone, and parents of many students go for their jobs at the time of the class".* Some students who even had access to phones had problems in attending the classes since they were living in small apartments with their family members. They were not getting any privacy and any peaceful time to attend the classes.

Health issues

Students faced a lot of health issues while taking online classes like developing strain on the eyes, itching, and pain in the eyes. Some students got irritated with online classes wherein they had to continuously stare into their mobile screens which made them lose interest in studying. One student said: *"My eyes were already weak and because of online classes, they got into worse condition. Nothing is good in the online class; I used to understand concepts in offline classes not in online classes. I don't know why."* Another student, too, vented out her frustration and said: *"Radiation of phone screen is high, sometimes, tears start coming from my eyes. At one stage, we just feel irritated with the phones, but we can't help it. Pain in the eyes, itching, irritation; everything happens".*

Learning issues

Many students were of the opinion that during online classes, it is really difficult to understand the concepts as they're not able to concentrate for a longer period. Students leaving and rejoining the classes in between makes things even more difficult, they said. Many students specifically shared problems that they face in science. In absence of practical classes, they were not able to clear all their doubts. Students said that they are not able to discuss numerical questions online. One student shared *"Disturbed voice and network problems break our concentration. There are lots of doubts while self-studying and we want teachers to clear those doubts. Due to the time limit, understanding topics and doing numerical questions are also impossible at the same time".*

Students feel that minimal interaction with the teacher is a hindrance to learning. One student expressed that she feels scared to ask questions from teachers during online classes. This could be because students moved to the next class in the lockdown period and were given new teachers in the new classes. For some students, these teachers were strangers to them, and the level of comfort that students develop when they meet their teacher every day personally, was missing during online classes. Unaware of the teachers' nature, many students were not able to connect with the teacher; they were hesitant to share or ask about their doubts and solve their queries with the teacher. This holds well in reverse also as for teachers, too, students were strangers and certainly there was a lack of connection. A study conducted by Adijaya (Adijaya & Santosa, 2018) had found that students felt that the interaction between the students and the teachers during online learning was not optimal compared to learning in traditional classrooms.

Irregular attendance/Lack of seriousness amongst students

Students faced problems with learning online such as difficulty in concentrating when they have the option of closing their videos and muting their voices. Many students even chose to skip a lot of classes as they felt that even if they don't study during

the online classes, there won't be any problem and they took advantage of this situation. One student sharing her experience about her classmates said, *"I think school is a better place to study because in school, students are under the supervision of teachers and they fear that if they won't study, they will face scolding from the teacher. In online classes, only a few students join the class and do their work. A lot of students never join the classes and they never do any work, the only reason being that they're not scared. Students very well know the teacher is not in front of them and they will still be getting passing marks due to online classes".* Students also believed that during online classes, students aren't serious as only the teacher is talking for most of the part and students are just listening.

Some students shared that they have joined online coaching classes/tuition classes and most of the time, the school classes and coaching classes clash with each other. As a result of this, they have to request their school teacher to adjust the timing accordingly. Sometimes, teachers do adjust, but most of the time, the teachers are not able to adjust the timing for individual students. As a result, students have to miss

their classes/tests because students give more importance to their coaching classes or online tuition classes. One student shared "I attend my tuition classes on a regular basis. I have my tuition classes daily and most of the time, timings of my classes, especially science classes, clash with that of my tuition class. I have not attended my science classes many times".

IV. CONCLUSION

Online learning has become a common experience today due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown period, online learning proved to be an important platform to keep students engaged with the studies while maintaining social distancing. Even though students faced some challenges in adapting to the changed scenario, they benefited because of the online classes as their studies continued even during the pandemic. Because of the online classes, not only the teachers but the students, too, got aware of the technological advancement and nuances of e-learning. This will help them in using these technological aids in their offline classes as well.

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Living in the New Normal of COVID-19: The Challenges and Coping in Academia

Rajeev S.P., Lizy P.J., Ashwathi Muraleedharan

ABSTRACT

The social fabric of academia, during and beyond COVID-19 , leads the way towards innovation and technology in academics and appears to be adapting to the "new normal" in life. This is a mixed-method research that attempts to answer the questions on the challenges and coping of teachers and students in getting accustomed to the new normal. The quantitative strand collected from 220 teachers of primary and secondary education, and qualitative data collected from 12 students and 12 teachers unfolded the challenges of access to affordable technology, lack of proper orientation, and the stress of adapting to new technologies. The findings also indicate the challenges of students such as engaging in more screen time, less social interaction, and increased workload through asynchronous ways of learning. The coping strategies of teachers include technology-enabled interactions, more time on digital platforms, managing role conflicts, and roping in parents as major partners in education. The students, on the other hand, cope by maintaining a digital engagement centric schedule of daily routine, seeking parental support in education, and engaging with friends online. However, teachers and students feel the need for prompt interventions in academia with online mentoring; social engagement, and mental health coaching from professional social workers.

Keywords: *COVID-19, online teaching, access to digital infrastructure, psychosocial challenges, coping, mental health.*

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Although many academic institutions have adopted blended learning, but a large number of Indian academic institutions still continue to follow the traditional teaching and learning practices. COVID-19 created a systemic re-arrangement, with the academic world fastening its wheels to online classes and therefore online learning emerged as a victor ludorum in India (Dhawan, 2020). However, there is a dearth of scientific knowledge that could guide the teachers and students in the edifice of hybrid learning spaces with little interaction (Hod & Katz, 2020; Kauppi et al., 2020). The studies on online teaching and learning critique the 'one size fits all approach' (Gillett-Swan, 2017), especially in the context of children with diverse learning needs. However, according to Dhawan (2020), there are many other concerns, some of them being accessibility, flexibility, and learning pedagogy.

As Jacobs (2013) suggests, "The students of the 21st century have grown up with computers and the internet" (p.2). However, online learning poses certain challenges that

Dr Rajeev S.P., Assistant Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), Kochi.
Dr Lizy P.J., Associate Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), Kochi.
Ashwathi Muraleedharan, Doctoral Scholar, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), Kochi.

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

the instructors and the learners have to encounter. The study reports that the teachers find it challenging to engage and interact with students online, but an ideal interaction would make the course more interesting and enriching. Hybrid learning spaces need "socio-cognitive" and "socio-emotional" activities, but this also acts as a challenging task for the teachers as they are inadequately trained in this area (Hod & Katz, 2020; Jacobs, 2013).

Children thrive on reciprocal communication even during this ubiquitous environment and many authors suggest online communication as a remedy for enhancing collaborative learning exercises (Dhawan, 2020; George, 2020). It can be said that "the quality of the student-teacher relationship is consistently associated with social, emotional, behavioural, and academic adjustment, and this is even more relevant for students with special needs" (Freire et al., 2020, p. 1). Mentoring programs in schools aim at supporting students with health (including mental health), academic, relationships, and social outcomes (Busse et al., 2018). Online mentoring is one of the measures possible during the pandemic and it has been found

effective even before the COVID-19 related lockdown (Kang et al., 2012). In the school environment, there is evidence that teacher consultation and mental health coaching by professional social workers enhance student adaptability and effectiveness (Cappella et al., 2012). NIMHANS has taken the initiative to train counselors in online interventions for students and teachers (Sheth et al., 2020).

II. METHODOLOGY

A sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2009) was used to conduct this study. While the quantitative data was collected through an online survey, the qualitative data was collected through telephonic interviews with teachers and students. The survey provided data on the innovative technologies used in the teaching-learning process, the prevalence of stress and challenges among teachers teaching online, along with information on training sessions, hours of planning for online classes, and the common issues related to technology, teaching-learning process, and student-focused challenges. The qualitative interviews provided the psychosocial challenges experienced by teachers and

students in online teaching and learning and the ways of coping exercised by them. Using snowball sampling, the online survey was made available to the teachers' community and a total of 220 school-teachers from Kerala participated. The researchers took consent from all the participants, including the 8 teachers and 12 students (and their parents) for the in-depth qualitative interview. Children who expressed emotional difficulties through the course of the data collection were provided with telephonic counseling after the interviews, and helpline numbers were shared with teachers and students.

III. RESULTS

The teachers who participated in the survey used mainly Zoom (30.5%); Microsoft Teams (26%); Google Meet (18%) and other platforms including social media for

Digital Platforms	%
Active Presenter	2.7
Microsoft Teams	26.4
Google Meet	18.2
Zoom	30.5
Webex meeting	9.1
Any other	13.2
Total	**100**

Table 1:Digital platforms used for online classes

engaging in online classes (see table 1).
Among the teachers who used the digital platforms for online classes, (72%) had received some form of training organized by the schools or the district authorities for education while the others (28%) did not receive any training on the digital platforms or online teaching. The training and the level of stress of teachers on online teaching were related (see table 2).

Mean Stress of trained	- 1.48
SD	- 0.993
Mean of not Trained	- 3.2
SD	- 1.435
T	- 10.044
Df	- 218
Siq./p	- 0

Table 2:Stress Score Comparison (independent T-Test)

It was identified that there were significant differences (t= -10.044 (df =218); p <.05) in the stress regarding online teaching between the teachers who received and did not receive the training.

The mean score of stress among those who received training was 1.48 (S.D. = .993) in comparison to those who did not receive any training (M=3.20; S.D. = 1.435).

Challenges in online teaching

There were different challenges expressed by the teachers in online teaching (see table 3).

Challenges	Number	%
The classroom is not lively	18	8.2%
Network/Connectivity/ Internet issues	112	50.9%
No confidence in doing online teaching	23	10.5%
No personal connection with children	52	23.6%
Not able to consider the child's capacity and emotions	15	6.8%
Total	**220**	**100%**

Table 3:Challenges of Online Teaching

Student-centric challenges:

Other than the technological challenges, the teachers also faced certain challenges that emerged from the student interactions (see table 4). The key issues were absenteeism (14%); children with special needs not being considered (21%); low attention span from

Challenges	%
Absenteeism	14
Low attention span	28
No assessment, assignment completed	10
Emotional issues children exhibit	19
Children with special needs	21
Not understanding instructions	8
Total	100

Table 4:Student related challenges in online teaching

the students (28%); emotional issues expressed by the students (19%); and no assessment or assignment completion by the students (10%).

Teachers' satisfaction with online teaching was marked on a 5 point scale (see table 5) and a majority (43%) expressed that they were not satisfied with teaching online and

Level of Satisfaction	%
Not at all satisfied	8.6
Not satisfied	42.7
Sometimes	27.7
Satisfied	14.5
Highly satisfied	6.4
Total	100

Table 5:Level of satisfaction with online teaching

(9%) of the participants were not at all satisfied. Age was introduced as a variable for analysis but no strong correlation was found between age and the levels of satisfaction.

How teachers and students experience the challenges and the patterns of coping are envisaged in the interpretative data that follows:

Experiencing pedagogical challenges

The participants expressed how different challenges affect their daily engagement with students. One of them was the pedagogical challenges.

"We have to teach many skill-based courses and all our exercises were planned and designed to match with the classroom goals, and overnight we had to shift to online teaching. We hardly have effective tools to engage with children. I believe it may take time to create the sophisticated tools that are amenable to our context and fitting to the digital platforms" (participant teacher 3)

"It takes a lot of time explaining even simple things to kids. We get no feedback from them. Interaction is challenging and it is also difficult to teach skill-related topics. I think it is not useful for average or below-average students who need special attention in class. This is a "one size fits all approach" (participant teacher 8).

Losing school connectedness

There are many ways and reasons for students experiencing the concerns over losing school connectedness and it was indeed their strongest protective measure. One of the participant-teachers expressed that:

"I feel that school was not only a place of learning for students rather they were involved in multiple activities and

initiatives. Schools were protecting their privileges as a student and their routines. We lost that. Teachers are unable to understand whether the below-average students can follow their teaching strategies or not. Personal attention is not possible in online teaching and neither is spontaneity." (participant teacher 4)

Role conflict in teaching from home

The participant teachers expressed their experiences of meeting the challenging roles as teachers and also as responsible family members.

"When we are at home, we have to take care of our familial responsibilities, along with planning for the online classes. If a student fails to submit the assignment, it takes hours of follow-up. I don't think we have personal time anymore as parents and students contact us for various reasons and we need to listen to them and resolve their issues" (participant teacher 4)

"I had to struggle in the beginning to meet the online class schedules. Earlier, we had school time but now school-time is spread across the entire day. Also, when we are at home, we cannot fully take excuses from the personal responsibilities" (participant teacher 6)

Challenges faced by participating students

Teachers expressed that, students with emotional and mental health issues suffered a lot in isolation. One of the teachers expressed that:

"A few students called me and asked for emotional support. I referred them to the school counselor. However, I find the parents need training in understanding the emotional issues of their children" (participant teacher 3)

I used to speak to my teachers about my issues and my class teacher would listen to me carefully. Now I don't speak to her much because she is very busy...recently, my teacher called me and she gave me the number of another teacher and I will be contacting her" (participant student 2).

Challenges related to student engagements

The student participants of the study expressed that they miss many school activities including meeting friends, interacting with people, celebrations, and friendships. Some of the participants also expressed that they are overloaded with academic exercises alone.

"We are so close to each other. Usually in our classes, like political science, we love debating and arguing. That is not possible in an online class. Teachers merely stick to the textbooks" (participant student 3).

"My day is all about waking up and sitting in front of the computer. When we were in school, our teachers kept classes interactive. Teachers aren't able to teach up to their full potential now. They are being formal and now they just focus on the syllabus" (participant student 8).

Coping strategies adopted by participants:

Teachers adopted different coping strategies to engage with their students effectively and also to reach out to each student who requires additional support and care.

Preparations based on student expectations and needs:

"Online can never replace the classroom situation, of course. But every teacher spends so much of their time on just a half-hour video; finding the right way to teach,

who all the students are, and making the video to make sure all students understand.

And then to also prepare something for the students who have special needs. So a lot of work goes into making it into a good quality experience" (participant teacher 6).

"We try to minimize the workload for the students and encourage interactions when they come online. Moreover, I have shared my WhatsApp number in case they want to reach out to me. Students and parents can contact me any time." (participant teacher 2)

Parental involvement and partnership in teaching:

The participating teachers reported that the involvement of parents is necessary more than ever in school education, because only they have access to children often and directly in this period. Some of the participants also expressed that:

"Parents play a deciding role and they can do more than what teachers could do in bringing children online and being responsible for learning. We are connected

with parents through WhatsApp groups." (participant teacher 7).

"A lot of students have a family background ,who are unwilling to care for their learning. So, we have to work to build a rapport with these parents. Often, we also need parents to monitor exams or assignments at home" (participant teacher 8).

Online counseling / mentoring and coaching:

The participant teachers and students affirmed that online emotional support and group engagements by the counselors and social workers helped children to be more expressive and participative in online education. The teachers expressed that:

"Children with mental health needs must be taken care of. We have been in touch with parents, giving them suggestions on identifying symptoms and resolving these problems to the best of their ability. If not, they also have access to all the helpline numbers. Our counselors used to be in touch over the phones with the students who have been seeking counseling support at schools

previously" (participant teacher 2).

"We had a small group interaction organized by our school counselor. She was just amazing and made us all interact online through certain activities. We drew something and explained it to other friends and it made us speak … after a long time. We found it very effective. I think we had some inhibitions before this activity and we managed them." (participant student 12).

Social media and online networks of children :

Children expressed that they spend time on social media and maintain connections with their friends as a coping strategy of social connectedness. Some of them also reported having increased their online gaming as a matter of entertainment. They emphasized that:

"I enjoy gaming. It has helped me to de-stress. But once I talked to my school teacher, I started putting a limit on it. However, it is the only relaxation for me." (participant student 7).

"I used to call my friends everyday but nowadays we are busy with online classes. But we still manage to catch up. That is how I manage my connectedness." (participant student 11).

IV. DISCUSSION

Challenges of offline to online transition

The interaction and relationship with teachers enhance the teaching-learning practices (Freire et al., 2020; Jacobs, 2013). But when they moved online, even though most of the teachers teach only 2-4 hours a day, their focus is on completing the syllabus. The students want to interact with the teachers and the teachers also feel that they have lost connection with the students. But, the teachers felt that it was due to their commitment to complete the syllabus, lack of training, and increased stress.

The students compared the online experience with their offline classes where they had a lot of activities at school and a considerable amount of learning taking place at school itself. The hybrid learning space is expected to be equipped with activities that suit the socio-cognitive and socio-emotional aspects of the learning community (Hod & Katz, 2020; Jacobs, 2013), which sadly, is missing in this scenario.

Pedagogical challenges

Teachers and students understand that the transition has been an overnight one. Therefore, the teachers feel that the "one-size fits all" approach in implementing the curriculum contends with numerous challenges like the gifted children and the ones who need special care are both provided with the same syllabus and pedagogy. Although the online education system has several advantages that traditional education practices fail to accomplish (Hod & Katz, 2020), the researchers suggest that the curriculum and pedagogical principles have to be aligned with the needs and capacities of the students. Moreover, they ought to be disseminated using sophisticated ICTs.

Tools for online learning

It is identified that along with developing need-based tools (for diverse learners), imparting specific training programs for teachers can reduce the stress of teachers engaging with the students online. Transitioning online using the traditional pedagogical structure steers the challenges towards the students with special needs. A ready-made plan of action, overlooking the levels of learning, without much emphasis on the needs of children is widely criticized in the previous studies (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

Challenges faced by students: learning, behavioural, and emotional

As a consequence of the poor connectedness to teachers and schools, children exhibit increased emotional and social adjustment issues (Freire et al., 2020). Teachers admitted that the online teaching hours do not accommodate for individual support, so teachers refer those (the identified/revealed) students to school counselors. Similarly, students encourage more interaction and they positively respond to the telephonic interactions and referrals by the teachers. They explained that they do not reveal any personal issues during the online sessions with their teachers, but sometimes teachers do understand and get back to them with support. Previous studies reveal that emotional support; mental health coaching and life coaching are imperious for children, especially those children with special needs (Freire et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2012). However, when the education system moves on to the online modes, the learning community (students, teachers, and parents) require mental health coaching and online mentoring (Busse et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2012; Tinoco-Giraldo et al., 2020). Students reported that the social group work session conducted by the professionals improved their participation and interaction in the online platforms with teachers and peers.

Coping mechanisms adopted by participants

Children find different ways of being connected to the school peer group. This can contribute not only to their social needs but also to their academics. As Chen et al., (2020) reported in their study, inspiring discussions have a positive impact on the students' involvement in academics and school-related interests. Certainly, teachers need to be part of it and therefore, it is a leading hint to the teachers to engage with children in informal discussions, inspiring messages, and discussions online.

Identifying parents as stakeholders

Parents are now considered as the key players in the academic exercises of students in online learning. As an effective strategy of coping, the teachers build rapport with parents and they help children connect with teachers and vice versa. The parents were linked either through social networking platforms or through email groups. The teachers provided the information to parents along with sharing the instructions with the students. Parents, as the major stakeholder of school education, enabled the teachers to manage absenteeism, irregularities, connectivity issues, and emotional and behavioural issues of children.

V. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers collected survey information from teachers as they felt that they will be able to provide perceptions concerning their overall quality of life, post the transition into online learning. A significant number of them had to balance household chores as well as the online classes, and those challenges seemed more pertinent to address.

This also serves as a recommendation, as qualitative data collected from the 12 students gave us insights into how children with special educational needs have been affected due to online learning. The researchers of this study encourage future studies to focus on this area.

VI. CONCLUSION

The transition of academic exercises from offline to online has brought in many challenges. Though online learning is found to be very creative and adequate in the previous studies, they also agree that there are certain prerequisites for a successful transition. Some of the key necessities are

accessibility and affordability of digital platforms, need-based curriculum and pedagogy, and sufficient capacity building of the learning community. The pandemic shifting of those necessities still poses a major challenge to online learning. But the teachers and students adopt diverse coping strategies. Teachers develop tailor-made remedial coaching materials for children, build rapport with parents and make them part of the education process, and by identifying children with psycho-social support. Children receive psychosocial support, and they also create opportunities to connect with their peer groups through social media platforms. Emotional support, online mentoring, and mental health coaching are required for children with special needs.

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Social Interaction Among School Children in Delhi during Time of COVID-19 : Role of Technology

Remya Ann Mathew

ABSTRACT

The paper looks at the experiences of students during the school closures induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. It tries to do so by using the concepts of autonomy and interdependence as experienced by children while using the internet. Drawing upon a small online survey conducted in October 2020, the paper attempts to understand internet usage among these students by locating this usage amidst relationships they are part of and traces how autonomy is exercised by children as they interact with their friends without having proximity with them. The paper then looks at inequalities that come to the fore while using technologies. In this paper, I argue that the social interaction among children in the post-COVID-19 scenario has changed; taking on new forms such as dependence on technology, this could lead to small clusters of interaction between children. I am also arguing for looking at the concept of autonomy as something which is exercised in relationships.

Keywords: COVID-19, social interaction, school children, autonomy, school closure.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet, which was once considered a luxury, has become part of everyday lives for children and adults alike with evolving mobile technologies. And with the pandemic, the use of technology has become a necessity for most people. The paper attempts to capture some of the experiences of school students who had to stay at home due to the COVID-19 induced school closures. It also attempts to look at concepts of autonomy and dependency and how they play out, as students use them in the context of the COVID-19 induced lockdown and restrictions on mobility. Students who participated in the study belong to different schools in Delhi. The limitation of this study is that it looked only at those who have access to technology. This study is part of my PhD work on internet usage among children in Delhi-NCR and was undertaken as the COVID-19 and the school closures that followed, heightened the reliance on technology among all segments of society, including school children.

Through this paper, I would be looking at some of the responses from the survey to understand social interaction of young adolescents with friends and with parents in the context of increased use of the internet. Most of the respondents spoke about how there was no physical interaction with their friends and how they missed it. It was, however, possible for some of them to cultivate friendships using technology. It was also revealed how friendships formed in school are very important for this age group. The responses also brought to light the inequalities that became part of using technology. I attempt to think through these responses with the help of concepts such as

Remya Ann Mathew, Doctoral Scholar, Department of Sociology, Delhi University.

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

autonomy and dependence as they are interwoven in the social interactions which children take part in.

II. METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on a small online-based questionnaire with both descriptive and choice-based answers. Google forms were used in order to conduct this study in the month of October 2020. Around 55 respondents ranging from the age group of 12 to 15 years old responded to the form. The snowball sampling technique was used. The students could choose whether they wanted to respond or not and they could also clarify that their parents had no objection regarding their participation in the survey. Of the total respondents, 66% of the respondents were female and the other 34% of the respondents were male. 21.8% were 15 years old, 34.5% were 14 years old and 25.5% were 13 years old. In this paper, descriptive answers were selected from the online study such as the experience of online school being different from offline school and their relationship between friends and family. From their responses, I analysed these qualitatively by thematizing them based on certain themes that arose from the

study. In the following paragraphs, descriptive responses received from children have been talked about briefly.

Experiences of online school

Some responses showed how children were initially happy with online schooling but as time went on, it became difficult and they wanted to physically go back to school. Two respondents realized the way school was conducted online was a unique experience and an opportunity that was presented only in these circumstances. One of the positive responses was that it was good and relaxing. A girl, aged 15, talked about how it has been easier to clear doubts in online classes as she was scared of asking doubts in front of the whole class. However quite a few of them referred to this experience as boring, stressful, no fun and how they were missing friends. Two of the responses highlighted the difficulty of clarifying doubts in online classes. Some of them shared how there would be network problems and thus disruptions in the classes. There were responses which showed how students missed activities such as sports, dancing, singing, practical classes, counseling sessions and social events. One of them

talked of how teachers could no longer discipline them for their mistakes, and another response was about how they no longer feared the teachers. Some of the responses showed how there was an increased workload and how school extends from morning to night which was made possible by the technology. A twelve- year-old girl talked about how 'life was sucked out of learning'. Another response showed how in school, while they could secretly talk to their friends without the teacher's knowledge, in online classes, this was not possible.

Relationship with family

One of the questions asked from children was whether their parents asked for help during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them said that their parents were well versed with the internet and knew more than them. Some said how earlier also they would help their parents and this continued even during the lockdown. There was, however, a significant portion of the responses where children helped their parents in their work-- either operating certain apps or in making power-point presentations or with online meetings.

Another question that was asked was whether and how they shared devices in the family. Around 65% of the respondents shared their devices with others in the family, either siblings or parents. There were difficulties in sharing the devices as the requirements had increased. Some talked about how they had to buy new devices while others found it difficult to attend their classes. One of them said that sharing these devices was difficult as it was easy to feel possessive about these devices.

Relationship with friends

Children could no longer have face-to-face interaction with their friends during lockdown. There was no hugging, handshakes, gossiping, night stays, sharing food, etc. One of the boys aged 15 said "no school, no friends." This response was echoed by others as well who said that they did not have friends in their neighbourhood. Friendship was maintained through video-call, phone call and sometimes even through zoom. The need for school-based friendship was brought out by one of the responses which said that friendship was important to talk about problems going on at home which was made impossible due to COVID-19.

In this section, in addition to the way the study was conducted, I looked at some of the responses received through Google forms. In the remaining portion of the paper, I would look at two themes which come out strongly through the study. Firstly, how the COVID-19 and the school closures affected the peer group relations among children. Secondly, the inequalities which came to the forefront as this new means of schooling got adopted. These themes would further point us towards concepts of autonomy and interdependence.

III. CONCEPT OF AUTONOMY

Childhood studies have often focused on the agency of children. There have been various scholars (such as Allison and Prout; Jenks ; Tisdall et al and others) who have attempted to prove that children do participate and take actions on their own despite the constraining forces of adult structures around them. This stance is particularly important in an arena where children are thought to be immature, innocent and often vulnerable. Children were clearly seen as not yet fully human and needing to be taught how to inhabit the world of adults. In the earlier studies (such as that of Corsaro and Fine, see also Shanahan), the process of socialization was given importance where childhood was seen as a process where children who were not

full human beings learnt the ways of the adult world and adapted to it. The new childhood studies refuted this way of perceiving children and gave us a new way of thinking that children are beings in themselves.

Kagitcibasi in her article looks at the emphasis on individual agency by psychology as stemming from the cultural underpinning of a western individualistic worldview. She argues how autonomy and relatedness can co-exist but individualistic societies have stressed on agency at the cost of not looking at relatedness. Heidi Keller also looks at how autonomy and relatedness are not mutually exclusive and how it manifests differently in different cultural environments.

As one looks at childhood, it is easy to over-emphasize the concept of relatedness as children are often considered as not yet fully developed. In a context in which children were not valued or validated by adults, the concept of agency and discovering it in the lives of children has been a useful exercise. Shakuntala Banaji has talked about 'ephemeral' agency that children display especially in contexts of poverty. She argues that the treatment of agency as existing on a spectrum would be highly productive. She says that "children's agency is shown as neither individual nor only resistant and disruptive… It is ephemeral, not fixed or sustained, occurring in enactment of routines and in the spaces between."

This focus on agency is essential to understand the childhood in and of them. However, there is a need to understand that children are still part of structures (both adult structures and also structures such as caste, class, ethnicity, etc.,) which disadvantage them, and their experiences are different, just like those of their adult counterparts. While it is necessary to understand that children exercise their own agency, the question that needs to be asked is how this agency is exercised from within the confines of the system they are part of. There is thus a need to break from an approach that directly looks at how children exercise their agency when they operate the internet and focus upon how children act within relationships and are tied to the social relationships they are part of.

Children do exercise autonomy to some extent but differences in their circumstances need to be accounted for. Autonomy cannot be viewed in isolation but rather through interdependence. Family ties, friendship ties and other networks operate both in the online/offline world to ensure that the child operates not in a vacuum. Through their social relations, different children may depend on parents, older siblings or other friends. These relationships are integral as children try to navigate the internet on their own.

IV. AUTONOMY EXERCISED IN PEER GROUP

In this section we will look at how autonomy is exercised in relationships especially with friends and family in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By looking at how students kept in touch with their friends, we will see their reliance on technology. Then, we will see how the school emerges as a crucial space where friendships are formed in urban areas and how autonomy is exercised in relationships such as friends and family and how the new context has meant that there is a change in the pattern of relationships.

On being asked about how they keep in touch with their friends, the responses talked about how meetings in schools and outside were no longer possible and they relied on phone calls, social media. While

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talking about how 'life has been sucked out of learning', students also mentioned how they missed their social interaction with friends and classmates and especially how they missed getting attention from teachers. One of them remembered earlier times when they used to have night stays with their friends which were not possible anymore.

In the literature on childhood studies, school as an institution has often been criticized as an extension of a separate space enforcing adult structures, moulding young children and equipping them for the adult world. However, the closure of schools has revealed its importance especially with regard to the friendships formed there. Students valued the time they had with their friends and they missed the interactions which took place in school. A boy aged 15 said, *"Because of no school, no friends"*. The school was a place where friendships were forged more than any other place.

One of the students used zoom to keep in touch with their friends. Although separated from friends due to the pandemic, technology ensured that they cultivated their friendship. One of them, a girl who was 14 years old said, *"Before the Corona situation, we used to meet face to face every day. I am not allowed to go outside my house without an adult with me so I never really had an interaction with my neighbours. I just have one-two good friends. Apart from that I don't have friends. So, to keep in touch with them I call them and text them via WhatsApp"* (sic). This shows how reality includes the online world and it is increasingly difficult to separate the physical and the online.

These responses clearly show how the school becomes a site where friendships are built. It goes to show how childhoods are restricted and protected. Parents trust their children to make friends from their school. It could be a way of ensuring that friends are formed from similar socio-economic backgrounds. This could potentially mean that parents trust the school they send their children to, in order to make friends.

According to Nita Kumar, the success of the child is made possible by acquiring economic, social and cultural capital. Increasingly, private schools eclipse the role of the family in ensuring that 'middle-classness' is produced. The shift to online classes has meant that the inequalities have

been reproduced as we will see in the next section.

The statement by the 14-year-old girl can be potentially understood to mean how in urban areas, children make friends based on the same school they attend or based on similar activities. As children grow up, they learn to trust these friends and depend on them. This becomes a place where children can talk about their families and the issues they face in life. This was interrupted as during COVID-19-induced school closures, one was forced to live within the four walls of the house. Social interactions between friends, which once flowed seamlessly between the school, the home and the internet, broke down. However, with the closure of schools, children have intensified use of technology not just for educational purposes but also for maintaining their friendships. But there was a longing for face-to-face relationships as relationships began to be crowded on social media pages.

A girl aged 15 said, "The changes that occurred are that we are not able to meet anyone, it's harder for me because I don't have any society friends with whom I can talk to face to face. When I have some kind of problem going around my family, I always need a friend so this is something I don't like and this is a change I don't like during COVID-19 ". "As I mentioned before, I don't have any friends in my neighbourhood so I can only call my school friends. So yeah, it's difficult to contact them sometimes because I can't talk to them face to face."

This statement helps one realize how friendships forged in school can be significant in the lives of children and give space to talk about their family. This shows how the space between family and friendship can be carefully navigated and how children learn of this from a young age. The child is able to deal with problems going

around the family by speaking to a friend. It also reveals how the child navigates trust both within the family and outside. This reveals how the child does exercise autonomy from within their circumstances.

This can also be seen as indicating that family cannot be considered as a safe haven. In order to understand the issues that children face, there is a need to recognize that children are part of different families, including those which are less than perfect. Children, however, learn to manage these relationships with the peer group they are part of. One can understand from this as to how trust is negotiated and adapted to.

But with lockdown, this avenue has come under pressure. The school that was an avenue where students expressed themselves and made friends with others has been taken away from them. While the process of learning has become better for some students who can focus just on their studies, this is to be viewed critically as it is against a backdrop where social interaction becomes completely restricted. The value of face-face social interactions was recognized even amidst intense technological use.

In an urban scenario, it is often the home and the school that children are confined to and these are spaces where adults regulate the actions of these children. Boyd (2014) brings out the fact that the medium of internet is unique in that it allows teens to participate in an unregulated public while located in adult regulated physical spaces such as the home or the school. This means that the internet provides a space where students can exercise autonomy without having to be part of adult structures.

As we look at the various responses of students at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we will see instead of this 'unregulated publics', a coming together of various 'publics' while at the same time an

erosion of the 'private'. The 'private' seems to be pushed back to the realm of the family, as children can no longer interact with their friends in person. On the internet, students pursue different interests, including their education leading to the formation of various publics, including unregulated ones. As these increase, there is for the children a loss of the small spaces they had in regulated spheres to carry on with their autonomous activities.

This section has looked at the importance of school in sustaining peer group relationships. The autonomy of the child can be seen in the way the child becomes part of different relationships and is able to navigate through them. The increasing dependence of technology has to be understood in the context of already existing relationships. As there is dependence on technology, there is also a layer of complexity introduced in the inequalities faced.

V. INEQUALITIES INHERENT IN USING TECHNOLOGY

The stark contrast between protected childhoods and devalued childhoods came to the forefront as migrant labourers left the cities for their native places. The children of these migrant labourers went with them and had no access to schooling. Survival itself was at stake for these children and the mass exodus meant that not all of them could access education. Although there have been various efforts to extend education, it captures the brutal inequality of our society.

The argument Nita Kumar (2015) makes, that middle-classness has to be produced constantly by consumption and also by the success of the child at school, is well taken. The reproduction of inequality it is argued arises from this cultural politics of the middle class. The very fact that internet or mobile phones can be used for entertainment, the consumption of the latest model of smartphone are all markers of the reproduction of middle classness. In addition to this, the Edu-tech companies can at times stand in place of the coaching centres and since the lockdown, one can see the importance of the online mode for education. The Internet then becomes a strong marker of middle-classness and privilege, of a community closed off to the poorer classes. However, the mere access to internet usage does not permit entry into middle-classness, I will be looking at how it has to be continuously produced online and it is a work in and of itself.

While interacting with students before the pandemic, it was observed how the internet was already part of the lives of the students. However, with the lockdown owing to the pandemic, a new form of schooling emerged and the internet became something that was an integral part of the lives of the students.

Boyd writes about how technologies introduce new social possibilities and these challenge the assumptions people have about everyday interactions. Certain types of interactions are enabled by the design and architecture of these technologies. The ease by which students handle new technology does not come by itself but rather by having been exposed to these technologies earlier on. The way students have multiple accounts across different platforms, the ease by which the student does the work are not picked up by itself but should be understood as part of one's socio- cultural background.

On being asked how their internet usage has changed, one of the students compared the internet to 'food and water' arguing how essential the internet has become in their life. Their responses show how the Wi-Fi and the internet have become woven into children's lives. In order to survive, the internet was essential. Network issues became a point of frustration for them.

As there was an increasing dependency on the internet itself, various factors such as having the devices and the paraphernalia of the internet itself became important. This meant that there were various divisions along the line of who could access and who could not access the internet. Among those who did use the internet, there were varying markers and cues that revealed their socio-cultural background. Even as students are exposed to various choices within the internet and are no longer forced to interact with their classmates, there is a possibility of further divisions among the children without it being visible to the public eye. There can be small clusters that are formed based on interests or other factors such as regions which further stratify the children. It can be possibly inferred that as children exercise their autonomy in relationships, there are various social markers and distinctions they bring with them and the internet does not lead to its erasure.

There is an intermeshing of the real and the online life with the increased usage of internet technologies. The after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that life which could be separated into various spheres has come together on the internet. All kinds of activities become part of the internet. There are students who do not have access to devices and others are constrained in using the same as there is erratic supply of electricity. Among students who access the internet, there are class distinctions in the form of the clothing, the background view, noises, etc (see Bhattacharya). These structures continue to operate even when education has moved to the online world.

VI. CONCLUSION

The theme that the school is an important place not just for education but also for fostering friendship especially in urban areas was explored. The autonomy of children seems to develop in the informal

interactions in the peer group. The space of the internet is located within the home and, therefore, one has to take into consideration the quality of relationships within the home. While certain students enjoyed time with their family, others could not express themselves freely. As noted in the experience of online school, the power structures seem to be disrupted at least partially as the teachers no longer exert the kind of disciplinary power they once did. This shows how children are able to exercise their autonomy within the new structures. However, technology used in online classes has its own way of disciplining, allowing for those with no disruptions and those able to learn on an individual basis excelling.

As the responses showed, it was not easy to separate the public from the private because of the use of technology. School time began to be extended at home as work load increased. It was possible to concentrate solely on studies without other disruptions. There was thus a dependence on technology and the affordances it provided; however, the way it was used was based on one's desires and aspirations. The inequalities prevalent in online schooling go to show how there are various material objects that children are dependent on. There is also the cultural and social capital which differs for each of the students. The way the children exercise their autonomy is dependent on these material structures, including technology as well as the reproduction of social and cultural capital.

In a non-western urban context marked with stark inequalities and a decisive shift to technologies amidst a pandemic, it is important to recognize children and value them. Children through their use of the internet have common interests with other urban children while also being rooted in relationships with parents, friends and siblings. These relationships and the technology itself allow for autonomy

ofchildren to be enacted in different ways which needs to be recognized.

The article explored social interaction that children engaged in during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic by examining various responses of students which were collected through a small online survey. One could say that among the urban middle class, the internet has permeated all areas of life especially during the lockdown and the school closures that followed the COVID-19 pandemic. The article examines how 'autonomy' develops through social interaction. In order to gain a better understanding about children's social interactions, it is important to look at concepts such as inter-dependence alongside autonomy. One can observe how social interaction among children has definitely been disrupted and changed because of the pandemic-induced school closure. Even after these closures are removed, there is the possibility of social interactions acquiring new tendencies such as being formed within clusters of familiarity and technological dependence leading to further stratification.

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Loss of Learning during the Pandemic and Planning Ahead

Research Team, Azim Premji University

ABSTRACT

This study was done among children in public schools across primary classes, to assess the extent and nature of the learning loss because of school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic for the foundational abilities that children had learned earlier, but had now forgotten. The study covered 16067 children in 1137 public schools in 45 districts across 5 states. Analysis shows that 92% of children on an average have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes; this is 82% for mathematics. The extent and nature of learning loss call for determined and appropriate policy action, as public schools reopen.

Keywords: *Learning loss, COVID-19, states, foundational abilities, children, school closure.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies across the world indicate that school closures, both in general and specifically during the pandemic, have had a significant negative impact on learning levels of children and have sharpened already existing inequalities (Azevedo et al. 2020; Dorn et al. 2020; Kuhfeld et al. 2020). It is important to understand what exactly is meant by the 'loss of learning' due to school closure during the pandemic. This loss would include (i) 'forgetting' of abilities students had already acquired in the class they were in before schools closed, and (ii) abilities they would have acquired during a normal school year in the class they were placed in during school closure. The former includes the abilities that children have forgotten due to lack of usage, for example, the ability to read with understanding, the ability to write, and the ability to perform basic mathematical operations like addition and multiplication. This learning loss further compromises new learning, since these abilities are foundational to all further learning. This situation must be juxtaposed with the fact that we are already facing a crisis in learning, particularly concerning foundational literacy and numeracy (MHRD, 2020).

This study was undertaken as a field-level empirical study, to understand the extent and nature of learning loss of foundational abilities among public school children across the primary classes, because of school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic. The entire study was conducted in January 2021. It focused on the assessment of four specific abilities each in language and mathematics, across classes 2-6. These four specific abilities for each grade were chosen because these are among the abilities for all subsequent learning – across subjects – and so the loss of any one of these would have very serious consequences on all further learning.

Overall, the study finds significant learning loss among children in both language and

mathematics, and across classes. The extent and nature of learning loss are serious enough to warrant action at all levels. Policy and processes to identify and address this loss are necessary as children return to school. Supplemental support, whether in the form of bridge courses, extended hours, community-based engagements, and appropriate curricular materials to help children gain the foundational abilities when they return to school will be needed. It follows that teacher capacity to ensure student learning in these unusual circumstances must be in focus, particularly concerning pedagogy and assessment needed to deal with students at diverse learning levels. And most importantly the teachers must be given enough time to compensate for both kinds of learning loss – and we must not rush into promoting children to the next class.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted with 16067 children in 1137 public schools and covered 45 districts across 5 states -- Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand (see Table 1). Teachers were selected based on prior knowledge of their engagement in school teaching-learning processes, as an assessment of the learning levels of children, both when schools closed and their current status, was necessary to understand the nature and extent of learning

State	Number of Schools*	Number of Students	
		Girls	Boys
Chhattisgarh	215	1623	1313
Karnataka	326	2095	1736
Madhya Pradesh	169	1033	734
Rajasthan	198	2027	1891
Uttarakhand	229	1990	1625
Total	1137	8768	7299

* The assessments were not done for the entire school. The number of schools indicates that the children assessed in the study were enrolled across 1137 schools in total.

Table 1:*Children and schools covered state-wise*

loss. The baseline assessment of children's learning levels for the period before schools closed in March 2020, was based on an ex-post comprehensive analysis by the relevant teachers who had taught these children, aided by appropriate assessment tools. Selection of children, both girls and boys, was based on discussions with teachers and efforts were made to cover children across all primary classes that the teacher had taught in the previous year. End-line assessment of current learning levels on the same specific abilities was done by administering oral and written tests to the same children. This was done by assessors in collaboration with the teachers. The assessment was generally carried out in the community or even in homes.

Assessments were done for children across all the primary school classes they were in 2019-20 on only select foundational abilities for the previous class. This is because schools closed soon after students moved to the current class (2020-2021) and also because there has not been any significant teaching-learning support during the period of school closure (AzimPremji Foundation, 2020).

Assessment tools were designed in alignment with the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) Learning Outcomes for the two subject areas, language,and mathematics, for classes 1 to 5.Age-appropriate core content domains were identified and mapped to the NCERT learning outcomes for both subjects. Further, specific abilities for each of the learning outcomes, that are the foundation for further learning, were carefully identified. These specific abilities were selected from the abilities associated with the previous class, because the absence of any one of these would deeply compromise the acquisition of more complex abilities and impact learning across subjects, as the child moves through

different stages in school. The assessment tools were piloted in four states – Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand – with a small sample of teachers and children, and then refined further based on the feedback received. In addition to the assessment data, field-level narratives from the interactions with children, families, and teachers were collated by the assessors.

III. LEARNING LOSS

Abilities lost in language and mathematics

Analysis of baseline and end-line data revealed that 92% of children on an average have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year, across all classes. Illustratively, these specific abilities include describing a picture or their experiences orally; reading familiar words; reading with comprehension; writing simple sentences based on a picture. To elaborate, 92% of children in class 2, 89% in class 3, 90% in class 4, 95% in class 5, and 93% in class 6 have lost at least one such

specific ability from the previous class. In mathematics, 82% of children, on an average, have lost at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous year across all classes. Some of these specific abilities include identifying single and two-digit numbers; performing arithmetic operations; using basic arithmetic operations for solving problems; describing 2-D/3-D shapes; reading and drawing inferences from data. Across different classes, 67% of children in class 2, 76% in class 3, 85% in class 4, 89% in class 5, and 89% in class 6 have lost at least one such specific ability from the previous class.

Lived realities of teachers, learners, and parents

The findings from the analysis of the assessment data reveal only a part of the story. The narratives from the field that were generated while the study was being done provide a snapshot of the context in which families and children find themselves.

Most of the public school teachers associated with the study were intensely

	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6
LANGUAGE					
Expression	**49%** lost the ability to describe events in a picture in their own words	**45%** lost their ability to orally express views on simple topics	**61%** lost the ability to express the gist of a poem upon listening	**61%** lost the ability to orally connect read text and personal experiences	**43%** lost the ability to answer questions based on a text
Reading and Identification	**71%** lost the ability to identify a written or printed word	**67%** lost the ability to complete printed words	**10%** lost the ability to read rhyming words fluently	**39%** lost the ability to read an unfamiliar poem with fluency	**23%** lost the ability to read the contents of a newspaper
Writing	**30%** lost the ability to label images they had created	**46%** lost the ability to write their views about a given picture	**29%** lost the ability to write 4-5 simple sentences on a given picture	**41%** lost the ability to write a story/poem with imagination	**54%** lost the ability to write their views on events around them
Analytical Thinking	**23%** lost the ability to orally answer questions based on a story	**50%** lost the ability to orally answer questions after listening to a poem	**23%** lost the ability to answer questions upon reading a story	**16%** lost the ability to answer questions based on a given text	**31%** lost the ability to read non-textbook materials with comprehension
MATHEMATICS					
Reading and Identifying numbers	**20%** lost the ability to identify single-digit numbers	**26%** lost ability to read numeral from two-digit numbers from 21-30	**70%** lost the ability to identify greatest/smallest three-digit number using place value	**25%** lost the ability to find the fractional part of a given picture	**52%** lost the ability to identify equivalent fraction of a given fraction
Addition and Subtraction	**33%** lost the ability to subtract single-digit numbers using concrete objects	**37%** lost the ability to add two digit numbers pictorially	**20%** lost the ability to subtract two digit numbers without borrowing	**55%** lost the ability to multiply two digit numbers	**40%** lost the ability to divide a four digit number by single digit number
Identifying Shapes	**23%** lost the ability to describe 3D shapes with their physical features	**44%** lost the ability to identify 3D concrete shapes from their surroundings	**23%** lost the ability to describe features of 2D shapes	**39%** lost the ability to use multiplication to solve daily life problems	
Mathematical Operations	**14%** lost the ability to use addition operation to solve problems in daily life	**48%** lost the ability to solve problems subtraction operations			**21%** lost the ability to represent data in a table using tally marks
Identifying angles and objects			**11%** lost the ability to read the time correctly from a clock	**67%** lost the ability to find the length of an object using a scale	**60%** lost the ability to classify angles into right angle, obtuse and acute angle

Figure 1: Percentage of children who lost specific abilities associated with the previous class in language and mathematics for classes 2 to 6

troubled to learn first-hand about the extent of learning loss that their children have experienced during school closure. Some teachers became emotional when they realized that children whom they tagged as 'intelligent' and could earlier 'read so fluently, write so nicely and perform operations so easily' were now struggling with 'such simple questions. As one teacher from Madhya Pradesh shared,

"Last year the child who was in class 3, is now in class 4, and in the current session, nothing has happened in school. In such a situation, how can that child be promoted and brought to class 5 learning level? Worse, mostly the situation is that some children have not even retained learning levels of class 3."

Moreover, they along with the assessors could directly experience how children have been disconnected from the school. A teacher from Chhattisgarh expressed,

"I had a feeling that children will lose the habit of sitting in the classroom, and they would have had some loss of learning as they could not learn new things from their syllabus. But I never imagined that so many of them will forget what they had learned in the previous class."

Teachers surmised that given that most children in a regular scenario cannot remember what they had learned in the previous class, the long school closure, in effect, means that there is a gap of one year between two academic years, and managing this learning gap will be a very difficult task. During the visits to the communities for the assessment of the children, parents were found deeply worried about their children's education and constantly wanted to know when schools will reopen. They kept asking that if children could interact with each other in the community, why could they not do so in school as well? They were worried that children have forgotten all that they had

learned, since they do not 'read anything' at home.

Many of the children thought the assessment signalled the opening of the school; numerous children from all classes converged to the assessment site with this hope. Some children did not even want to go back home after the assessment was done. How children are also looking forward to the reopening of schools is evident in this remark from one of them,

"If marriages, processions, and cricket matches are on, why are schools closed?"

The teachers were quite categorical that they wanted the children to come to school as soon as possible so that teaching can start systematically. Many of them have experienced the half-hearted efforts of online education and were aware of the limitations of such efforts to achieve any meaningful learning. They underlined how there is no alternative to physical classroom learning, where students work in groups and their learning process takes place in a collaborative and facilitating environment. Teachers felt even home visits are a poor substitute for school-based learning. The concern of teachers extended beyond academics – they were worried about 'social loss' and also the impact of the learning loss on children's ability to navigate adult life. As one teacher from Uttarakhand narrated from her experience,

"I was coming to school and meanwhile, I met one of my students on the way. He had started working in a cloth shop. When he met me, he said, मैडम सूट ले जाओ बहुत अच्छा – अच्छाआया है' *(bua salwar-kameez set; nice ones have arrived for sale). A similar kind of incident occurred later – one of my students met me and he was working at a shoe shop. He said to me,* मैडम, बहुत बढ़िया सैंडिल आये हैं, दुकान पर आना' *(very nice foot wears have arrived; please come to the shop). I was*

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thinking that rather than talking about education, the children have started talking about business."

Like the assessment data, the narratives from the fieldwork reinforce the urgent need to have a systematic plan to reorient key public school processes, to compensate for learning loss among children as schools reopen.

IV. CONCLUSION

The learning loss due to COVID-19 is indisputable. The impact of learning loss due to children forgetting what they had learnt earlier is likely to be further compounded, if nothing is done to compensate for this loss when schools reopen. Children will be pushed towards more complex learning abilities of the new class, without having the prerequisite foundational abilities. As studies have shown, this compounding of learning loss will be more for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and who access primarily the public school system. It is critical to understand that this learning loss is not limited to public schools. The learning

of significant numbers of children in private schools has also been interrupted by the pandemic. Even where private schools have taken the initiative of reaching children through remote modes, very little actual 'online teaching' has occurred; mostly, instructions and supplemental resources have been shared (Vyas, 2020). Thus, the issue of learning loss must be addressed for all children across all types of schools and all classes in the schools.

It is reasonable to assume that school closure and no direct teaching-learning with children have contributed significantly to the learning loss of children. Reopening of schools and resuming direct teaching-learning is key to address this. However, a business as usual approach as schools reopen will not work – the extent and nature of learning loss must be identified to inform policy and processes as children return to schools.

While this study gives us a sense of the extent and nature of learning loss, we need more understanding to address this in the classrooms – for example, we need to understand why the loss in some specific

abilities is higher than in others. Effective school-level strategies will be required to factor these nuances, and this calls for a finer understanding through more detailed and continuing research in this area over the ensuing academic year. Supplemental support, whether in the form of bridge courses, extended hours, community-based engagements, and teaching-learning materials will be necessary to help children gain lost abilities and to further their learning in the class they return to,when schools reopen. While a portfolio of pedagogical approaches based on a finer understanding of the situation can be developed and made available, each teacher will have to address the specific situation in her classroom. It follows that the capacity to ensure student learning in these unusual circumstances must be in focus, particularly concerning pedagogy and assessment needed to deal with students at diverse learning levels.

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Addressing Learning Loss in Ashram Schools: Pedagogical Insights from a Field Study

Nilesh Nimkar, Mitali Thatte, Pranjal Koranne

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of the study undertaken to measure the learning loss due to COVID-19-induced school closures among students of standard 6th and 7th in Ashram Schools in Nashik, Maharashtra. The study to measure the learning loss in language and mathematics skills was conducted for students who were part of a "level-based learning" intervention of NGO Quality Education Support Trust. The study finds that there is a 27% backslide for language and a 12% backslide for mathematical skills. Considering the fairly large backslide for language, the authors perform further analysis of the language and literacy scores and find that "complex reading comprehension" and "written expression" are the skills that suffer the most. The authors explore various reasons for this. They also describe a pilot study, currently in progress, undertaken by Quality Education Support Trust (QUEST) to mitigate this loss. This pilot study focuses on exposing students to complex text and is being conducted in an online mode following the second lockdown. The paper also makes some recommendations regarding priority areas to focus on once the schools reopen. It suggests diagnostic assessment of children to make concrete plans for mitigating the learning loss. It also argues for decentralizing the planning of instruction and pitching it at the level of children with a focus on reading comprehension and writing. The paper also proposes a minimum of two years of an instructional continuum instead of directly starting with the grade level input.

Keywords: Learning loss, pedagogy, ashram schools, tribal children, education, school closure, literacy, reading comprehension.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is home to over 700 tribal communities listed under 'Scheduled Tribes'. Their population, according to the Census 2011, is about 104 million (Xaxa, Virginius, et al. 2014). These groups have been socially and economically marginalized throughout our history. Thus, many policies have been implemented for the education of these communities to aid in their growth and development. Setting up Ashram Schools was one such policy. In the third five-year plan (1961-66), several Ashram Schools were set up in some states of India. In 1990-91, the scheme was formally announced by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, to establish 'Ashram Shala' complexes for the social, educational, and economic development of the tribal population in the interior regions of India. These Ashram Shalas are residential complexes for children from grades 1 to 7, 1 to 10, and sometimes also include grades 11 and 12. In Maharashtra, the Tribal Development Department directly runs over 500 Ashram Schools and financially aids over 500 more

Nilesh Nimkar: Director, Quality Education Support Trust
Mitali Thatte: Research Consultant, Quality Education Support Trust
Pranjal Koranne: Officer Research, Quality Education Support Trust

Ashram Schools (Government of Maharashtra, 2017).

The low achievement of children in Ashram Schools, especially in language and literacy, has been a persistent issue in education in India. One reason for this is perhaps the gap between their home language and the medium of instruction. For example, children from tribal communities in Maharashtra often do not speak the standard variant of Marathi that is used and expected in school. Also, many of these children are first-generation school-goers and hence, have little to no exposure to the written form of language until they reach school. They find it difficult to adapt to the needs of the school, and even by grade 7 or 8 many of them often struggle to read and write in the language of instruction, which in Maharashtra, is Marathi. Any pedagogy designed to enhance their competencies in language and literacy needs to take into account this reality.

II. THE ANUPAD PROGRAM

The Anupad program offered by QUEST tackles this issue by designing a pedagogy that is adapted for the educational as well as socio-cultural needs of the children in Ashram Schools in Maharashtra. This program is based on the 'level-based learning' approach. The basic premise of this approach is to first understand and assess what children already know and then build the teaching plan using that as the base. The design and structure of this program have largely evolved as a response to ground reality and are strengthened through continuous feedback from all the stakeholders (Dreze, Jean, 2008). As of May 2020, this program has directly benefited 31,000 children and about 2,000 teachers from 388 Ashram Schools in Maharashtra.

As a part of the Anupad intervention, QUEST provides inputs to teachers in each

school so that they can provide level-based instruction in language and mathematics to students of grades 5, 6, and 7. Under the program, a diagnostic baseline assessment of children is conducted to assess their learning levels. The assessments conducted as a part of the program have nothing to do with the ranks of children in the class or even to find out who has passed or failed, but to get a clearer picture of the learning needs of the children and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The assessment is not based on rote memorization but defines learning as a set of competencies that the child is expected to acquire based on the state-sanctioned curriculum for grade 5.

For example, the table below lists the competencies covered by the language assessment and the weightage it carries in the test.

Component	Marks
Reading Comprehension	36
Writing	23
Spelling and Decoding-Encoding	12
Grammar and Vocabulary	9

Table 1: Weightage of the different components of the language test

'Reading Comprehension' and 'Writing' have the highest weightage in the test because QUEST believes that these are the core competencies that children need to cope with their grade-appropriate level. Reading Comprehension as a competency is assessed using a set of passages of various levels and genres, and children have to answer multiple-choice questions of different types for each passage in the test. This method of assessment captures different aspects of the child's comprehension, such as the ability to extract information, make inferences, and connect the text to their experience (Duke, Nell K and P David Pearson, 2002).

Children's written expression is assessed using a set of tasks, like writing the

description of a picture, writing a story based on a given set of words, and writing a letter or opinion based on a given situation. The written expression is assessed using a rubric that takes into account different aspects of expression, such as structure, idea, organization, and language use. In all the writing that children do, the strategy of translanguaging (Poza Luis, 2017) is encouraged so that children can use the entire linguistic repertoire available to them to express their ideas and feelings.

As part of the intervention, groups of children are formed, based on their achievements in language and literacy as assessed by the diagnostic test to provide level-appropriate input. This is a between-class grouping and children study language and mathematics in these groups for 1.5 hours during school time every day. The groups are not static and children move from one group to another based on periodic assessments.

The debate about attainment grouping has been raging for a long time. The main criticisms of this classroom organization strategy include –

a) The possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy for low as well as high achievers resulting out of the grouping (Francis, Becky, et al. 2017),

b) The decreased self-confidence in students who are placed in the 'lower' group (Boaler, Jo, Dylan William and Margret Brown, 2000),

c) Decrease in the quality of instruction overtime for the 'lower' group (Evertston, Carolyn M. 1982) and

d) The opposition of the democratic ideal of the right to education (Martha A Cook, 1977). While grouping children, QUEST is conscious of these criticisms, however, this strategy has some known advantages as well (Taylor, Francis B, et al., 2018).

Great effort is taken to ensure that there is no stigma associated with any of the groups. The grouping is between-class according to language and literacy skills only for a part of the school day, hence, low and high achievers are not permanently segregated. Test scores are not revealed to the students at any point during the intervention. Also, the

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

atmosphere in these schools is extremely non-competitive and thus the emotional problems that arise in schools with competitive environments mentioned in the criticism of the strategy, do not arise in these schools.

> *Without exception, all students were extremely positive about the level-based learning classes. They were well aware of the reasons for the need for such classes, and did not seem to feel any embarrassment about admitting that they hardly knew how to read when they joined the school in Class 6. They said that their friends who do not need level-based learning classes envy them because they have so much fun here. Students seemed to be engrossed, enthusiastic and eager to participate, even feeling free to make mistakes, something which is not commonly seen in government-run schools. Teachers also reported that students who hardly participate in the regular classes take part happily and eagerly in the level-based learning class. They have more confidence, speak their minds, and even point out the teacher's mistake sometimes.*
>
> *- Selected comments of auditors from Tata Trusts regarding the Anupad Intervention*

In fact, by the end of the intervention, teachers have reported a substantial increase in self-confidence, especially for children placed in the 'lower' group. Considering the ideals of democracy, it is the lower group that is the focus of attention for the better part of the intervention, and it never happens that this group is neglected because of poor instruction.

The language part of the intervention covers competencies from grades 1 to 5. Children who struggle with the fundamentals of decoding and encoding are taught the script using an approach that keeps at its centre the real goal of all reading - meaning-making

(Nancy G. Patterson, 2016). The Devanagari script is broken down into a set of Aksharas and Swaras, which can form meaningful passages, and using these, children are taught to read. They also practice decoding and writing some of the Aksharas in the early sets, but the focus is always on reading meaningful words, sentences, and passages. As children come from a less literate environment, they have not been exposed to different kinds of reading material. Thus the intervention includes working with the children on different genres such as dialogue, narrative, news report, advertisement, poems, etc. Children are provided explicit instruction for the comprehension of these various genres of text. A school library is an integral part of the intervention and read-aloud activities are conducted with children using the books from the library. Throughout the instruction, children's use of their home language is never criticized but used as a valuable resource for their language and literacy development through the strategy of translanguaging.

Anupad in Nashik District of Maharashtra

One site of implementation of the Anupad program is in Nashik district of Maharashtra for about 2200 children from 18 Ashram Schools, in collaboration with the Integrated Tribal Development Department and with the support from NSE Foundation. As a part of the program, at the

Subject	Aug '18	Feb '19	Feb '20
Language	19.4	31.8	47.8
Mathematics	22.6	32.4	42.1

Table 2: Mean scores of children for different rounds of testing, as a part of the intervention

end of every year, QUEST conducts its language and mathematics assessments of children, as mentioned above. This cohort is composed of children who were in grades 5 and 6 when the intervention started. The mean score of children of this cohort for different rounds of testing since August 2018 is given in Table2.

Our experience says that children need to score at least 50% marks on the diagnostic test to cope with their grade-appropriate curriculum. We can see that the baseline scores (August 2018) of children in these 18 Ashram schools were well below this required minimum level but children were approaching the 50% bar by February 2020.

III. UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON LEARNING

On March 23, 2020, the Government of India declared a nationwide lockdown as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world where all economic and social activities were closed (Gettleman, Jeffrey and Kai Schultz, 2020) Maharashtra was one of the worst-hit states during this pandemic (The Economic Times, 2020). A series of unlocks were then declared over the year, slowly opening economic activity. Although schools were the first to close, they remained closed in January 2021 for grades 8 and below(PTI, 2020). Thus, schools were closed for about a year. There has been much debate about the impact of such extended school closure on children's learning (Engzell, per, Arun Frey and Mark Verhagen; Maldonado, Joanna Elisa and Kristoff De Witte 2020). It is imperative to understand this impact to effectively plan to mitigate it. This paper analyses the impact of school closure on the learning levels of children and makes recommendations to address it, when schools reopen.

We acknowledge that looking at the loss in learning levels of children is just one way of analysing the impact of school closure on children's life (UNESCO, 2020). No doubt that many children from marginalised communities have had to face some harsh situations during the lockdown and may find it difficult to return to schools (Alvi, Muzna and Manavi Gupta , 2020). For many children in rural and tribal areas, schools are more than a place to learn. They are places where children receive good nutrition, they are places that keep them away from labour and marriage, and sometimes it is also a place that keeps them safe from other threats in their lives. However, these are only the extended benefits of schooling. Formal education is the foremost reason families send their children to school, because it is often the only hope that they have for social mobility.

Throughout the time of school closure, the educational needs of children from higher-income groups are being addressed in some manner by families and private schools but children from Ashram Schools have not had any such opportunities and formal education forms a big part of the everyday lives of children. Research has also shown that the knowledge gap between children in low and high-income groups grows when schools are closed (Celano, Donna and Susan B Neuman, 2008). Reading and writing, which are the core components of formal education, have a long-term impact on children's further education. Without achieving skills in literacy, children will lose many opportunities in later life. Thus, to do justice to these children, and to give them a chance at success, it is necessary to focus on the core academic competencies, for which we will need to effectively plan inputs so that children can eventually recover their learning loss and be able to cope with their grade-appropriate curriculum.

As can be observed in Table 1, one round of testing for QUEST's level-based learning program happened in February 2020 in Nashik, just before schools closed. At the time of this testing, about 1,400 children had received the full cycle of 2 years of input and we designed our study to measure the learning loss for this cohort. After the testing in February 2020, as the lockdown began in March, schools were closed. Because of this, classroom instruction ceased. After about a year of lockdown, likely, children can no longer do some things that they could do before the lockdown. Thus, to measure the learning loss, we assessed children again in January 2021 on parallel tests, that is, tests in both rounds assessed the same competencies and were of the same difficulty level. By comparing the results of testing done in January 2021 to the results of the testing done in February 2020, we have measured what we call 'backslide' in the learning levels of children. We are aware that children have also lost what learning they would have attained had input continued, and this 'Opportunity Cost' is also an aspect of learning loss. However, measuring the backslide will help teachers and educators to understand the current learning level of children and thus they will be in a better position to plan classroom instruction once schools re-open.

IV. SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

For our study, we decided to collect data of about 200 students (a 15% sample of about 1,400 children). QUEST normally conducts testing in schools, but because of the lockdown, the testing had to be conducted in the villages where the children lived. This is especially difficult in the case of Ashram Schools because the children that attend these schools may come from villages as far as 50 km away from the school. Children attending the 18 Ashram Schools, which are a part of QUEST's Anupad program, lived in 435 different villages. Out of these 435 villages, we randomly selected a sample of 61 villages with the condition that each of the villages selected should have at least 5 children. We further narrowed this sample to 37 villages according to the feasibility of reaching out during the time of COVID-19. As per the records of Ashram Schools, these 37 villages had 409 children. We selected a large enough sample on purpose because there was a good probability that many children would have migrated out of their village. We ended up collecting the data of 234 children from these 37 villages. The data collection was done by a team of 6 researchers, each of whom visited a village a day. The entire process of data collection, paper checking, data entry, and evaluation took about 25 days.

After collecting the quantitative data for measuring the backslide, we planned an extended field visit to one of the villages in our sample. The objective of the visit was to observe first-hand some aspects of the day-to-day life of children since school closure.

V. EXPERIENCES FROM FIELD VISIT

A researcher from our team spent three days in a village where some children from the Ashram Schools from the intervention lived. Most children above the age of 15 had gone with their parents to work on grape cultivation. The researcher spent time with about 10 children from grades 1 to 7 who were still in the village, to understand their daily routine during the lockdown. The children spent most of their time either playing a myriad of games or performing household chores. Among the children, it was the girls who spent most of their time working in the house, washing dishes and clothes, cleaning, or taking care of younger children. However, all children and adults as well, spent at least a few hours of the day bringing water from a nearby well or pond to

the house for daily use. The boys and the girls in the village were also working in their fields, watering cashew and mango. The fields they worked in were far from their houses in the village proper and sometimes parents and children would stay in the small shacks they had built on their farmlands, while they worked. Thus, for the children, this situation was not very different from their normal routine when out of school, for either summer vacations or other school holidays, as the village seemed relatively unaffected by the pandemic, perhaps because of the low density of population and also because they followed the protocols set by the government regarding quarantine and other measures of prevention. The only real difference that the children or parents felt was that now the schools were closed for an extended period.

On the first day of the visit, Mr. Lahange (name changed), an Ashram school teacher from the village, gathered about 20 children from grades 1 to 7, some of their parents, and some members of the Gram Panchayat in a temple at the centre of the village. The parents insisted that the researchers conduct some teaching activities with the children. They told the researcher that children had not received any real classes since the lockdown began in March 2020 and would welcome any kind of input for children. The children also did not have any exposure to the reading material or academic input, except for textbooks and some worksheets that teachers had assigned.

As a part of the field visit, the researcher also interviewed some parents personally. Yogesh Mhaskar (name changed), who has finished schooling till grade 10 and whose two daughters are enrolled in an Ashram School, said, "Children have lost about 10 months of school and we as parents can't do much at home for their education. Since the lockdown, they are at home. Here, they don't listen to us and play most of the time, but

they do listen to teachers. There is no network even if some of us have a mobile phone. They do work at home and help in the field, but without schools, they won't have a future - there is no future in farming, they need to be educated and work in private companies, if not as government employees." Parents were also concerned that children have lost the habit of sitting in one place and studying, as they have been constantly physically engaged, either as play or as work. All parents believed that schools should begin soon and the prolonged gap in school will have negative consequences for their children's education.

VI. RESULTS

We have represented the backslide in learning levels in two different ways;

Subject	Average Marks in		Percent Backslide
	Feb '20	Jan '19	
Language	46.6	34	27.2
Mathematics	41.2	36.4	11.7

$$\frac{\text{Average mark since Feb'20} - \text{Average mark since Jan '21}}{\text{Average mark since Feb'20}} \times 100$$

percentage backslide and the amount of instructional time lost.

Percentage backslide

The percentage backslide is calculated by the formula:

We can see that in Language, there is a 27% backslide from the level in February 2020 while in Mathematics, there is a 12% backslide. We can say that children currently have lost 27% of competencies in language and 12% of competencies in Mathematics, compared to February 2020.

Considering that backslide for mathematics is much less compared to language, further in-depth analysis is performed, only considering the language component of the test.

Backslide in terms of years of input lost

To estimate backslide in terms of the number of years of input lost; we will need to look at the trajectories of previous scores. The following graph shows the mean scores for language for three rounds of testing: February 2019, February 2020, January 2021.

We can see from the graph that the cohort went from 29 percent marks to 46.6 percent marks in one year from February 2019 to February 2020, which means that children in this cohort took about 1 year to gain 17.6 percent marks. During school closure, children have lost about 12.6 percent marks. Assuming that the gain in the marks follows a linear pattern, we can estimate the amount of time of the input lost, by the simple formula for proportions.

Therefore the amount of input lost
= 12.6/17.6 =0.72 years

According to the Right to Education Act (RTE), one school year is equivalent to about 36 weeks of instruction time for the upper primary level. However, in our experience, we find that Ashram Schools generally are only able to complete about 30 weeks of input in a year. Therefore 0.72 years of input lost translates to 0.72 * 30, which is 22 weeks of input lost for Language. For our Level Based Learning Program, the instructional time is about 4.5 hours per week per subject. Therefore, 22 weeks of loss translate to about 99 hours of loss of instruction.

Contribution of different components to the backslide

We have also calculated the contribution of different components to backslide by using the difference in scores in February 2020 and January 2021.

The contribution of a component is given by the formula:

$$\frac{\text{Avg. Difference in Marks of the component}}{\text{Avg. Difference in total Marks of the Test}} \times 100$$

We find that, of the four components of the language test, the two highest contributing components are Reading Comprehension
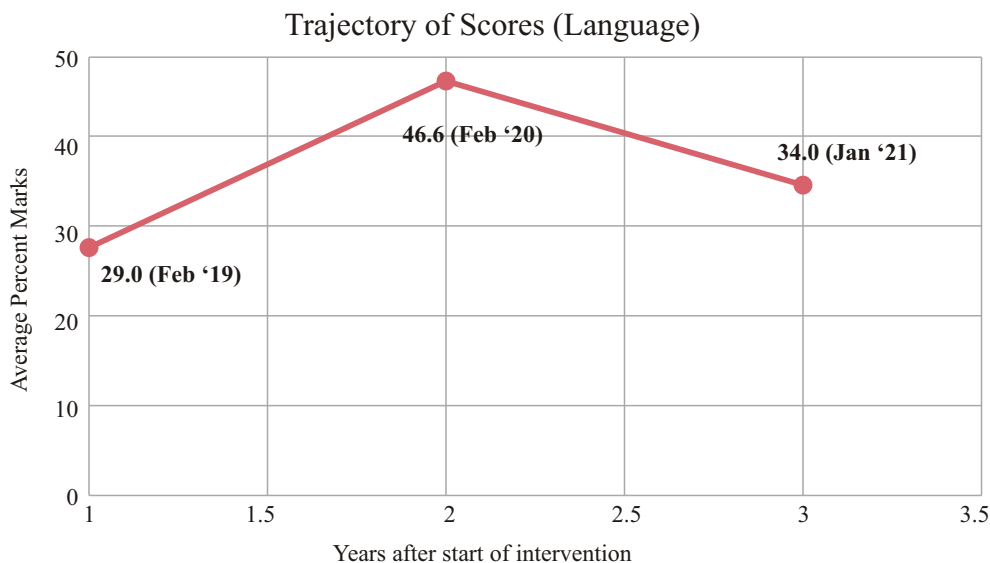

Figure 1: *Trajectories of Language scores*

and Writing with 57% and 21% contribution, respectively. This means that 78% percent of the backslide is because of these two components, while the remaining 22% is because of the other two components combined.

We can further zoom in on Reading Comprehension to see what kind of comprehension has suffered. For this purpose, we have divided Reading Comprehension into two parts; Reading Comprehension Level 1 and Reading Comprehension Level 2, with the text in level 2 being longer and more complex than in Level 1.We have calculated the percent backslide for a component in the same way as we have calculated for the overall backslide. The percent backslide for each of these levels and the writing component is given by the following table:

Compon-ent/ Sub Compon-ent	Possible Marks	Avg Feb '20 (%)	Avg Jan '21 (%)	Percent Backslide
Reading Compreh-ension 1	21	63.0	51.6	18.0
Reading Compreh-ension 2	15	49.2	27.6	43.9
Writing	23	28.9	19.5	32.4

Table 5: *Comparison of scores in Feb 2020 and Jan 2021 for Reading Comprehension and Writing*

VII. DISCUSSION

Children from the cohort in this study had an opportunity to undergo the LBL program and they were receiving special input for the 2 years before the lockdown. They had made considerable progress as compared to their baselines in 2018, when their mean scores in Language and mathematics were 19% and 23%, respectively. In February 2020, the mean scores had shifted to 48% and 42% for

Language and Maths, respectively. Hence, we can say that the cohort was very close to the bar of 50%, post which children generally cope better with the grade-appropriate curriculum, as mentioned earlier. With a little more input after February 2020, the cohort would have achieved this level. However, after the suspension of school instruction for about 9 months, the cohort is showing a backslide of 27% (equivalent to 99 hours of instruction) for Language & 12% (equivalent to 50 hours of instructional time) for Mathematics. Recovering from this backslide as soon as possible will be critical and classroom instruction needs to be planned systematically to do this. Children will be receiving this instruction for the second time, and our experience shows that it takes less time to revive the competencies than it had taken to develop them for the first time. Assuming this, we estimate that children would need at least 50 hours (roughly half of the original time) of instruction for Language and 25 hours of instruction for maths, so that they return to the level where they were in February 2020. Children from the cohort were part of the intervention and hence it is possible to measure the learning loss and plan the instruction based on the evidence. However, we can assume that the children who did not receive any level-based input would be almost closer to the baseline of this cohort conducted in August 2018. Hence, the impact of school closure on their learning levels will be even greater. It will be advisable to plan a quick diagnostic assessment at the local level and plan the input based on the results.

While planning the 50 hours of input in language for children from the cohort, it will be important to focus on reading comprehension and writing as these are the first two contributors to the backslide, with 57% and 21% contributions, respectively. Though the backslide in writing tasks is 32%, the mean score in this component

before the lockdown (in February 2020) was 29%. This is much lower than the mean score of 57% in reading comprehension at the same point in time. Hence, we can say that children already had a lot of scope for improvement in writing and one can anyway recommend giving adequate emphasis on writing tasks, irrespective of the backslide observed.

We have split the Reading Comprehension component into two sub-components – Reading Comprehension 1 (RC1) & Reading Comprehension 2 (RC2). RC 1 includes comprehending shorter & simpler text (of about 50 words) while RC2 includes comprehending longer and complex text (of about 100 words). The mean scores of RC1 & RC2 before the lockdown were 63% & 49%, respectively. The point to be noted here is that RC 1 was well above the 50% bar and RC2 was very close to it. From this, we can infer that most of the children could comprehend simple text while many could comprehend complex text as well.

The backslide in comprehension of simpler text (RC1) is 18% while the backside in the comprehension of complex text is 44%. This means that while children have lost capacities in comprehending simple text, the loss is greater for capacities in comprehending longer and more complex texts. During field visits, researchers tried to understand if children from the cohort had any possibility of engaging with the printed material at home during the period of lockdown. They found that apart from the school textbooks and some workbooks, there was hardly anything that would help children to keep in touch with the printed language. The large backslide in the comprehension of long and complex text can be attributed to this print-deficit environment (Celano, Donna and Susan B Neuman 2008). It is interesting to note that the children's capacity to comprehend simpler text has regressed less in

comparison to comprehension of complex text. This may be due to the higher mean score of 63% in the simpler level of the Reading Comprehension component before the lockdown. This means children have achieved better mastery of these competencies and they have retained it better as compared to the other component.

Thus, it is necessary to focus on the comprehension of longer & complex text for quicker recovery from the backslide. This may be true not only for the children from the cohort in our study but also for all the children who experience a print-deficit environment during the lockdown. Hence, it will be helpful to plan input on reading comprehension of longer and complex text in the first few weeks after the schools reopen. If children didn't have any level-based input, it may be necessary to focus on the comprehension of basic text too. As discussed earlier, reading comprehension is the most critical ability to cope well with the grade-level curriculum, and backslide in this ability may result in prolonged learning loss as reported by the studies (Andrabi, Tahir, Benjamin Daniels and Jishnu Das 2020) (Alexander, Karl L, Doris R Entwisle and Linda Steffel Oslon, 2007).

Strategies to address learning loss

Based on the study, it has been estimated that children would need 11 weeks of input to recover their competencies in language and literacy. Thus, QUEST prepared a plan of input for the children from the study. The plan is given in the Table 6.

The input in reading comprehension and writing is planned in a progression, where the tasks get more and more complex, in terms of genre and text length, as the weeks progress and by week 11, children are expected to not only recover the competencies they had gained before lockdown but also be able to obtain levels in

Week	Activity
1	Song, Read Aloud of Picture Books, Reading Comprehension of Dialogue (100 to 200 words), Experience Writing
2	Song, Read Aloud of Picture Books, Reading Comprehension of Dialogue (100 to 200 words), Experience Writing
3	Song, Read Aloud of Picture Books, Reading Comprehension of Advertisement, Story Writing (Complete given story)
4	Song, Read Aloud of News Reports, Reading Comprehension of Expository Passage, Story Writing (Write story using given words)
5	Song, Read Aloud of Picture Books, Reading of Advertisement, Reading Comprehension of News Report, Story Writing (Write Story on a given subject)
6	Song, Read Aloud of Dialogue, Read Aloud of Chapter Book (Tottochan), Read Aloud of Dialogue, Reading Comprehension of Dialogue (300 to 400 words), Dialogue Writing
7	Song, Read Aloud of Chapter Book (Tottochan), Reading Comprehension of Narratives (300 to 400 words), Story Writing (Write a story based on a picture prompt)
8	Song, Read Aloud of Chapter Book (Tottochan), Reading Comprehension of Advertisements, Advertisement Writing
9	Song, Read Aloud of Chapter Book (Tottochan), Reading Comprehension of News Reports (300 words), Writing News Report

Table 6: QUEST plan for the children

Week	Activity
10	Song, Read Aloud of Picture Books, Reading Comprehension of Expository Passages (300 to 400 words), Letter Writing
11	Song, Read Aloud of Picture Books, Reading Comprehension of Poem, News Report (about 400 words) and Expository Passage (about 400 words), Writing News Report, Writing-Expository Passage

Table 6: QUEST plan for the children

reading and writing, which they would have achieved if the input had continued. This plan was to be implemented for about 200 children by trained personnel from QUEST. The number of students that QUEST could reach was limited by the resources and personnel available. As this pilot program to address the learning loss progressed, some schools began the process of re-opening and some did not. Hence QUEST adopted the strategy of reaching out to the maximum number of children, either in their village or in their school. Thus, QUEST started the implementation of the plan in 2 Ashram Schools and 5 villages. However, after about two weeks of conducting these sessions, the second wave of COVID-19 hit Maharashtra and lockdowns were imposed again in February-March 2021. QUEST, therefore, decided to shift this program to an online mode. The instruction plan and content remained the same, but we shifted from face-to-face sessions to a WhatsApp Bot along with phone calls and zoom calls. QUEST was able to reach only about 80 (60 had smartphones available) students of the initial 200 students due to the unavailability of either mobile phones or networks. QUEST will conduct an assessment after about three months to check to what degree QUEST has been able to make up for the learning loss. Preliminary analysis of children's responses to different tasks suggests that children are learning through

online mode as well; however, we will need to conduct further in-depth research to understand what and how children can learn through this new medium.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned before, the language gap compounded by the print deficit environment leads to a situation where many children from tribal communities often show low achievement in language and literacy. However, it is also vital for them to learn the language, as it is the only means of social mobility (Lisa Delpitt, 1993) (in the same way that English is perceived as the only means of social mobility by almost everyone in India). Now, with such extended periods of school closure, as our study has shown, children will need focused input on reading comprehension and writing. These two competencies are vital for the children's ability to cope with their grade-appropriate curriculum.

Through our study, we have identified the learning loss in reading comprehension and writing, among the children from Ashram Schools from our program and we have designed a pedagogy that is possibly suited for addressing it. Currently, QUEST is making efforts to implement the proposed plans through available media. Efforts need to be taken to reach out to the maximum number of children, either through online media or through a mixed-method strategy that involves phone calls, village visits, and online input. Many children in urban areas have continued at least some aspects of their formal education online and many also have a home environment that can support their formal learning. But, children from Ashram Schools, who live in remote areas, are often on the other side of the digital divide.

In our study, we managed to reach about 60 of the 200 children we had selected for the pilot because of lack of connectivity. We chose to continue our pilot because we felt that it was important to make an effort to provide input to children we could reach and not deprive anyone of the opportunity of learning, just because we could not reach everyone. Considering the tenets of social justice and welfare, such efforts are vital in making sure that we identify and address the educational needs of children from tribal communities in the current scenario and provide appropriate inputs through whichever channels are available to us.

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Impact of Online Education on Lives of Children during the Pandemic

Anshi Bhalla, Kapil Kumar Mandawaria, Pavan Sharma, Dipti Gupta

ABSTRACT

The scope of the study is mainly to enlist the factors determining the impact of the digital mode of education on all the stakeholders during COVID-19. The study aims to come up with possible recommendations for policymakers considering the overarching coverage and importance of the education system in the country. The research methodology included qualitative and quantitative analysis supported by statistical methods like the Chi-square test. The softwares used for analysis included Microsoft Excel and SPSS. The results indicated the gap in the infrastructure, which can cause a roadblock in the transition to digital education. The study talks about the physical and behavioural issues that children can face due to excessive use of devices and some unique challenges like ensuring fair testing methods for assessment. The research also underlines the factors to be considered to gauge the readiness of the education system for future challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19, online education, right to education, teachers, students, parents.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education in India has been a focus area since the Right to Education Act came into existence. However, the reach and quality of education imparted to the students, especially those belonging to the lower-income groups and those in remote areas, has still not reached upto the expectations of stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic, which caused disruptions in all walks of life, further worsened the situation by forcing the shutdown of schools and enforcing the digital mode of education. This impacted millions of students as education for them came to a complete halt. According to UNESCO, ever since the outbreak of COVID-19, around 1.37 billion students in 138 countries worldwide were affected. Nearly 60.2 million school teachers and university lecturers had to stay at home. In the Indian context, lockdown impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary education, besides the 28 million children (Edex live, 2020) who were undergoing pre-school education in the *anganwadi* centres. The sudden shift to the online medium of education obstructed the overall education system in the country, especially in government schools. These schools were already struggling for basic amenities like proper classrooms, sitting arrangements, chalks, boards, etc, and transitioning straight to the online medium without going through the basic upgrade took a toll on the students. Even some of the private schools were not able to adapt to the sudden infrastructural requirements. The government, which was caught off-guard

Anshi Bhalla, Student PGP Sustainable Management - Batch 2019-2021, IIM Lucknow
Kapil Kumar Mandawaria, Student PGP Sustainable Management - Batch 2019 – 2021, IIM Lucknow
Pavan Sharma, Student PGP Sustainable Management - Batch 2019 – 2021, IIM Lucknow
Prof. Dipti Gupta, Business Sustainability, IIM Lucknow.

initially, slowly started to roll out mitigation plans like learning applications and material but these proved to be futile in cases where students were facing infrastructural issues like network coverage, the number of devices the family-owned, electricity outage, etc.

At the outset, there were three main stakeholders affected by this sudden change in the learning environment viz. the students, the parents, and the teachers. The students faced challenges like limited attention span, lack of peer learning and lack of motivation. The parents were anxious concerning the huge infrastructure fees that they had to pay, the quality of education that their wards were getting, and the amount of seriousness shown by them. The teachers had to make major changes in the way they imparted the learning experience; (a) acclimatizing themselves with the online mode; (b) coming up with creative methods to maintain the engagement level of the students; (c) ensuring fairways of testing the students. Looking at the overarching coverage of the problem and the large impacted population of young children both in rural and urban areas, this study tries to critically analyse the factors which had the highest impact and can be addressed by making suitable recommendations to the policymakers. This research tries to capture some of these factors and draw inferences

from their occurrences in the entire process by interacting with the main actors in this situation of crisis and by applying qualitative and quantitative statistical tools to conclude.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND STRATEGY

The journey of exploring the research question started with the construct of "understanding the impact of the sudden transition of the education system to online mode forced by the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic". We attempted to analyse the preparedness of the education system and the challenges it faced against the contingent situation. The impact on the key stakeholders and how continuous and uniform learning experiences can be maintained for different categories of schools (private/government) was also studied. We arrived at our management question, which was identifying the factors playing a major role in the adoption of online mode of education and the impact that these factors have on the quality, motivation levels, engagement levels and learning of the students. As the pandemic gained momentum, many organizations, (both private and public), took up studies to analyse the impact on the students. UNESCO and Economic Times, in their research, focused on surveys to understand
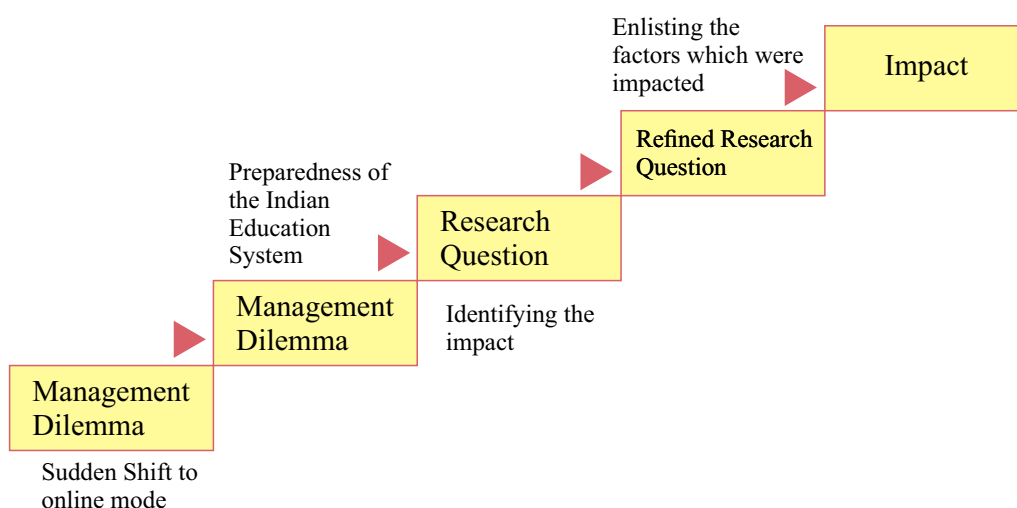

Figure 1: Research question process

the changes in choices and behaviour of the stakeholders. As per a report published by UNESCO, nearly 826 million students were kept out of schools around the world due to no access to household computers and 43% had no internet at home. Some national-level surveys also highlighted the advantages of the online medium for the education system, in the form of "flexibility" of submitting the homework for the students, plethora of new topics to be explored from some of the very best faculties of the world (Karyala, Kamat, 2020). Apart from direct benefits, the studies have also highlighted the rise of the humongous ed-tech industry, which created indirect benefits in the form of employment and coverage. The disadvantages of course include affordability and access to the internet, which are major roadblocks for adoption at scale.

As the research is based on identifying factors, the requirement of qualitative study is of much importance. An "ex post facto" design was planned for reporting purposes with a statistical and case-based scope. It involved focused group discussions and in depth-interviews for data collection and design. We used a restrictive sample with purposive (quota) sampling of 30, which constituted the main stakeholders viz. students, parents and teachers from different cities belonging to private and government institutions. The software used included Microsoft Excel (for qualitative analysis) and SPSS for quantitative analysis. We ensured the privacy of our participants by following the confidentiality protocols and obtained informed consent as appropriate from them. The figure below shows in pictorial format how the research question was derived.

Data collection

The research was primarily divided into two main phases. Phase I involved the collection of raw data from the tools like focused group discussions and in-depth interviews. It was followed by content analysis to identify main headings under which the factors could be grouped, depending on their relative interaction with each other. Phase II consisted of the application of statistical tools like the chi-square test, factor analysis and various graphs using software like Excel & SPSS to identify the interaction between the different factors as obtained in Phase I.

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

III. QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Objectives

The objective of doing the qualitative data analysis was to identify factors and problems that the students, teachers and parents were facing in the new mode (online, radio, television, and recorded videos, etc.) of education.

Method

For the identification of factors, we used exploratory research methods like focussed group discussion (FGDs), in-depth interview (IDI), and online surveys. There were 30 participants (students, teachers, and parents spanning the tier-1, 2, and 3 cities with representations from government and private schools), in our research. We did 2 FGDs, 1 IDI and conducted multiple online surveys for the same.

Intent

The virtual interactions with teachers, parents & students were aimed at understanding their views on the problem statement.

Teachers

(a)Preferred mode of education - online/offline, the new ways of teaching that they used to make a connection with the students and to increase the engagement levels.

(b) Difference in the behaviour of the students with their videos switched "on" as compared to when the videos are switched "off", problems faced by the teachers in maintaining discipline in the class.

(c) Pros and cons of radio and television broadcasting and other online modes (recorded video, Google Meet, Zoom, or other online mediums) as observed by them.

(d) Any observed changes in the level of understanding and motivation of the students in the online mode?

(e) What changes were made to the mode and medium of conducting the tests to be both fair and to judge the students on the knowledge gained?

Students

Discussions with students included problems faced by them during online classes considering the points mentioned below, but not limited to these:

(a) How learning from recorded sessions impacted their understanding of the subject? (b)Whether their subject knowledge was being compromised, whether submitting assignments, or taking exams posed any challenge?

c) Any observed changes in the teaching methodology and whether they were mindful of their teachers(or were afraid of them), as compared to when in the physical classrooms.

Discussions also included changes in their stress levels, attention spans, eyesight, sitting postures, and other such physical factors.

Parents

Discussions with the parents gave insights on:

(a) What was the difference in the behaviour of their wards when their cameras were turned on/off?

(b) Special measures taken by them for ensuring the child's education.

(c)Issues they (parents) thought that their children were facing.

Platforms used for teaching were Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other institute-owned apps for live classes and recorded sessions. Instant messaging app WhatsApp, emails, and government apps were also used. For examinations, Google Forms and PDF files were used primarily.

VI. INFERENCES FROM THE DISCUSSION

Teachers

Government teachers found the initiatives by the government, including Diksha (a platform for school education; an initiative of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (Ministry of Education, Govt of India), for facilitating digital learning, to be quite helpful. Overall, the teachers had to take extra measures for ensuring class participation during discussions and had to deal with unresponsive students even during roll calls. Some of the teachers shared interesting measures like group activities or interactive games during the classes to overcome student unresponsiveness. The most common problems for non-participation as stated by the students were network connectivity and bandwidth. Maintaining discipline, explaining concepts became a tedious task for teachers of pre-primary and primary schools as the attention span of students was very less as compared to offline classes. Many school teachers also thought that they themselves needed to first completely understand the usage of smart devices on their own and then work on them, which caused delays in the initial period. Some students also created nuisance in the class either by playing music in the background, taking screenshots, scribbling on the presentation screen, or misbehaving in the chat box. Teachers were unsure of the testing methods to assess the students and usually had to compromise on the same, as students faced a variety of problems like

inability to access question papers, non-submission of answers on time, etc. Teachers were facing strain in the eyes due to prolonged exposure to the screen. A major point of concern for the teachers was the lack of feedback to their classes as students were unresponsive and teachers were not able to gauge whether the students were understanding the concepts or not.

Parents

Many parents with more than one child raised the concern of "affordability", where separate smart devices were needed by each child for attending the classes. The affordability of data packs was also a detrimental factor for their wards. Parents were worried about the learning as they doubted the participation of their children in the classes, as teachers did not disallow students to switch their cameras off during the classes. Due to improper postures, parents found the attention spans of the children reducing drastically, with the learning environment at home also not being up to the mark. They thought children were losing out on lessons on discipline, peer learning. Payment of infrastructure fees was another point of concern for the parents as children were at home. Parents who sent their wards to government schools were happy with the development of their children, as they learned the usage of applications for learning purposes.

Students

The students claimed that there was slight or even no fear of the teachers in the online classroom. Most of them would switch their cameras off while attending the classes. They also enjoyed the comfort of attending the classes in the posture of their choice such as lying down, sitting lazily or informally. They were also able to do multiple tasks during the classes, which were both good and bad. They insisted on recording the

sessions to watch these videos at their own convenience. The students also mentioned that they had more "attention span" in offline classes and other students created distractions like scribbling on the presentations that the teacher was presenting, unmuting themselves when they are not speaking thus disturbing the entire class and teachers. Due to prolonged exposure to screens, students complained of strain in the eyes, mood swings and irritability. Important aspects of physical classes like peer learning, open discussion in the classrooms (competitiveness amongst the students) with the teachers were missing in the online classes, as many students abstained from participating in the class. The students were happy with the testing methods as their results/grades improved due to MCQ-based questions.Some students complained about the fairness of these methods. The students often faced network connectivity/bandwidth issues even in tier-2 cities, due to which they lost out on important information in live classes. The recorded videos created a problem of "doubt clearing sessions" as students would often watch the recorded videos at their convenience and would have to wait till the next class to get their doubts cleared, which created an interruption in learning. Particularly in government schools, students who previously didn't have much

understanding of IT tools and smartphone applications now started to become accustomed to their usage thus simplifying certain tasks. They liked the use of "WhatsApp" and learning through animated videos (being broadcast on television by the government authorities).

The above responses as noted from the IDIs, FGDs and online surveys, led to identification of major factors impacting the learning of the students and these were listed and classified, as indicated in the figure 2.

V. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The 30 respondents-- school children, teachers and parents--were asked questions eliciting single, multiple and descriptive responses. After coding and cleaning the data, discrete frequency distributions based on the responses to different questions were obtained. The variables were studied extensively by graphical representation through pie charts, histograms, bar charts and stacked histograms. These pictorial depictions helped us to visualize trends in the sample under study and delve into a deeper analysis. To establish the inter-relations between categories of two or more attributes on the macro level, two-way cross tabs were created by summarizing the categorical data into frequencies for each pair of categories. The Chi-square ($\chi 2$) test,

Testing Factors

- Cheating was easier
- No proctor to invigilate in most of the cases
- No actual testing of the students (MC based exams)
- Open Book exams

Infrastructural Factors

- Network bandwidth
- Stability & speed of the network
- Absence of learning environment as in the school
- Multiple smartphone requirements for large families

Ergonomics Factors

- Eye sight issues due to long time spent on the screen
- Mental fatigue due to prolonged exposure to screens
- Improper way of sitting during classess (sitting comfortably or lying down on the bed).

Behavioural & Learning Factors

- Reduced class participation
- No/limited intercation with peers and teachers for better understanding
- Classroom experience is missing
- Reduced attention time-span
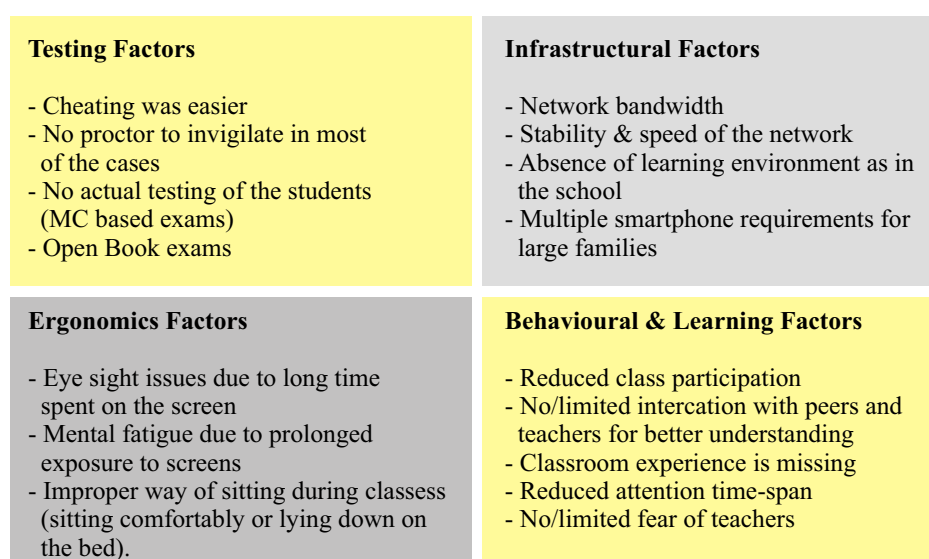- No/limited fear of teachers

Figure 2: Categorisation of factors

which is a powerful tool for testing the hypothesis of independence of attributes, was applied on contingency tables. An important part of most research surveys is the choice of control variables, which plays an important role in understanding the conditional independence between two variables. In alignment to identify the factors that impact the sudden shift to online mode during the pandemic, we used factor analysis. Also, the discriminant analysis technique helped determine if the chosen variables are good enough to differentiate between online and offline preferences. The statistical analysis was carried out using computer packages like Excel, SPSS extensively.

The aim of the study was to capture the interplay of various aspects which influence the factors affecting the shift in learning medium.

The responses to the question 'What had been your medium of learning before the pandemic?' were grouped into frequencies. This was done to understand the comfort of switching to a new medium of schooling. Based on the pie chart shown below (figure 3), we deduced that 50% of the respondents chose offline medium as the most frequently used method of interacting through peer learning, group discussions, physical monitoring followed by 27% who chose

both online and offline mediums to learn and 23% of them chose an online medium to learn. On the face of it, it may seem that students and parents are more inclined towards online medium as children get the freedom and parents get to monitor as opposed to teachers who have lesser control. We used the Likert scale to see the eagerness to learn on online medium before and after the pandemic and found that eagerness to
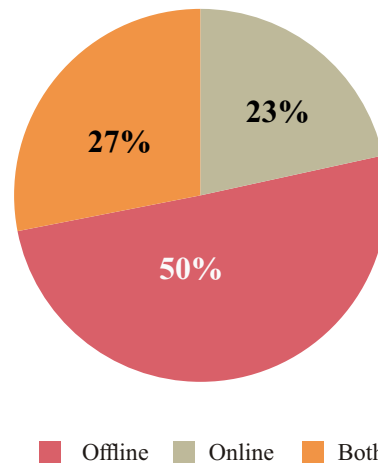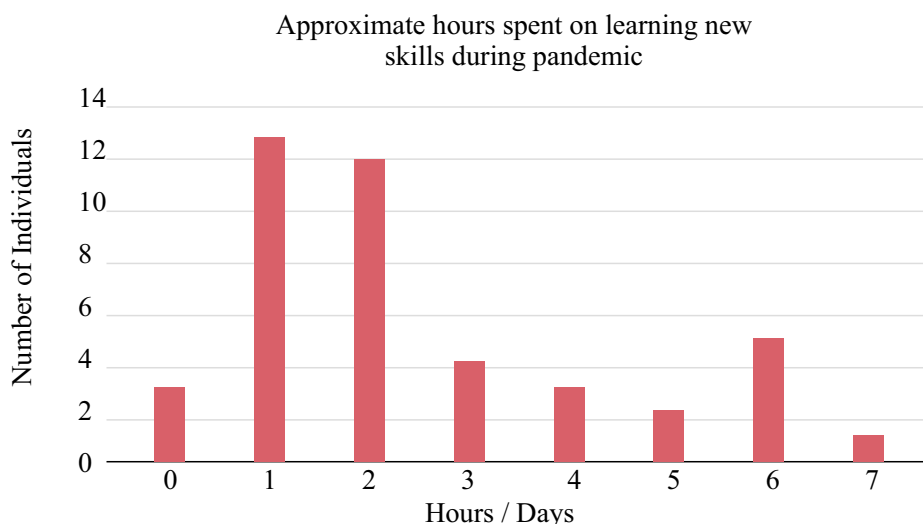

Figure 3: *Modes of learning*

explore online medium to engage has increased. This indicates that people have now started adjusting to the change, which they never expected before.

The data in the bar chart below (figure 4) show the number of hours people have spent on learning a new skill per day through online mediums. We see that most people

were able to give 2-3 hours per day on average to learn a new skill. This was seen especially amongst teachers who wished to be more efficient and creative while delivering their classes. Another reason was that they could not understand how to engage with the children especially belonging to classes 1-5 without looking at their progress physically.

To identify the factors that impact the shift to online classes

Using the Factor Analysis technique, the initial 19 questions were reduced to 14 questions as some of them had redundancy and then we ran the analysis to club them under underlying factors as shown in figure 5: SPSS output.

Correlation Matrix[a]

		V1	V3	V4	V5	V6	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12	V14	V16	V17	V18
Correlation	V1	1.000	.000	.300	.116	-.109	-.057	.278	-.168	-.192	-.015	-.457	-.148	.315	-.282
	V3	.000	1.000	-.047	-.083	.156	.353	-.124	.299	.086	.417	.000	-.132	.161	.201
	V4	.300	-.047	1.000	.395	-.199	.255	-.046	-.291	-.180	-.166	-.198	-.219	.051	.051
	V5	.116	-.083	.395	1.000	-.141	.397	.075	.362	.078	.095	-.219	-.372	.032	-.183
	V6	-.109	.156	-.199	-.141	1.000	-.086	.000	.213	.257	.402	.062	-.075	.000	.086
	V8	-.057	.353	.255	.397	-.086	1.000	-.169	.144	.038	.162	.054	-.133	.111	-.112
	V9	.278	-.124	-.046	.075	.000	-.169	1.000	-.095	-.245	.199	.082	-.184	.476	-.205
	V10	-.168	.299	-.291	.362	.213	.144	-.095	1.000	.372	.280	-.159	-.251	-.082	.055
	V11	-.192	.086	-.180	.078	.257	.038	-.245	.372	1.000	.281	.000	-.025	-.162	.047
	V12	-.015	.417	-.166	.095	.402	.162	.199	.280	.281	1.000	.291	-.081	.172	-.058
	V14	-.457	.000	-.198	-.219	.062	.054	.082	-.159	.000	.291	1.000	.327	.142	-.280
	V16	-.148	-.132	-.219	-.373	-.075	-.133	-.184	-.251	-.025	-.081	.327	1.000	-.349	-.195
	V17	.315	.161	.051	.032	.000	.111	.479	-.082	-.162	.172	.142	-.349	1.000	-.118
	V18	-.282	.201	.051	-.183	.086	-.112	-.205	.055	.047	-.058	-.280	-.195	-.118	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	V1		.500	.054	.271	.283	.383	.069	.188	.154	.469	.006	.217	.045	.066
	V3	.500		.403	.332	.206	.028	.257	.054	.326	.011	.500	.243	.198	.143
	V4	.054	.403		.015	.145	.087	.404	.059	.170	.191	.147	.122	.394	.394
	V5	.271	.332	.015		.228	.015	.347	.025	.341	.309	.122	.021	.432	.167
	V6	.283	.206	.145	.228		.325	.500	.129	.085	.014	.372	.346	.500	.326
	V8	.383	.028	.087	.015	.325		.185	.224	.421	.196	.389	.241	.280	.279
	V9	.069	.257	.404	.347	.500	.185		.309	.096	.146	.333	.166	.004	.138
	V10	.188	.054	.059	.025	.129	.224	.309		.022	.067	.201	.091	.333	.386
	V11	.154	.326	.170	.341	.085	.421	.096	.022		.067	.500	.448	.197	.402
	V12	.469	.011	.191	.309	.014	.196	.146	.067	.067		.059	.336	.182	.381
	V14	.006	.500	.147	.122	.372	.389	.333	.201	.500	.059		.039	.227	.067
	V16	.217	.243	.122	.021	.346	.241	.166	.091	.448	.336	.039		.029	.151
	V17	.045	.198	.394	.432	.500	.280	.004	.333	.197	.182	.227	.029		.267
	V18	.066	.143	.394	.167	.326	.279	.138	.386	.402	.381	.067	.151	.267	

a.Determinant= .008

KMO and Bartlett's Text

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.457
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	112.334
	df	91
	Sig.	0.064

Correlation among the questions is low, that is they do not have similar context or give same information

At 90% confidence, we find that the data set is suitable for factor analysis (correlation matrix is Identity Matrix) However, the variance is high which is indicated by KMO adequacy

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	4
V10	.771	-.105	.237	-.198	
V11	.687	-.271			
V12	.563	.329		.294	.411
V6	.558		-.309		.220
V9		.616			-.149
V17	-.104	.770			.297
V1	-.222	.567	.138	-.383	-.181
V5	.212		.823	-.242	-.176
V8			.738	.167	.444
V4	-.491		.522	-.304	
V14				.884	.126
V16	-.179	-.355	-.250	.591	-.245
V18			-.365	-.502	.492
V3	.184				.822

Extraction Method : Principal Component Analysis
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization
a. Rotation converged in 12 iterations

The table gives the questions that are loaded in the 5 factors respectively. Most of them are loaded on more than 1 factor but the loading is less as compared to the primary factor, we are suppressing the low correlation variables to get the factors affecting the shift on online medium of schooling

Figure 5: *Factor analysis results using SPSS*
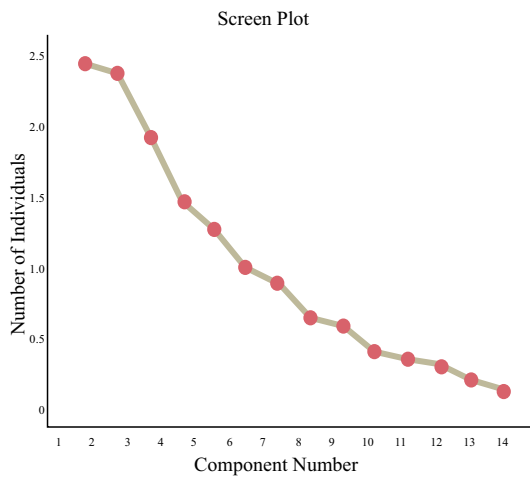
Screen Plot

Figure 5: *Factor analysis results using SPSS*

Further, the data in the pie chart below (figure 6) shows the various combinations of online platforms people are using to enhance the learning experience. It was evident that most people would continue to use these learning tools and the idea is to take the benefits of both online and offline learning mediums to upgrade the education system.
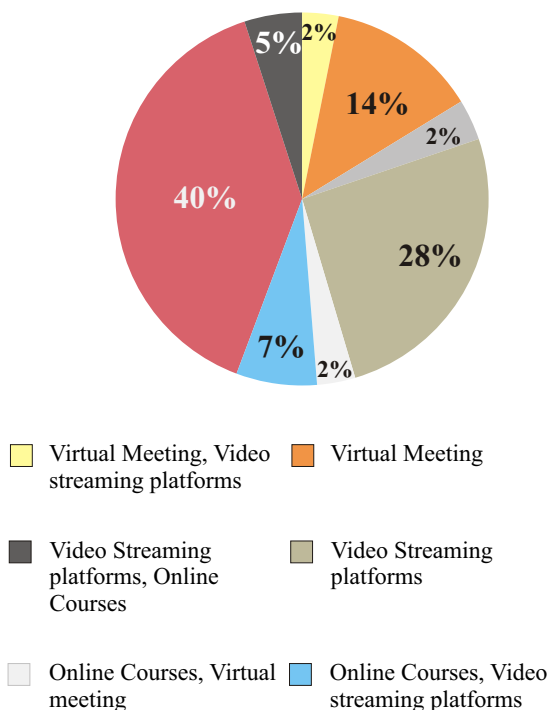

- 🟨 Virtual Meeting, Video streaming platforms
- 🟧 Virtual Meeting
- ⬛ Video Streaming platforms, Online Courses
- 🟫 Video Streaming platforms
- ⬜ Online Courses, Virtual meeting
- 🟦 Online Courses, Video streaming platforms

Figure 4: *Modes of Learning*

VI. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The sudden transition to online medium has provided both opportunities and challenges, which need to be considered while making decisions in the future. Government school students have got basic know-how of technology, which they can leverage to shape their future. For private school students, the learning got hampered due to lack of monitoring. One positive conclusion that came out of the research was the increase in the number of students enrolling in the government schools (supported by the government initiatives) as compared with those in private schools in rural areas as the latter category found affording the infrastructural needs to be difficult.

When we talk about infrastructure, last-mile connectivity is still an issue and is a major hurdle for the country to improve the access to education in the remotest parts. Also, the affordability of devices is an issue for low income and medium income parents. Hence, the government can plan to use the results of such studies to align other schemes of availing infrastructures (setting up of computer centres/subsidies on electronics/distribution of devices for the rural households/low- and middle-income family groups).

While attending the classes, children were not following proper sitting postures, which caused physical issues to them. Also, due to the long duration of exposure to the screens, they complained of strain in their eyes. These problems can be arrested by using screen covers or by making statutory requirements like reducing the span of the lectures, making meditation mandatory before starting the classes.

Evaluation of students in India has always been an issue when it comes to fairness and level of difficulty. The online medium has

disrupted the traditional ways of evaluation/testing. Invigilation can be made better by making technological interventions like software and web cameras. Students may also be asked to justify the MCQs marked by them, in 1-2 lines thus helping assess them on their understanding.

Behavioural changes have also been observed in the students as they are becoming anxious. They are not able to avail the benefits of peer learning and are losing out on key emotional learnings like facing their teacher, competitiveness and other such factors. This can be reduced by ensuring children are given more group tasks in place of individual activities, which will help them interact and learn from their friends.

Policymakers can take a cue from the above observations while designing future interventions in the education system. While implementing any digitally oriented schemes, it is important first to understand the ground reality in terms of infrastructural readiness of the children, as lower-income group families with more than 2 children will require a sufficient number of devices along with stable internet facilities to realize the dream of "Digital India". The penetration of the internet and infrastructural augmentation should be considered based on the number of devices as per the usage of the family members. This problem can also be solved by designing scenario-based infrastructure development plans (at the source i.e. school level itself) where first the current states of government pre-primary and primary schools are assessed and based on their immediate and long-term requirements, technological interventions are planned. A basic scenario can contain provisions of basic amenities like whiteboards, interactive models in the schools, the upgraded scenario may contain usage of projectors, presentations in the

classrooms, and the most modern scenario may contain the use of IoT/smart classrooms with the use of modern techniques like augmented and virtual reality, which can solve the problems of access and reach for the children.

The role of private organisations becomes very important in transitioning to a system that is "pandemic proof" as foundations / CSR arms of private corporations can play an important role in capacity building of the staff and teachers in adopting the latest IT tools and techniques. One such suggestion can be forming an association (taskforce) of major IT firms, which can either develop a tool kit or conduct training sessions for teachers that will help them acclimatize to the latest teaching methods. This was a major issue in many government schools as observed during the pandemic due to which students lost their precious time in their academic calendars.

Development of testing platforms / methodologies in schools is a challenge and to align with the "National Education Policy, 2020" (as approved by the union cabinet), which focuses on "experiential learning and critical thinking," the concept of "open book" testing can be suggested. This can help students build their analytical ability and get rid of their dependency on memorizing things. This will also help in eliminating unfair means and biases as was observed in students when they were being tested during the pandemic, using Google Forms.

The changes brought in our lives by the pandemic put Herbert Spencer's concept of "survival of the fittest" right at the centre of adaptation; the biggest hindrance being education especially of young minds. But the real question is to evaluate the impact of going online, identifying the factors that affect children for better or worse. Through our study, data suggested that four critical

factors such as testing, infrastructure, ergonomic, behavioural and learning aspects can positively or negatively impact children. This opens doors to solve pertinent problems that can help to decide which features of online learning should be ratified and which ones revoked or ameliorated.

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Annexure I – Geographic representations of the participants of the study

City	State/Province
Jodhpur	Rajasthan
Pushkar	Rajasthan
Jaipur	Rajasthan
Sardarshahr	Rajasthan
New Delhi	Delhi
Dehradun	Uttarakhand
Agra	Uttar Pradesh
Nashik	Maharashtra
Mathura	Uttar Pradesh

Bhawna Jain, 17 years

02

Interview with former Union Health Secretary Ms. K. Sujatha Rao

Years of experience in the public health space helped former Union Health Secretary Ms K Sujatha Rao raise several important issues during the COVID-19 induced pandemic. One of them was welfare of the young generation of India and their sufferings during the pandemic. Ms Rao in conversation with the DCPCR journal team shared her views on strategies that are helpful to mitigate the adverse effects of pandemic on children at present.

Ms. K. Sujatha Rao, former Union Health Secretary

Ques. If we reflect on the experiences of the two waves of COVID-19 so far, what do you think has been the impact on children, especially those from underprivileged families? Do you think in terms of state and civil society response, enough has been done to mitigate these effects, and if not what else needs to be done?

Ans: The impact of the two waves has been traumatic for all of us – children and adults. It has been worse for children in more ways than one. It wasn't just the health safety aspect but the fact that they are confined to a space. No socialization and no routine! Extremely important things like doing homework, going to school, learning new things every minute, playing games, making friends and interacting with others and in the process imbibing information, learning social skills, cultivating mannerisms, attitudes, knowledge, and so on are not feasible for most children and this has deeply impacted their minds. It has been a stressful situation for the children, who probably are perhaps unable to comprehend why it is so.

From the state and civil society, the response has been extremely uninspiring. While the privileged few were exposed to some uninspiring online education, the children of the underprivileged families have lost one and a half years with no education whatsoever. Media reports show that many have had to drop out to earn for their families and most have fallen back in their learning skills.

I do not believe that schools had to be totally shut down for so long. Schools could have functioned in a staggered manner. Even an hour's instruction and homework assignments given with classes held twice weekly would have been extremely beneficial for the children. So for example – primary classes of 1 and 3 could have been held in the morning session and classes 6 and 7 in the afternoons. For classes 2 and 3 and 8 and 9 on the next day in the afternoon and so on. Such staggering would have provided and ensured social distancing and

at the same time some learning. In schools fortunate to have playgrounds or in villages, classes could have been held outdoors. In other words, a little bit of planning and commitment was required that has been sorely lacking. I feel disappointed with the policy's absence in such a vital area.

Ques. *A large number of children have lost their parents. The National Commission For Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) reported 30,071 children in the Supreme Court. Most state governments have announced financial assistance and education schemes for these children. How would you advise the Government's approach for these children?*

Ans: I think this is a very important policy initiative that ought to be implemented with all sincerity. Given the relatively small number of children, the government can undertake age-appropriate planning. A micro plan, which means a detailed folder for each child based on an evaluation of his or her circumstances needs to be prepared. In the case of a baby or a very small child, the effort should be to give the child adoption as the first choice. There are a large number of childless couples in our country who are doing the rounds of our government offices for permission to adopt a child. If there is family support, the child must stay with the family and the Government provides financial support to help the child continue with education and meet other expenses, to reduce the burden on the caretakers. If orphaned, and no relatives willing to take care, the child should be sent to a boarding school and educated through the school years. A financial grant till s/he matures should also be provided for the child to help him/her build on his/her future after education.

If a child is older, try to, as said above, help the child integrate with his family/ boarding school or a foster home. Particular care will

need to be taken to ensure that the child will be taken care of and not abused or exploited. This is even more important in the case of girls. The policy then must provide the various options and a framework. Each child should then be identified into the appropriate slot, home, hostel, or orphanage. Orphanage should be the last option as institutionalized orphanages have not taken appropriate care of children. Care is indifferent and children do not find the emotional support that they need.

While one cannot generalize, yet, an analysis of outcomes of an SOS type of care provided to orphans and an institutionalized orphanage will show the difference. The concept is very interesting where a family situation was simulated with children of different ages (4, 7, 8, 10…) living together under the care of an elderly woman, providing the mother care in one house. 10 - 15 houses would be in the village. In other words, what I am trying to suggest is to ensure that the child's emotional needs are given as much importance as food, clothing, and education. Our institutional orphanages tend to be more concerned about rules, discipline, and procedures, with the children, often left to themselves. Often we also hear of their exploitation. Finally, while I do think we should involve civil society, we must take care to thoroughly screen them to ensure their genuineness and commitment.

Ques: *Full immunisation of children against deadly disease stands at a mere 62% according to the National Family Health Survey (2015-16). The COVID-19 pandemic has further compromised our children's immunisation programme. There have been several reports of children missing out on their scheduled doses. You have been Union Health Secretary yourself. What would you have done differently?*

Ans: Yes. It is disturbing to get such reports that the fall in routine immunization has been almost 30%. That was large because of the suddenness of the pandemic and our unpreparedness. Being novel it was difficult to be "prepared" in that sense. But with time, we should have quickly got our act together and organized the immunization sessions. The lockdown was another disruptor, where supply logistics got severely impacted. And then the fear among the parents to take the children to hospitals or facilities for immunization, as there was little information on the effect of COVID-19 on children. But then I do believe that there is enough capacity in the country to have managed the COVID-19 as well as carried out essential functions like universal immunization. I might have roped in medical students, NGOs, and civil society to help the ASHA and the anganwadi worker for tracing and testing, while the ANM could have attended to immunization. It is difficult to give a one size fits all answer – it would have needed an assessment of the local situation and community strengths to find the appropriate solution, as per the broad policy guidelines. In the medium term, it is essential to ensure a separate cadre of people to attend to immunization of children and other public health functions.

Ques: *Several studies have directed towards the fact that disruption in implementation of Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and Mid Day Meal (MDM) during COVID-19 has impacted eating patterns and nutrition of children and pregnant women. What policy measures do you recommend to bring these schemes back on track in the current situation, particularly in a country where malnutrition remains unacceptably high?*

Ans: In some places, 'take home' dry rations were introduced. I do feel that along with that option, community kitchens could have

been set up, food packets or nutritious food as advised could have been packaged and made accessible to the children. Every village has an ICDS center. Where dry rations are not preferred, the anganwadi center could have continued to function for the sole purpose of providing the nutrition supplements, instead of shutting them down. To avoid crowding, the rations could also have been given to the SHGs wherever strong and well organized, to cook in turns and provide the food to ten children in a given place. In other words, suspension of nutrition for children could easily have been avoided with better planning, as neither the number of people nor the staff required for children's nutrition and preventive activities for the COVID-19 management was overlapping. But then, such policies would have required strong decentralization and community engagement.

Unfortunately, communities were not made partners in our struggle with COVID-19 and that is why community-based solutions were not adopted. And as said, community-based solutions entail identifying the agency at each village level and being given the responsibility to discharge specific responsibilities such as assuring access to food. The communities themselves would have provided the solutions. Mothers are and can be a great strength. They could have been used. We need to correct that and bring the community back so that children are insulated and protected at all costs. It is important to remember that classical public health approaches to manage pandemics that are normally spread over a year or two stand on two pillars – decentralization and community engagement.

Ques: *Several experts have predicted a third wave and it is likely to affect children more than others. What are the 2 things we can learn from our success or failures to manage the third wave?*

Ans: There is no evidence that the COVID-19 infection is going to be more dangerous for children. I do not know how this conclusion has been arrived at. So the first thing is to get this fear out. And more so for small children, it is clear that the virus is not so harmful. But then this does not mean that we let down our guard. It does not mean that a child has a special immunity against the COVID-19. They are as vulnerable as adults. But children need to be protected, as they are not strong enough and COVID-19 can be more fatal, in the immediate and long term. Besides, children may even be asymptomatic and carry the infection to parents or grandparents in their homes. For all these reasons, teaching children and making them understand the importance of COVID-19 appropriate behaviour is important and that consists of using a mask at all times, particularly when they are going out, avoiding crowds, and avoiding high-risk areas such as markets, temples, weddings. It's a good idea to take children outdoors and let them play and ensure they are never kept for long in closed and worse, air conditioned rooms. Besides, healthy eating, exercises are important to improve body immunity and resilience. In other words, in normal times, children take care of themselves with their boundless energies. But in COVID-19 times, when they are not going to schools or going out, there is a need for parents to take special care of children's needs. The good news is that there is a likelihood of a vaccine for children being made available soon. I expect it by the end of the year. While that will certainly strengthen their protection against the COVID-19, yet, we will still need to be cautious and ensure children continue to adhere to COVID-19appropriate behaviour.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

03

Faizah Iqbal, 16 years

A Generation at Stake: Protecting India's Children from Impact of COVID-19

Save the Children

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

I. INTRODUCTION

The world is facing an unprecedented crisis in the form of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director General declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2020c), and on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic (WHO, 2020d). In India, the first case of COVID-19 was reported on January 30, 2020. India currently has the largest number of confirmed cases in Asia, and has the second-highest number of confirmed cases in the world after the United States of America. The national and state governments have implemented measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 including school closures, home isolation/quarantine and community lockdown, all of which have secondary impact on children and their households.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Save the Children launched a global research study to generate evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, and identify children's and their family's needs during these times. Overall, 46 countries, including India, participated in this research. India contributed a substantial

Save the Children is a child rights' NGO, which works in 18 states of the country. Beginning its journey in 2008 in India, and registered as 'Bal Raksha Bharat', it has changed the lives of more than 11 million (1.1 crore) children. Their pioneering programs address children's unique needs; giving them a healthy start, an opportunity to learn as well as protection from harm.

sample to the global study covering 1,598 parents and 989 children, aged between 11-17 years.

The sample from India comprised marginalised and vulnerable children and their families. The research sampled two distinct population groups:

1. Save the children programme participants:

Data including surveys of families and children was collected from the programme participants in 11 Save the Children intervention states and 2 union territories, whose contact details were available with the programme staff. These states were selected across regions, including east, west, north, south and north-east. States included Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Jammu & Kashmir, Odisha, Karnataka and Telangana. The total sample for this target group included 992 parents and 754 children aged between 11-17 years.

2. Migrants:

Samples from the target group of migrants were taken from Jharkhand. Respondents included parents and children who were migrating to or had already migrated back to their home state of Jharkhand due to COVID-19. Total sample for this target group included 606 parents and 235 children aged between 11-17 years.

A total of 1,598 parents and 989 children participated in the research study from different parts of the country. The results presented in this report focus on quantitative data collected from parents and children in the programme participants group and the migrants' group. Qualitative data, in the form of quotes from children, across the two target groups are also included in the findings.

III. KEY FINDINGS

Education:

a) Not returning to school: One out of ten children said that they would not be returning to school or do not know whether they would return to school once they reopen. This finding is consistent across both target groups.

b) No or inadequate learning: Eight out of ten parents from the programme participants group reported that children are learning little or nothing at all. A similar scenario was reported by the migrants group.

c) Not Using internet for learning: Three out of every four children in the programme participants group and the migrants' group were not using the internet for learning due to limited access.

d) Facing obstacles in learning: Four out of every five children in the programme participants group reported facing obstacles to learning. Among the migrants' group, three out of four children reported facing obstacles to learning.

e) No support in learning: Three out of every ten children in the programme participants group and the migrants' group reported that they had no support in their learning.

f) Increased burden of household chores on Girls: Children reported increased burden of household chores as an obstacle to learning. A girl is twice more likely to report an increase in the burden of household chores as compared to boys.

g) Access to learning material: Nearly two-thirds of children in the programme participants group had access to some form of learning material. Among those who had access to learning material, two-thirds had access to only one or two types of material.

Among the children from migrants' groups, 68% had access to some form of learning material, with the majority of them reported having access to only one or two types of material. While comparing the relatively poor households and households that are not relatively poor among the programme participants group, a child from a relatively poor household is twice more likely to not have access to any learning material as compared to a child from a household that is not relatively poor.

h) **No contact with teachers:** More than half of all children from the programme participants group reported having no contact from teachers at all since the closure of schools. A similar situation was reported by the children from the migrants' group. Variation was observed between children of relatively poor households and households that are not relatively poor from the programme participants group, wherein 58% of children from the relatively poor households did not have a check in from their teacher as compared to 44% of children in the households that are not relatively poor.

Livelihood and sustenance:

a) **Loss of job:** One-third (32%) respondents in the programme participants' group reported the loss of their job. One in five respondents also shared that besides them another adult member in their family also lost their job. Among migrants, 85% of them reported the loss of their job and 29% reported that another adult member in their family also lost their job.

b) **Loss of income:** In the programme participants group, 78% of households reported income loss since the onset of the pandemic A significant proportion of relatively poor households in programme participants group (84%) reported the loss of income as compared to households that are not relatively poor (70%). Among migrants, 91% of households reported the loss of income.

c) **Struggle to pay for food:** More than half the parents (56%) in the programme participants group reported that they are struggling to pay for food. While comparing the relatively poor households and households that are not relatively poor in this group, it emerged that 60% of the relatively poor households were struggling to pay for food as compared to 52% of households that are not relatively poor. In the migrants' group, 60% of households reported lack of money to pay for food.

d) **Inability to pay house rent:** Approximately one in five (18%) households in the programme participants group and one in four (26%) households in the migrants' group reported that they are struggling to pay house rent.

e) **Need for cash support:** One out of every two respondents in the programme participants groups cited the need for cash or cash vouchers. A little more than half (53%) of the relatively poor households as compared to 43% households that are not relatively poor in the programme participants group expressed the need for cash / cash vouchers. Seven out of every ten migrant households expressed the need for cash/cash vouchers.

f) **Received support from the government:** The findings showed that 43% of respondents in the programme participants group and 48% in the migrants' group reported receiving some kind of support from the government before the outbreak of the pandemic.

g) **Job support requested from the government:** Three out of ten respondents in the programme participants group

reported the need for job/employment support. Among migrants, 64% of respondents expressed the same need.

Protecting children from violence:

a) Violence at home: The findings showed that 11% of children in the programme participants group and 17% of children in the migrants' group reported violence in their homes during the pandemic.

b) Increase in negative feelings: Three out of every four children in the programme participants group reported an increase in negative feelings since the outbreak of the pandemic. Additionally, four out of five children in the migrants' group reported the same.

c) Improved relationship with children: Nearly half (45%) of the parents in the programme participants group reported that their relationship has improved with their children. Variation was observed among the relatively poor and the households that are not relatively poor as 39% of parents in the relatively poor households reported improvement in relationship as compared to 53% from households that are not relatively poor. Among migrants, 18% of parents reported improvement in relationship with their children.

d) No contact with friends: More than one-third of children in the programme participants group as well as in the migrants group reported that they are not in touch with their friends since the outbreak.

e) Low virtual contact with friends: One-third (35%) of children in the programme participants group reported being in touch with their friends virtually. Among relatively poor households, 30% of children reported having met their friends virtually while 41% of children from households that are not relatively poor reported the same. Among migrants, 20% of children reported

being in touch with their friends virtually.

f) Stress or violence in relationship: Three out of ten parents in the programme participants group reported stress or violence in household relationships. A significant proportion of respondents in urban areas (36%) reported stress or violence in household relationships as compared to rural areas (26%). One-third of respondents from relatively poor households reported stress or violence in relationships as compared to 27% in the households that are not relatively poor.

g) Increased involvement in household chores: More than half the children (54%) in the programme participants group reported an increase in involvement in household chores since the outbreak. More girls (58%) reported increased involvement in household chores as compared to boys (46%). Among migrants, 42% of children reported increased involvement in household chores.

Health and nutrition during pandemic

a) Problems in accessing healthcare services: One out of every three respondents from the programme participants group shared that they were facing barriers in accessing healthcare, medication or menstrual products. One out of every two migrants reported problems in accessing these services. A significant proportion of respondents from relatively poor households (35%) from the programme participants group reported facing barriers in accessing healthcare, medication or menstrual products as compared to respondents from households that are not relatively poor (31%). Remote healthcare services play an important role in the event of a lockdown or restrictions on movement. None of the respondents in either target group reported having access to remote healthcare services. One-third of the respondents in the programme participants

group reported that they were not able to access COVID-19 tests. Among migrants, 43% of respondents shared this concern.

b) Struggle in access to preventive supplies: More than two-fifth (44%) of the households in the programme participants group and almost half (47%) of the migrants' group reported not having access to masks. A significantly greater proportion of households in rural areas (47%) as compared to urban areas (39%) reported not having access to masks. About half of the respondents in the programme participants group and migrants reported not having access to sanitizer / soap. In the programme participants group, 7% of respondents also cited challenges in securing water delivery while 27% of the migrants reported so.

c) Lack of paying capacity for accessing healthcare: More than one-third of respondents (37%) in the programme participants group who lost their income due to COVID-19 reported that they experienced difficulties in paying for healthcare or medical supplies. Among migrants, more than half the respondents shared the same challenge.

d) Relatively poor diet: Three out of every five respondents from the programme participants group found it difficult to provide their families with meat dairy products, grains, fruits and vegetables during the pandemic. Among migrants, this scenario was prevalent for three out of four respondents.

e) Lack of nutrition: Loss of income due to the pandemic affected people's access to essential food items and food nutrition supplements. Six out of ten (59%) respondents from the programme participants group shared this concern. More respondents from relatively poor households (62%) reported facing difficulty in accessing food items and food nutrition supplements as compared to 55% among the households that were not relatively poor. Among migrants, 74% of respondents shared the same challenge.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Education:

a) Providing distance learning program to vulnerable children: It is imperative to

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provide effective, flexible and inclusive distance learning programmes for the most deprived and marginalised children including children from migrant families. It is important to provide support to parents to ensure continuity of education with the help of digital learning tools.

b) Providing support to teachers: The teacher and school administration should be provided with resources and support for the continuity of education of children through digital and other modern mediums of learning.

c) Psycho-social support: COVID-19 has led to loss of learning and caused stress among the relatively poor children who have limited access to digital learning or learning material. Thus, there is a need to provide psycho-social support to children and help them catch up with learning levels as well as ensure continuity of education even after schools reopen.

d) Community mobilization for return to school: Create an inclusive and gender sensitive 'back to school' campaign. It should include community mobilisation to promote the community's confidence in the safe reopening of schools and promote access (and return) to education for the most deprived and marginalised children. There is a need to specifically focus on the migrant families as their children are at a higher risk of not returning to school.

e) Conducting learning assessment on return to School: Provide every child with a learning assessment on their return to school to inform interventions including remedial classes for capacitating them to catch-up with any loss of learning. It is important to ensure enrolment of children from migrant families who have returned to their native places.

Livelihood and social protection support:

a) Ensure COVID-19 related assistance and support to vulnerable households and children: Ensure vulnerable households, including migrant families, in both rural and urban areas benefit from existing government social protection systems and receive other COVID-19 related assistance and support.

b) Take social protection measures for the worst affected: Ensure continuity of existing social protection programmes / schemes (including schemes announced during the pandemic) to the eligible families and children. Special efforts are required for the migrant families and their children to ensure their access to entitlements irrespective of native place or place of work.

c) Strengthen social accountability mechanisms: Place children at the centre of the response and recovery plans by strengthening social accountability mechanisms to support dialogue between children and decision-makers at all levels.

Protecting children from violence:

a) Ensure access to mental health and psycho-social support services: It is important that mental health and psycho-social support services are made available to children of all ages and their parents / caregivers, including those of migrant families as they are likely to be at greater risk of facing mental health issues.

b) Strengthen referral and reporting systems: Strengthen the community-level child protection system for children to report violence safely, including when schools are closed.

c) Invest in positive parenting: Uplift and invest in positive parenting including parenting without violence for children to behave appropriately through teaching, routines, understanding and support. It is important to train and sensitise the concerned stakeholders and service providers to promote parenting without violence.

d) Identify vulnerable children: t is important to strengthen community-based child protection mechanisms to identify vulnerable children who are either out of school / drop outs or on the verge of engaging in child labour.

e) Child protection services to migrant families: There is a need to make efforts to provide protection support and services to the children of migrant families.

f) Generate in-depth evidence on child protection issues during COVID-19: There is a need to generate in-depth evidence on implications of COVID-19 on child protection issues such as child labour, child trafficking, child marriage and other child protection concerns.

Health and nutrition during pandemic

a) Take measures to improve coverage of healthcare services: There is a need to improve equitable coverage of healthcare services by removing financial and non-financial barriers. It is important to prioritise efforts and resources to make services available free at the point of use for vulnerable children and families, including migrant families.

b) Ensure access to preventive supply: It is important to ensure that preventive items including masks, sanitizer / soap and water delivery are available. Specific focus is required to provide these to vulnerable children and families including migrant families.

c) Ensure access to safe and nutritious food: Ensuring food security by continuing existing social protection schemes is important (including those announced during the pandemic) so that the most deprived and marginalised (including migrants) can provide for themselves and for their children's healthy development.

V. CROSS THEMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Provide uninterrupted access to critical services for the most vulnerable children and their families: These include access to critical services such as healthcare, nutrition, food security, education, mental health and psycho-social support, protection against violence, social protection and child-sensitive cash transfers to the most vulnerable children, including children from migrant families.

2. Scale up investments on children: Considering that COVID-19 and its after-effects will continue to impact the lives of children in the near future, there is a need to increase the investments on children. Hence, it is important to ensure that health, nutrition, education and protection services are well-resourced and inclusive.

3. Strengthen the delivery system: There is a need to strengthen the mechanisms to ensure effective implementation of programmes for children during COVID-19. Ensuring the availability of a trained and skilled workforce is crucial to reach out to children. Strengthening the delivery of services to vulnerable children, including children from migrant families is even more important.

4. Build engagement among multi-stakeholders: A coordinated and synergised effort is required to have state, civil society organisations, private sector, academia, media, community, citizens and

children work together to address the violation of child rights during the COVID-19 pandemic and come up with innovative solutions to address this complex problem.

5. Generating evidence on children: There is a need to invest in building evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on children. Efforts in generating data on children in the context of COVID-19 should be directed at all the critical child rights issues including health, nutrition, education and child protection. There is a need to specifically focus efforts on collecting data on vulnerable children and families, including children from migrant families.

6. Listening to children: There is a need to listen to the voices of children including girls and children from migrant families. It is important to ensure that dialogue and interaction with children captures their experience and the impact of COVID-19. These experiences and interactions should be used to develop response plans.

Glimpses of Impact of COVID-19 on Lives of Children in Nizamuddin Basti

Vardhna Puri, Jyotsna Lall, Deepak Padhi

I. INTRODUCTION

The first case of COVID-19 had hit India in Kerala on January 30, 2020. As the pandemic situation got worse, schools and anganwadis were closed in Delhi on March 5, 2020, and on March 22, 2020, India went into a complete lockdown. Nizamuddin Basti came into the limelight on March 26, 2020, when the Tablighi Jamaat headquarters in Nizamuddin Basti was localized as the source of COVID-19-19. A death in Hyderabad was traced to the Tablighi Jamaat headquarters in Nizamuddin Basti. The area was then sealed till June 7, 2020, which meant that people were not allowed to move in and out of the Basti leading to tremendous hardships for the community. This sealing impacted the lives of everyone in the community. This paper looks at the impact on the lives of children in the Basti.

Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative (www.nizamuddinrenewal.org), under the aegis of the Aga Khan Development Network, has been working in Nizamuddin Basti since 2007. It is a people-public-private partnership that aims to use heritage conservation as a stepping-stone to improve the quality of life of the local community. Its public partners are the Delhi government, South Delhi Municipal Corporation, Archaeological Survey of India, and Central Public Works department, while Aga Khan Foundation and Aga Khan Trust for Culture are the private partners.

Since the declaration of the pandemic in March 2020, various interventions have been carried out under this initiative to support the community. The organization supported the Delhi government in carrying out awareness drives, household-level surveys as well as identification of symptomatic cases with the help of community health teams.

II. PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS

As the lockdown was declared, government agencies moved quickly to provide nutritional support in the form of cooked food and dry rations. In the initial phase, around 700-800 people were provided cooked meals every day. The dry ration was provided by the government to children enrolled in anganwadis. An announcement was made that dry rations will also be provided to children in all government schools in Delhi, including SDMC schools. AKTC also gave rations to vulnerable families. Throughout the initial as well as subsequent lockdowns, the team of SehatAapaas and Sahelis, who are volunteers of the Aga Khan Development Network for spreading awareness about health, education, and rights among community people, supported women with deliveries and postpartum care, which was rendered difficult due to the absence of crucial services.

Vardhna Puri, Consultant, Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, Aga Khan Development Network
Jyotsna Lall, Director Programmes, Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, Aga Khan Development Network
Deepak Padhi, Senior Program Officer, Monitoring and Evaluation; Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, Aga Khan Development Network

Various strategies were adopted to keep children engaged in educational activities. Online education was initiated within a few weeks of the lockdown. Only 20% of all enrolled children could participate in this. It was then decided to provide a physical educational kit comprising worksheets for children, which were collected by parents once a week from the school, and the prior worksheet was returned. For younger children enrolled in the anganwadis, the community teachers made home visits to interact with caregivers to provide them with play material and activities. Of the 1,800 children covered through primary and pre-primary interventions, about 1,000 children were engaged weekly, mostly through physical and offline work during the pandemic.

III. IMPACT ON LIVES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Through the field activities, regular interaction with the community, and focused group discussions with different stakeholders, we were able to understand the impact on the lives of children and families.

a. Changes to routine

With schools and anganwadis closed, several major activities in children's lives could not take place. Children were, by and large, left to their gadgets as academic learning in the first few months was non-existent. In the initial phases of the strict lockdown, children were unable to go out to play.

b. Loss of income

Almost everyone's income was impacted to a greater or lesser degree. The most affected were the rickshaw pullers, rag pickers, domestic help, and those working as daily wage labourers. Even those who worked in the organized sector had their incomes reduced even though they managed to retain their jobs. Reduced income and increased debt impacted the food supply and hence access to nutrition particularly meat, vegetables, and fruit. As a result of loss of income, families also withdrew the academic support from children.

c. Nutrition support in terms of mid-day meal

Closure of schools/anganwadis meant the loss of the mid-day meal for school children and supplementary nutrition for anganwadi children. For many children, this was the one assured meal that they received. Even though anganwadis began distributing dry rations, this was no substitute for a cooked meal in terms of nutritive value and satiation.

d. Access to education

Formal education has been severely compromised since March 2020. Education needs committed teachers, not digital devices. The pandemic made it impossible for children to access education – those parents who could afford to have some kind of access to online support which is a poor substitute for school or a tuition teacher to help. There is a marked difference in the impact of online education on children whose parents can tutor their children themselves, which depends on the class variable. In Nizamuddin, many parents felt, especially before the intervention started, that they could not help their children since they cannot read. Parents reported that they felt their children would face a loss of learning. Some felt that children can catch up with the losses, but a large segment felt it would have a long-term impact.

e. Access to health care

During the pandemic, the polyclinic functioned in a limited capacity. Coupled with the sealing of Nizamuddin Basti, medical interventions and the child health

activities of immunization, growth monitoring and supplementary nutrition came to a standstill from April to June 2020. Uncertainty about life had led to an increase in aggression and anxiety about the future. Cases of domestic violence did increase, which invariably has an impact on children.

f. Parental observations of children's behaviour

Many parents in the focused group discussion spoke about excessive television viewing as a result of this lockdown. As per some, children also became lethargic and were sleeping for a much longer duration. Some children were also reported to be angry and aggressive. Possible linkage to increased violence in families can be explored but due to the sensitive nature of the issue, women were not probed on this.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE

COVID-19 is a child rights crisis, not only in terms of the right to development, but also in terms of repercussions for the safety, protection, and participation of children, as reflected in issues that are continually emerging. These rights of children do not exist in silos and constantly intersect with each other. Lack of support systems for adequate development needs of nutrition and education can easily make them vulnerable to early marriage, child labour, and trafficking. And these threats have gone up by all accounts.

In the case of Nizamuddin Basti, shortage especially in terms of macronutrients was not observed. Yet, the consumption of meat, fruits, and vegetables went down, which may have an impact on the overall health of children. Provisioning of more fruits, adding vegetables to cooked mid-day meals, or even peanuts and boiled eggs can be considered.

Online learning is difficult for children as interaction with teachers; hands-on activities and engagement with the teacher are important factors for learning. The means for online learning also do not exist, especially among families with limited resources. Despite being an urban center, only 20% of children could access online learning. Recouping educational losses through additional support, especially for young children, is very crucial and requires swift action. Renewed attempts to make learning engaging will be an important step, especially in government schools. The existing educational practices barely hold the interest of children. Vulnerable children require greater support even in 'normal times. The pandemic has pushed more children to the vulnerable category and hence, greater investment is required to reduce/remove vulnerabilities. Many children have dropped out of school during this time. These children need to be tracked and brought back into the fold of education otherwise they would be at a greater risk. Communities can be made aware and can be involved in the process of tracking. Families that have gone back to their villages will need to be tracked and supported there.

Emotional support from people who engage with children regularly is also needed. Anganwadi workers and school teachers can be oriented towards the emotional needs of children. Within the purview of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, community health workers are being trained to look at mental wellbeing and referral to mental health specialists if needed. Success has been achieved in programs where community members are trained on a range of issues and can support their communities in their time of need. In NizamuddinBasti, The ingenuity of parents and their concern for their children's education has been remarkable. The stereotypical image of parents from resource-constrained

backgrounds is of disinterest in their children's education. Or if not disinterest, it is not being the priority. Throughout the pandemic, a large proportion of parents were concerned about education. The ones who could afford to buy data packs and even devices for children. The others showed up regularly to collect and deposit the educational package.

Engagement of the community has shown improved educational and health outcomes, as evidenced through our work in Nizamuddin Basti. The quality-of-life survey charting social development indicators from 2008 to 2018 had shown a strong impact of a community-based approach. In Nizamuddin Basti, this was possible as there is a long-term connection between the community and organization

workers who understand the issues of the community members well. ASHA and USHA workers, under the National Health Mission, can also be oriented towards understanding the mental health of women and children and providing support if they are trained as lay counselors.

This network of community health workers and teachers helped us cushion the impact of the pandemic. The rights of the children are nested within the community and are not achievable without their participation. If children need to recoup from the losses that they have suffered, it is not going to be automatic, development agencies – both government and non-government–will need to plan and invest time, resources, and creativity to make it happen.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Social and Emotional Development of Adolescent Children and Way out

Vriti Bajaj, Vineet Bhalla

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

I. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children was observed firsthand by one of the authors of this paper through her work with the venture Heart To Art, an art and conversation platform that empowers children and young adults to express themselves. During the national lockdown period, she was contacted by a host of parents, mostly of young children, inquiring about sessions on career counseling and life skills development. This was revelatory of the trend that parents are increasingly looking online for extra-curricular and life skill-related workshops or courses for their children to help them spend all their spare time productively while being indoors.

Eventually, the co-author worked with four children (gender profile: 3 males, 1 female) in the age range of 2.5 – 7 years in multiple, periodic, intensive one-on-one sessions. As part of the same activity, she regularly interacted and discussed the progress of children with their parents.

Additionally, throughout the post-pandemic period of 2020, the co-author worked with an assortment of 30+ adolescents or children. These children were Interns at

Vriti Bajaj, Founder of the venture 'Heart to Art by Vriti Bajaj' and MPhil scholar, Delhi School of Social Work, University of Delhi.
Vineet Bhalla, Lawyer and writer.

Heart To Art (mostly female, hailing from upper-middle-class backgrounds); Expression ambassadors of Heart To Art, with whom she has constantly engaged throughout her career in differing capacities (these children are a mix of both genders, hail from low-income backgrounds, and are enrolled in the low end private or government schools); and those belonging to the Youth Volunteer division of a non-profit organization that she is associated with, and with whom she remained engaged during the pandemic to lend them emotional support.

With these adolescent children, the co-author observed and noted their interest in emotional expression with the usage of creative media to express them. Social emotional learning experiences shape how adolescents build their identities, establish behaviours, gain social knowledge and make sense of their relationships, and shape their values and beliefs (Cherewick, Megan et.al, 2021). The adolescent children participated in group discussions and conversations with the co-author where they identified subjects that they felt were neglected and needed support with emotion management, communication, conflict resolution due to isolation, and child rights. Based on this experience, modules, and awareness campaigns on those topics were created by the co-author for her venture.

The learnings and challenges described hereunder are derived from the co-author's work and interaction with the above stakeholders.

The authors' takeaways are broadly themed around the differences in the lives of these children in the post-pandemic period in contrast to the pre-pandemic normal, and shall be categorized into the following four sets:

1. Processing emotions and dealing with heightened emotional awareness.

2. Dealing with loneliness, and the value of personal relationships.

3. Impact of increased screen time.

4. Realizing the importance of physical exercise.

II. EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

It was observed that the children became not just increasingly aware of their own emotions, but also of those in their family. In this section, we will deal with questions of how the children processed these emotions, and what their dominant emotions were during this period.

Among the youngest children, sadness was reported as the dominant emotion. This sadness stemmed initially from missing the company of friends, but later also from missing their parents. This is because the parents were physically around the children all the time, but they were occupied with work-related calls for much of the day. Parents were not mentally present all the time. Though children understood their parents' need to work, but their increased solitude also made them aware of the inner voice in their minds. In the absence of parents' company or attention for the whole day, they could not understand how to deal with this solitude. This sadness sometimes manifested in the form of anger or conflict with parents or with siblings. Those children without any siblings reported craving the company of their cousins, friends, and other peers of their age. This comes from children's desire for socialization and feeling loved (Lee, Jungup and Choi, 2018). The parents of these children understood and appreciated their children's need for socialization, but their hands were tied due to the lockdown and COVID-19 risk aversion. They also recognized their children's need for emotional expression, which is why they contacted the co-author (counselor) for working with their children.

However, the co-author noticed in her interactions with the parents that none of them was willing to focus or invest in it as much as on their career and academic growth. This is perhaps, because of the absence of any focus on the subject of emotional expression in mainstream conversations in elementary education (Senad, Ramesh, 2017).

Among the adolescent children, too, a realization of the importance of healthy expression and management of emotions was noticed. These children started appreciating social relations, which they may have taken for granted earlier.

However, some of them reported an inability or an apprehension about articulating these matters with their friends or family members in larger groups, and probably even lacked the vocabulary to drive a discussion around this topic. At the same time, they voiced a desire to initiate and participate in such discussions and to spread awareness about hope, positivity, and the expression of emotions among their peers.

III. REALIZING THE VALUE OF RELATIONSHIPS

A major takeaway was that children realized the importance of personal relationships and those they had hitherto, to some extent. In this section, we will deal with questions of how children dealt with loneliness during the pandemic, how they connected with their family members and friends, and what changes came into their relationships during the pandemic.

Among the youngest children, it was observed that as a natural consequence of being bound inside their homes, they started spending more time with their parents and grandparents, and valued the time spent with them. As a consequence of this increased

time together, they articulated that their parents were their best friends, as opposed to the pre-pandemic period when that status was accorded to friends. In the initial few weeks of the lockdown, when their parents' workload was relatively low, they also got to participate in leisure and indoor games with their parents such as cooking, playing with Lego, playing online games (Ludo was a popular favourite among the children) and simple ball games, and doing yoga exercises together. They were also encouraged by their parents to engage in physical exercise activities, which will be delved into in a later section.

As discussed earlier, as a result of the enhanced relationship with their parents, the children also reported feeling despondent and upset when their parents would be busy working online and therefore could not spend leisure time with them, despite being at home.

The parents of these children, too, noticed that their children were feeling isolated and made efforts into locating resources and opportunities online for socio-emotional skill-building in their children. They admitted that earlier in their parenting journeys they had never given too much thought to their children's need for expressing their emotions and understanding themselves in the context of the same.

Among the adolescent children, it was reported that due to the increased solitude, the children spent more time introspecting on themselves and their emotions. They came to value the feelings of happiness and hope more, as well as wished to share and discuss these with their friends and family members. Some of them began, either on their own accord or on the encouragement of family members, to spend more time on their hobbies as a way of spending their time productively, and as a means to understand,

and work on, themselves. Some also developed an interest in understanding their family roots. In pursuit of the same, they were encouraged to inquire about their older family members and create a family tree.

IV. INCREASED SCREEN TIME

A significant change that has impacted adolescents, while being indoors, has been the shift of school education as well as communication with friends and family members over to the virtual medium. With school as well as meetings with friends and family members being conducted online via an electronic gadget, this section will engage with questions about how this has impacted children, and how they feel about spending so much time in front of a screen every day.

Among the younger children, it was reported that they were initially overwhelmed by the sudden shift to screens and technology; some even stated that they were unable to conceptually distinguish between live and recorded videos.

After overcoming these natural teething issues, they went on to enjoy the increased use of these gadgets, perhaps because it gave them a sense of normality and community, and control. They began using their gadgets not only for learning and communication but also for recreation (in the form of playing games, reading, or watching videos).

However, after a few months, they developed what can be crudely described as 'screen fatigue.' They mentioned that they felt like they were stuck in a loop around their screens and gadgets, and expressed the desire to spend some time away from the screen and physically meet their school friends instead. In the span of a few months only, the routine around screens became too monotonous and overwhelming, as they

craved the physical company of the people they had been hitherto interacting with via screen.

Among their parents, too, 'screen fatigue' was common, both in terms of something they experienced, as well as something that they noticed their children were beginning to suffer from. They became worried about what would be optimum screen time for their children; this is a valid concern due to the deleterious effect excessive screen time has on children's attention span and mood (Kozeis, N., 2009). Consequently, the parents began to put more thought into being selective about which online classes/courses/activities to enrol their children in, and how to engage them offline productively.

Among the adolescent children, the trajectory observed was similar to the one for the younger children. They, too, initially enjoyed the freedom to use their gadgets in an unencumbered manner, without any restrictions. However, as they and their peers began to increasingly spend time and communicate with each other online, they were confronted with the menace of cyber-bullying, either experiencing it or witnessing it happening in their peer chat groups. It was also during the lockdown period that the unseemly and disturbing 'Bois Locker Room' Instagram scandal came to light (NDTV, 2020). As a result, they felt the need for guidance and conversations around the subject of cyber safety for themselves and others.

As they, too, began to feel screen fatigue after a few months, they reported a strange phenomenon of being unable to disconnect from their online worlds. Some of them also reported feeling dissonant about the distinction between the real and virtual worlds. This is hardly surprising, for spending several hours online every day is found to harm adolescents' sense of reality

(Subrahmanyam, Kaveri et. al., 2001). Consequently, these children too, eventually, began craving the actual company of their friends, and community spaces such as schools and parks.

V. IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE

One of the most conspicuous changes in the lives of the children was a conscious, deliberate switch to engaging in physical exercise. This section will deal with questions of what caused it (that is, was it self-motivated or driven by parents), and do the children view it as an enjoyable activity or a chore.

Among the younger children, the dominant sentiment was one of sadness due to not being able to go out to play in the neighbourhood park with their friends, and revel in natural greenery. To that extent, the switch to physical exercise was parent-driven, and not seen as a substitute for their earlier playing time by the children.

The parents of these children inculcated physical exercise into their daily routine because they were concerned by how sedentary their lifestyle had become in the post-pandemic world. They worried about their children's health and both mental and physical well-being due to not being able to go to the park or cycle or play with their friends. Hence, they got their children to engage in regular physical exercise to build up physical fitness and motor skills.

Among the adolescent children, some were enrolled by their parents into online fitness programs, which they initially found enjoyable and were self-motivated to participate in. However, in the long run, they developed fatigue and the sense of being physically trapped in their homes, a sense known in common parlance as 'cabin fever' (Daniel Dresden, 2020). These children,

too, expressed a craving to go back to their earlier physical exercise regimes of playing at a park or cycling, since these were mediums for them to socialize with their peers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic created a massive upheaval in the lives of children. Being restricted indoors to their homes for months on end, not being able to go to school for physical classes or meet friends and family members, and carrying out all their education, communication, and recreation online through gadgets: all this impacted children's moods and behaviours patterns in various ways, which have been outlined above.

There is a simplistic tendency to paint these changes in black and white and discuss them from the crude dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad'. We have desisted from going down that path here. With predictions of the increased likelihood of similar, if not worse, pandemics, to strike the world shortly, these changes are likely to stay here (Jim Robbins, 2021). It is, then, incumbent to ensure that children can assimilate and transition to these changes as smoothly as possible, keeping their well-being in mind.

In light of the same, it is suggested, first and foremost, that either the State, or schools themselves, consider the issues of cyber safety and cyber bullying, and frame guidelines and advisories for students, especially those in their teenage years, to follow. School authorities must also recognize the very real issues of emotional expression, screen fatigue, and loneliness, and devise a student-friendly curriculum for the current scenario to address these.

Greater salience must also be given to the role of art and other experimental interventions in helping children across ages

and socio-economic backgrounds express themselves in a creative, non-intrusive manner, especially in these trying times (Thomas Bruce, 2007).

VII. LIMITATIONS

Since the findings of this paper are based on extensive, one-on-one interactive sessions with a small group of children, they are, to that extent, limited by the small sample size, as well as their specific geographic location and class identity.

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Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Lives of Children in Tribal Rural Communities of Rajasthan

Jahnavi Mukundan, Preeti Shaktawat, Alka Sharma, Yashaswi Dwivedi

I. INTRODUCTION

The narratives uncovered in the course of this paper attempt to convey the hardships faced by tribal rural communities with a focus on children in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite several efforts of the government to make facilities more accessible to remote geographies, the urban-rural divide still persists in India. In the larger narrative, a perspective that is neglected from the mainstream is how the pandemic has affected the lives of children in tribal rural areas, especially those hailing from marginalised groups. Most of the children in rural areas are at a socioeconomic disadvantage and face challenges in access to the infrastructure of formal education and modern healthcare. The intersectionality of caste places itself even in this context. In some instances, these children do not know what next day entails if they do not get their mid-day meal. Adolescent girls in such rural areas face great difficulties in accessing sanitary pads (as distribution from schools is on the hold).

Children and young adults with inhibited access to the internet could not participate in the revolutionizing of education through technology. Most of them were forced to stay within their settlements with their parents and were not allowed to play traditional games in groups.

II. THE CONTEXT

This study presents narratives of children and adolescents, structured across three phases; Phase I from March-September 2020, Phase II from October-December 2020, and Phase III about the current situation and onward journey. Empirical material for the study comes from the Mhada and Malaria villages of Badgaon block and two hamlets of Mohammad Falasia village of Jhadol block, located in Udaipur district, Rajasthan. These rural areas have large tribal populations, namely Bhils and Gametis, who have traditionally been given "low status" in the social hierarchy.

Women primarily engage in farming and the activities of homemaking, while men engage in occupations of labour (daily-wage) and also spend long hours at the farms. A majority of these households do not even have toilets. The nearest school is at a minimum distance of 3 to 5 km, which means a school-going child from the age of 6 has to walk a minimum of 30 minutes in harsh terrain and difficult weather conditions to access formal education – which at a policy level is supposed to be free and "easily accessible". In the case of those appearing for the matriculation and post-matriculation examinations, there is also an exam fee, which is a substantial sum for some of these households.

Jahnavi Mukundan - Fellow, SBI Youth for India (SBI Foundation)
Preeti Shakawat - Manager, Nutrition (Seva Mandir)
Dr Alka Sharma - Deputy Project Manager, Khushi Program (Seva Mandir)
Yashaswi Dwivedi - Program Incharge, Education Program (Seva Mandir)

A Centrally Sponsored Scheme 'National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education' (NP-NSPE) also called the Mid-Day Meal Scheme was introduced in August 1995 where children, approximately till the age of 14 or grade 8, are provided with one meal a day, which saves the cost of expenditure on food for the households. It is important to highlight this as during the pandemic, schools were shut and household expenditures increased as there were extra mouths to feed at home.

III. NARRATIVES

We visit the narratives of Shyam, Sushila, and Sanjana, Vimala, and Raj Kumar Das. Each of them has a distinctive outlook from their subjective contexts to highlight how the pandemic affected their communities.

Shyam, a 13-year-old shy boy from Mhada, Badgaon, is the younger of the two siblings. Sushila, 15, who resides at Mhadaand is one of the three children. She is preceded and succeeded by her sisters. Sanjana, 17, who resides in Mohammed Falasia, has an older brother and a younger brother and sister. She is the primary caregiver for her siblings.

Their experiences of pandemic highlighted that absence of traditional games due to social distancing norms resulted in long idle hours. These children were also closely exposed to the violence in their homes during the pandemic. However, children would gather close to the village, away from their home to spend a few moments of togetherness.

A shared aspect among three of our primary respondents is that they hail from the Bhil community, who were once nomadic and over the years have settled in pockets of villages across Rajasthan. They are still considered "lower castes" in the caste hierarchy of Indian Hindu caste system. If one visits these villages, it is evident that they are located at the farthest end of the

village, already putting them at a disadvantage.

Phase I – Journey from March to September 2020

In the initial phases of the lockdown, the school-going children, Shyam, Sushila and Sanjana shared that their schools were shut down and as a repercussion, they had to stay home. Notably, these children, in certain contexts do face discrimination in terms of socially amalgamating with their peers as the norms of their communities are different. When asked about their experiences during the pandemic, each had a different response.

Shyam, a student at the nearest government school, said: *"Schools shut before the lockdown and we got to know of Corona before the adults at home did. My mother only understood that schools were shut when she noticed all other children were at home."*

His mother added: *"I have two children-- a son and a daughter. I had to send my daughter to my mother's house because food was not affordable. We do not own farmland and hence, there is no fixed income. Odd jobs would fetch some money, but the lockdown halted that. All our savings were in the bank, but we could not access it as there was no transport available. No money meant we had to be at the mercy of whatever we received. It was a situation where we had to resort to begging, which was humiliating."*

Conversations with Sushila revealed that the hardships faced by adolescent girls were distinct. **Sushila** shared: *"Once the lockdown started, I was not allowed to visit my friends. My father has a phone, so I was able to talk to a few. Till the 'recharge' lasted on my father's phone, I was able to watch some videos, but nothing after. We didn't have exams this year and I was able to help my mother at home! The biggest help I*

received was in the form of a dry ration from a teacher. The school distributed some dry rations later."

Sanjana, slightly older than her peers, said, *"I don't have friends here; my parents don't let me socialize. I have five siblings and I am the oldest. We did not face any struggles for the daily commodities as there is always an exchange of commodities for labour we provide."*

In further conversation, when she was asked for her practices of menstrual hygiene, she said:

"Currently, I am using the sanitary pads that were given to me by the school. Once these are exhausted, I do not know what follows since pads are very expensive. No one else in my family uses pads as no one else goes to school."

Sanjana also indicated that domestic tensions often triggered violence. *"My mother and father both throw the nearest object they can find at each other. I try to stop my father, but it does not just end at that."*

In addition to these anecdotes of hardships, Vimala shared the following experience:
"For three months, we could not go anywhere. I remember there were four days without cooking oil. I tried to go to the nearest market, incognito, but was unluckily caught by the police and was reprimanded violently. I then resorted to cooking rotis with pastes of whatever vegetable was available."

"As a homemaker, work increased tremendously. I did have help from my child, but I cannot forget that my child had to forgo his daily life and helped me around the house. It did make him irritable. My daughter bore the brunt of everyone being at home. She helped with all the housework, including bringing firewood and gathering

fodder for the domesticated animals. She missed out on her education at the time as we did not have anything for her to read or write! At the end of the third month, it became easier to go to the shop, the shopkeeper would supply goods from afar."

"Slowly, we became less scared and visited our neighbours."

When contacted, a school teacher shared: *"We anticipate high rates of dropouts and are sparing no effort to avoid that. In this village, 'online classes' have not been possible as most people do not have a smartphone. Schools might reopen soon, however, I do not know how we will cover a year's worth of education. In the period of the nationwide lockdown, we received dry ration that was distributed twice among the school-going children."*

Phase II – Journey from October to December 2020

Our conversations reveal that as things opened up, it was easier to access facilities of healthcare and also resume activities for livelihood, especially for men. Vimala shared two further anecdotes. The first pertains to access to healthcare and the second pertains to money lending.

"In October, I could finally take my child to a doctor to the nearest government facility for the missed routine visits. The doctor refused to touch my child, owing to the condition we were in. I then took my child to the traditional healer in the village. Frightened, we went to a nearby temple where the priest prayed for us and said 'coronavirus will not enter this village and your child is safe'".

The doctor not wanting to touch her child can imply casteism that exists in the very fabric of everyday life in India and the individuals at the receiving end of it have to pay the price, more often than not.

As writers of this paper are individuals who have participated and observed incidences closely at the grassroots, change has also been observed concerning the free movement of these "lower castes"

Vimala also narrated, *"As I had to carry my child for over 10 km, I carried enough water, so that I don't have to drink water anywhere else."*

Owing to the loss of livelihood and lack of amenities, Vimala's family had to resort to borrowing money. *"We gave Rs 5 for every 100 that we took [implying an exorbitant 5% monthly interest rate]. The borrowing stopped in November when a bank employee, who visited our village fortnightly, helped us withdraw the little money we had."*

Phase III - Current situation and onward journey

Currently, things are opening up. The opening of schools has resulted in positive change for the children who have missed out on an entire academic year. The teacher anticipates dropouts, especially among girl children.

The intersectionality of caste and access to facilities is once more highlighted in this instance mentioned below. He mentioned that online classes could not be organized for village children as most people do not have smartphones. During the period of the lockdown, the ration was distributed to students but it was not enough. Parents had to rely on superstitious practices in the absence of a doctor. The issues of physical and financial access continue to be a barrier in accessing services.

IV. CONCLUSION

These myriad perspectives highlight the lives of children and how they have been affected. The macro view of access to systems is highlighted through the financial

burden and in a more micro view the daily struggles faced, especially in the case of Shyam, whose mother had to send her child away because she could not afford to feed her.

Vimala's story highlights how traditional healing is seen as an alternative to modern medicine, owing to its accessible and affordable nature. In her narrative, she talks about her "condition" during a routine visit, which implies that the fear of contracting COVID-19 was very real.

The issue of adolescent girls concerning their accessibility to products of menstrual hygiene has been highlighted in the narrative of Sanjana, which directly correlates to the issue of girls dropping out of higher education.

From the perspective of a teacher, it can easily be said that children have lost a year in their academic lives and also, their space for daily interaction. The lockdown has hampered children's education, especially those appearing for their matriculation and exams this year. A noteworthy question to ask ourselves is "How one will cover a year's worth of education or if students will be promoted to the next grade directly. If the foundation is not set right, there is no value for this education."

It is also important to mention that the role of caste was visible during the interaction with the respondents. As they are largely homogenous communities, they did not face discrimination among their people, however, in the instance of a child not being touched by a doctor, or in the instances of the loss of occupation or the inability to meet daily needs. These were phenomena common to even the urban poor or rural India in general, however, the role of caste and how it correlates with access to facilities cannot be ignored.

The available support systems to residents in rural areas are primarily from their

community. However, other forms of institutional support are available in the form of government support, especially from local government. In recent times, organizations in the development sector have also come forward as one of the stakeholders. Regarding access to infrastructure, such as government healthcare centres, schools, roadways, public transport, etc, it is important to take note that even despite the presence of private and government players, access is tenuous and subject to affordability and livelihood.

However, it is noteworthy that in dire times, these communities come together to support one another. In conversation with the given respondents, it was found that incidents of domestic violence did see an increase, however, support from neighbours and friends within the community was also present.

Learning during the Pandemic: Experiences of Children from Low Income Communities in Hyderabad

Vignesh Krishnan, Pratik Bhalerao

I. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education is yet to be fully understood. The recent data indicate that the pandemic has the potential to increase the number of children living in monetary-poor households in developing countries to 725 million, up by 142 million (UNICEF, 2020). What makes it even worse is that two in three of these children will be from Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

This paper aims to distil lessons learned from a study commissioned by Teach For India (TFI), in the wake of the lockdowns necessitated by the pandemic. The goal of this study was to understand the experience of children from low-income communities when learning at home, along with their parents.

When the pandemic hit, TFI designed an extensive virtual learning programme "to facilitate instruction for more than 32,000 children" (Rai, 2020). During the initial months of the pandemic, TFI began reaching out to children and parents, tracking their wellbeing, and undertaking relief campaigns for the distribution of ration, before migrating to the virtual learning mode. It was during this period that we sought to study the experience of blended learning among children in urban low-income communities in Hyderabad.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was largely qualitative and employed a three-step methodology. This included surveys, semi-structured interviews, and virtual classroom observations. Of the approximately 900 secondary school children under TFI intervention in Hyderabad, about 150 children from 5 schools were chosen for the study, along with 28 parents and 14 Teach For India educators.

This methodological choice complements the rationale of the study, to give voice to children and parents, a hitherto neglected group. For instance, while Aristovnik et al (2020) and McAleavy et al (2020) rightly focus on the practical problems being faced by children from low-income countries and communities such as added anxiety, internet problems, lack of support, and widening of the learning gap among them - their study, like many others, provides a macro-level global view, with some of the nuances of the lived experiences of children being lost in the process.

Findings from the ASER 2020 report speak of the need to assess 'what works and how in the new learning format'. Interestingly, it speaks of a model of 'Hybrid Learning' that could draw from children's experience of learning from home, while combining the

Vignesh Krishnan, City Director, Teach for India, Hyderabad.
Pratik Bhalerao - Research Intern, Teach for India, Hyderabad.

more traditional and the newer ways of teaching-learning. It is exactly at this juncture that one sees the immense possibilities for the Blended Learning programme at TFI, as well as the larger educational system.

Children from low-income communities have traditionally faced a different set of challenges. Issues such as lack of devices, unstable electricity, highly-priced mobile internet packages compounded by the health and economic insecurity owing to COVID-19 do not even begin to capture the plight faced by most children in the public education system in the country, along with their families. A recent report by Azim Premji University also indicates the gap in access to technology. In cases where parents take a phone to work, children are left with no means of accessing online classes. Likewise, 70% of parents firmly believed that online learning did not meet the requirements of their children (APU, 2020). A few other challenges faced by children include the gendered nature of learning and the requirement of a conducive environment at home for learning.

Thus, in the Indian context, literature on blended learning during the pandemic has, by and large, failed to focus on student perspectives (cf. Khanapurkar et al, 2020).

III. CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILDREN

A key trend that emerged through the study was the availability of and access to smart devices. More than half of the children that we spoke to shared devices with their family members. Even in cases where children self-reported unrestricted access to a device. They were sharing their device for some part of the day. In the current times when learning is mediated through a device, unrestricted access becomes particularly important. It may, therefore, be one of the

reasons for children preferring school over online mode of learning. As one student said:

"In school, we can spend the whole day there. But on the phone, we cannot spend so much time as it may cause health issues. Interaction with classmates or friends over the phone is difficult due to network problems… Sometimes when my sister and I use the phone, the internet slows down, and if we don't attend online class one day, the next day's class becomes hard for us."

This specific example points to the cumulative nature of learning. Falling back on one day of learning leads to added work for the next day. While device sharing was not a problem for some children, almost 4 in 5 children experienced network problems. This in turn hampered their ability to follow the class seamlessly, and in at least 4 cases, children were unable to attend classes due to network issues.

Another significant structural issue for children was the physical discomfort they faced when attending online classes. Approximately, 27% of children reported eye problems, 14% spoke of headaches, 7% back pain, 4% neck pain/ ear problems as critical issues that prevented them from taking full advantage of learning in the online mode. Many children experienced multiple issues. For instance, children who experienced headaches also complained of problems with the eyes and the neck. A class 9 student explains it better:

"I have headaches every day. In school, we used to have open-air and study in the classroom, in online classes we had to sit in front of the phone and I got eye pain also. Sometimes I get very bored and so I do not complete my homework. I would like to go to school again so that I can attend my classes without any health issues."

The striking fact here is that the student ties her preference for school to the discomfort being faced by her due to the nature of online classes. More interestingly, boredom in homework completion is also a common theme in the study. At least 9 children stated that they experienced boredom while doing homework, and 4 said that they did not complete homework regularly. Many others spoke of their home environment not being conducive enough for their overall learning. These trends point to the importance of a conducive physical environment, particularly when children are learning online. Our observations also indicate that more than 1/4th of children were sitting on the floor or a mattress while tables and chairs are the norm for children in a privileged house-hold. Children and parents alike drew attention to the spatial constraints of their homes, which compounded all structural problems associated with device use and impacted their learning directly.

Similarly, another structural challenge has been the gendered nature of learning. Through our study, we observed that girls were disproportionately impacted by housework, and this hampered the time they spent on learning. At least five such children reported having missed classes because of the amount of housework they had to undertake. Likewise, for over 40% of girls, housework contributed to an increased workload in the last several months, while the figure for boys was less than 8%.

The study highlighted two other important comparison factors- the difference between siblings and parental perception of gender. Through our conversation with three pairs of siblings, a clear gender bias in housework appeared in all accounts. For instance:

Saiema (Grade 8, Name Changed): *"I have a lot of work at home. I have to sweep, wash utensils, help my mother and be by her side. So sometimes if the homework is more, then my mother has to do the work alone. So helping her, completing homework and attending classes also - it becomes a lot, my work increases."*

We also noticed parental accounts reflect this bias:

"Yes it's a good thing - she's a girl after all; even if she becomes a doctor ultimately she has to go to the kitchen, so in that way, I think it's good that she is doing housework"- Ameena (Name Changed, Parent)

In both parent and student accounts, a strikingly similar association of girls with housework emerges centrally, which seem to largely stem from a deeply patriarchal understanding of women's roles. To conclude, parental perceptions of children, particularly girl children and their understanding of the online learning mode, dictates the learning environment at home.

IV. OPPORTUNITIES IN CURRENT TIMES

While a majority of the students overwhelmingly preferred the physical classrooms for learning, a few children who were able to access their virtual classes, pointed out that the online medium has made it easier to clear doubts resulting in increased class participation and better understanding. One student stated:

"Bhaiya, when we can't see each other's face in an online class, it increases confidence to ask questions through messages. So I don't feel shy and ask the question rightly without being afraid of any circumstances and reactions. I can clear my doubts."

The new tech-centric learning format has also enabled him and his friends to create an academic peer support system as they regularly hold personal zoom meetings to clear doubts. This picture might seem

contradictory considering that the majority of children (over 9 in 10) prefer school over online classes. However, for one-quarter of these children, school is preferred simply because their peers would not have access to a device. For others still, network problems as mentioned above and the lack of a conducive environment were factors. Finally, the lack of peer learning and interaction, along with challenges relating to teacher support was also why children preferred school.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of blended learning vis-a-vis fully in-person classes is leveraging the power of technology to make the content more interactive (Delialioglu and Yildirim, 2007).

In many cases, teachers were able to leverage technology to come up with engaging and creative asynchronous pieces for the children. Here the teachers explicitly acknowledged the use of asynchronous learning as opposed to simply homework. One of the educators we interviewed said, "*We try to focus our async packets on creativity and colours to keep the children interested.*" These activities were sent in the form of interactive exercises for children. Children were constantly encouraged to score more points and the teachers also participated in an attempt to encourage them.

Another critical area is the role of parents in learning. Staying at home has also entailed greater parental involvement in the children's learning. Suresh's (name changed) mother's investment in facilitating his studies have been pivotal to his learning during the lockdown. This was also clearly highlighted during the study. From sharing her device to regularly checking in and keeping track of his studies, his mother spoke about her increased knowledge of his classes and subjects. Agreeing with her, Suresh was also quick to highlight that he

shares more details about his studies with her now.

During a time of such uncertainty, adapting to online learning has brought with it many challenges- some more structural than others- at the same time however, there are opportunities to be realized. Children who have unrestricted access to a device have found more room for tech exploration and learning outside of the virtual classroom. Where device access has been restricted, children have often struggled to attend classes and this has impacted their overall learning.

However, this is only part of the story. As discussed earlier, the importance of a conducive physical environment cannot be understated. Likewise, even with unrestricted access to a device, children have expressed boredom and loneliness due to the isolating nature of learning from home. For this reason, encouragement by parents and teacher support needs to reinforce tech access. Almost three-quarters of children believe support from teachers is very important to their learning. Similarly, almost 3 in 10 children have stated that parental investment and support have been an important or very important factor in their experience of online learning.

While tech-based learning is not the most conducive format of learning for the majority of the children and cannot replicate learning in physical classrooms, it can provide several opportunities, if used appropriately, it can become a key enabler for children and educators alike. We have outlined key recommendations below that will serve as an important guideline for institutions working with children in the current times.

V. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has highlighted the need to constantly listen to children and parents.

Most interventions in education are often designed without taking into consideration the voices of the stakeholders who matter the most. For instance, the study indicates that access to technology alone is not sufficient to address the concerns of children and enhance their learning experience. Access to devices needs to be supplemented with support from parents along with teacher investment. We also learned the need to design interventions that are context-specific and sensitive to the pertinent issues facing low-income communities. Where teachers have implemented learning along gamified lines and with more interaction, student participation rates have increased along with motivation.

These aspects further reiterate the idea that listening to stakeholders- children and parents in particular- can fundamentally change learning for children across low-income communities.

a. Building a parental support programme and providing end-to-end support

Our key learning from the study indicates that a successful implementation of the blended learning programme requires both investment and support from parents. Given the site of learning has moved completely from school to home, the role that parents play becomes pivotal to creating a conducive learning environment for children. In addition, since many parents have little to no prior exposure or resources to support children in their learning, the challenges of lack of devices, network connectivity issues, lack of conducive learning environment, among others become additional challenges for parents to navigate. Therefore, it becomes imperative to offer the necessary support to parents. for student learning at home to be smooth. Through the interviews, we observed that

most parents have not had a conversation with the teachers of their children about the implementation of the blended learning programme. This was more apparent for parents of children who had missed out on the initial months of online classes due to a lack of devices. In addition, a few parents also spoke of having received voice notes from the teachers, which merely stated the commencement of these classes.

A central theme of uncertainty in terms of the nature of online learning emerged from many parent accounts. Parents spoke of irregularity in timings, lack of set timetables, and problems in tracking or understanding their child's performance. It is then recommended that schools/ teachers undertake preliminary interactive and in-depth orientations with the parents before any future implementation of online-blended learning programmes. This would not only enable parents with more knowledge about the same but would also result in greater clarity on their role in the blended learning model. This could then contribute to their increased investment in creating a conducive home learning environment for children.

b. Understanding the inherent limits of Online -Blended Learning

The study also indicates the need to better understand the inherent limits of online learning. What comes out is the diverse set of challenges that children from low-income communities face daily, which become impediments to learning in the current times. Children have pointed out the apparent disconnect between the content that they're taught and the experiences that they go through daily. It is clear that when content is made relatable- when their teachers link the material to real-life examples, students can make sense of what they're taught. That is why we again reiterate the importance of the "what" aspect of the

content. Children have relayed their interest in learning that is gamified in nature, whereby children interact with other children and can earn 'points' or 'trophies'. Such a form of learning is also a source of motivation for the completion of homework and other assignments, especially at a time when there is little drive for a child to learn at home. An important pattern that was observed was the attempt to replicate experiences in the physical class in an online format. For instance, asynchronous work is mostly designed for homework and assignments. The majority of the children we spoke to mentioned the lack of motivation to engage in such assignments and preferred more hands-on experiential activities. Interacting with peers is one of the more fundamental aspects of schooling that a majority of children miss, and would like to see it feature more prominently in their learning. To that end, co-curricular activities in an online world have been greatly appreciated by children.

While it is inevitable for institutions to adopt online engagements in the current times to support children through their learning, the study makes it clear that schools and teachers need to be mindful of the inherent limits of online learning, and design interventions keeping in mind the diverse challenges faced by children and parents.

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Interim Compensation in POCSO Cases- Collaborative Methods to Ensure Access to Justice

Priya Watwani, Pawani Mathur

I. INTRODUCTION

This article shares the voices of the key stakeholders ensuring access to justice, to victims of child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. iProbono and Counsel to Secure Justice (CSJ) collaborated to collect stories and assess the impact of the pandemic on how interim compensation is awarded as a temporary relief under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012 ('POCSO'). By understanding the impact on the procedure, we can identify areas for improvement as well as surprising positive shifts in the legal system.

An initial overview of the compensation system for survivors in Delhi established under POCSO is juxtaposed with varied voices. We hear from lawyers and social workers who represent child survivors and play a pivotal role in securing financial relief while keeping the best interests of the child at the forefront. We also hear from child survivors and their families/guardians to provide a holistic view of the issue.

II. UNDERSTANDING INTERIM COMPENSATION UNDER POCSO

Victim compensation is guided by the Compensation Scheme for Women Victims/Survivors of Sexual Assault/other Crimes ('NALSA scheme') published by the National Legal Services Authority in 2018. The NALSA scheme, however, excludes survivors under POCSO, which provides a unique procedure for compensating child survivors of sexual abuse. To bridge this gap, the Supreme Court in Nipun Saxena &Ors. vs Union of India &Ors., directed that until the POCSO Act and Rules are amended, the NALSA scheme would act as a guideline to the special POCSO courts when awarding compensation. The Supreme Court also directed all State Governments / Union Territory administrations to implement the scheme in their respective jurisdictions.

Delhi's unique system involves multiple representatives from different agencies through the life cycle of a case. To ensure that the compensation procedures under POCSO and NALSA guidelines are implemented, effective coordination between various agencies and stakeholders including the Courts, the Investigating Agency, Child Welfare Committee (CWC) as well as the State & District Legal Services Authority (SLSA/DLSA) is crucial.

III. WHAT DO THE LAWYERS SAY?

We interviewed advocates practising on iProbono's panels and an in-house counsel at CSJ, who continued to represent children before the trial courts of Delhi during the pandemic. With several years of experience of representing clients in sexual abuse matters, these advocates agreed that the introduction of e-filing and virtual courtrooms during the lockdown positively impacted both administrative procedures as well as orders issued.

Priya Watwani, Senior Program Analyst, iProbono.
Pawani Mathur, Legal Fellow, Counsel to Secure Justice.

a. Access to justice during the pandemic

Advocate Tusharika Mattoo noticed a surge in action by district courts, including sensitive action towards the extenuating circumstances during the pandemic. She said that *"Virtual courts took up matters immediately and with virtual hearings (VCs) as the norm, became even more diligent in listing applications on short dates. This ensured that investigating officers (IO) not only supplied a copy of the status report in advance but also ensured their presence (as they could connect remotely)."*

Advocate Pawani Mathur, in-house counsel at CSJ mentioned, *"At least in Delhi, courts seemed more eager to dispose of smaller applications like those for compensation probably because the regular court caseload reduced due to suspended functioning during the lockdown. Even filing was easier as all it took was one e-mail with the application attached, while during normal functioning, physically applying to the district courts is more cumbersome."*

The role of the judiciary in administering access to justice during the pandemic cannot be underestimated. Across the board, lawyers thought judges were more proactive and receptive during the pandemic. *"Judges themselves encouraged us to file interim compensation applications on which orders were passed almost immediately. Some also directed their DCW or DLSA counsels to make sure the victim/her family liaised with the DLSA department to ensure speedy disbursement of compensation amounts,"* added Pawani. In her experience, positive orders were passed in six of her cases within two weeks of filing, with the relief amount ranging from Rs.50,000/- up to Rs.1,75,000/-.

On a similar note, Advocate Faraz Maqbool said *"Due to lesser caseload before concerned courts, they could dedicate more time to miscellaneous applications and decide them in a wholesome and efficient manner."* Tusharika agreed and said that *"Judges provided a more patient hearing, and screen sharing of documents allows you to bring relevant points to their notice (more challenging in physical hearings)."*

According to Advocate Chaitanya Sundriyal, *"The probability of the hearing being adjourned reduced since the judge, the counsel for the complainant/child victim, the investigating agency, and the court staff can join the hearing from their respective places. More importantly, virtual hearings have ensured that the child victims/complainants are not made to visit courts physically—which at times can be traumatizing in sensitive cases such as those involving offences under POCSO."*

Despite increased efficiency, the forced shift to virtual systems presented roadblocks partly due to poor technological infrastructure. *"Due to COVID-19, there was a lack of clarity in getting applications listed. We had to rely on the concerned court staff to ensure that the listing goes through. Once listed, the hearings were swift."* said Faraz. *"Poor network connectivity and background noises are the primary issues during virtual hearings, especially in cases where counsel, or parties, could not join hearings from their offices and had to join from their respective residence,"* added Chaitanya.

In Pawani's experience, one area that proved difficult during the hearings was a discrepancy between the client's version of their financial situation during COVID-19 and the status report prepared by the police: *"Some of our clients reported misinterpretation by the police, while some mentioned that the police had not spoken to them before filing the status report. There were also instances where investigating*

officers mentioned everything but the earnings of the victim's family in their status reports. Bringing these difficulties to the court's notice was helpful and in some cases, the investigating officer was ordered to revisit the victim's family and file a fresh status report."

In Chaitanya's experience, the court passed a reasoned order, considering the case facts and the circumstances of the child survivor/complainant. He was also of the opinion that the amount awarded could be reconsidered in light of the economic hardships caused by the pandemic. Similarly, Faraz suggested that while filing such applications, it is important to spell out why (a) financial aid is needed by the family and (b) a stated amount may not be sufficient.

b. Efficacy of interim compensation procedures

Advocates shared their opinions on the existing compensation law in India and it appears that law and procedure for interim relief are accessible to survivors via a simple application and the survivor does not have to wait for a decision on merits to receive compensation.

Judgments passed by the Delhi High Court during the pandemic helped to streamline the compensation process – an improvement from pre-pandemic decisions. On this note, Chaitanya explained that according to *"The judgment of the Delhi High Court in the case of Mother Minor Victim No. 1 & 2 vs State & Ors., the power to award interim compensation is vested with the special POCSO court. Special courts may be required to be more proactive to take up the issue of awarding interim compensation suo moto as soon as a case is registered under POCSO, instead of waiting for an application to be filed on behalf of the child victim."*

IV. WHAT DO THE SOCIAL WORKERS SAY?

Social workers Shivangini Singh and Aishwarya Sinha from CSJ provide psychosocial support to children and their families. They play a vital role in securing interim compensation by coordinating with government authorities and guiding families through complex formalities.

In their testimonials, they illustrate procedural delays and difficulties in obtaining interim relief: *"Need for interim compensation intensified during the last year. Many clients faced an unprecedented financial crisis as most families of our clients were daily wage earners. The compensation process became more difficult during the pandemic due to the limited functionality of courts and respective offices. We observed that the process of granting an order from the court was swift but the process of receiving money was slower than desired."* According to Shivangini, *"There are multiple factors that promote delays in disbursal of interim compensation funds for the victim. One prominent element is the absence of savings accounts for the victim since the amount primarily gets transferred into the account of a minor, who usually has a 'tiny account'. Consequently, making a new savings account further delays the process of disbursal. This complication was enhanced due to the pandemic when the victims or their families could not safely move out and open bank accounts."*

She shares the experience of working on a case involving a five-year-old sexual abuse survivor, in which it was a struggle to open a bank account for the child as she did not have an Adhaar card. Shivangini said *"Unfortunately, she was so young that her fingerprints could not be read and thus the process was further delayed. The reason for the delay from the victim's side is a result of*

Tiny accounts are mandatorily opened by schools in Delhi/NCR and may not allow transfer of larger funds.

the absence of relevant documents that are required to be submitted to the concerned disbursal authority. However, it has been observed that where the documents are completely available, the interim compensation amount is granted between the duration of 15 to 30 days."

According to the social worker Aishwarya's experience, another factor for the delay was the migration of families away from Delhi during the lockdown. "In cases where the family relocated to their native states, it became problematic to submit documents to the concerned authority which affected the timeline of receiving interim compensation, as locating families and reviving contact with them decelerated the course of action."

Shivangini and Aishwarya think the system can be improved if concerns regarding bank accounts and other documents are either addressed immediately or support is provided by the relevant stakeholders.

V. WHAT DO THE PARENTS AND GUARDIANS SAY?

The best interest of the child is at the center of any discussion about interim compensation and it is the families or in certain situations the guardians from shelter homes, who must jump through the various administrative hurdles to ensure that the child receives adequate compensation.

Rama*, the mother of a child survivor, explains that before the pandemic hit "I was in urgent need of money because my daughter was in the hospital as a result of the assault. The court granted the relief in one hearing and under the guidance of the social worker as well as the SHO, the money was transferred to my joint account quickly. It was a huge help to me at that time, considering the hospital bills and the medicines."

In another case, the superintendent in a shelter home in Delhi, Usha* ,applied for interim compensation as a guardian of the survivor. She said that *"I didn't face any major challenges in getting the amount. I was called to the DLSA office with the passbook of the child and the rest of the process was carried out smoothly."*

Indu* narrates her experience of the process post the lockdown and told us that, *"I was informed by the DLSA that the documents were incomplete and was requested to submit them within a week. After I submitted the same, the compensation money was received within 30 days in the bank account"*. Indu felt "the process was quite simple as it did not take much time once the documents were submitted, the staff present at the office also helped". She did think that additional support may be required when visiting the office/court the first time but due to the presence of a social worker, she was able to navigate through the process smoothly.

On the other hand, Supriya's experience was not as positive and even though she submitted all necessary documents in September 2020, she is yet to receive the funds. She said, *"In December, I was notified by the authorities that I would be required to open another bank account as the large compensation amount could not be transferred to the existing account. The delay could have been avoided if I was informed immediately about the requirement."*

VI. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

These varied voices from the field provide a snapshot of how interim compensation in Delhi is progressively becoming more convenient and sensitive to the needs of victims in response to the pandemic.

Despite limited court functioning during the lockdown, judges had more time to hear and consider compensation applications and grant relief keeping in mind the particularly sensitive circumstances of survivors and their families. Substantial improvements and flexibility are still required from state authorities on the ground. The strain on the legal system during this period is revealed in data published by the DLSA, according to which, in 2020, 433 child survivors of sexual abuse received compensation under the DVCS whereas, in 2019, 560 survivors received relief. Rigid administrative procedures are often un-navigable and an obstacle to access to justice at the best of times. These were amplified during the pandemic and added to the burdens of families who already face multiple socio-economic vulnerabilities. In this context, the nuanced role of legal representatives and social workers becomes all the more necessary to empower child survivors and their families and ensure they can access their rights including compensatory benefits.

Names have been changed to protect the identity.

Parental Support to Ensure Continued Learning for Children in a Post-COVID-19 Scenario: Some Learnings from Interventions in Delhi and Maharashtra

Apoorva Bhatnagar, Kingshuk Roy

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of parents in the lives of children is crucial and well-acknowledged in academic and policy circles. They are looked at as children's first teachers, and as children mature into adults, the role of parents becomes pivotal in raising children to become strong standing members of their communities. In the years of formal education, most parents allow the schools to facilitate learning among children while they play the role of providers themselves, ensuring that children have the needed provision and support to access education and learning.

The year 2020 embarked on the pandemic-induced crisis with the schools shut for an indefinite period. In this period, a magnified contribution of parents in fulfilling the educational needs of the children was imagined by the education system. In the absence of physical learning spaces like schools, there has been a gigantic attempt to transfer the entire learning activity in the virtual realm. Technological solutions have been created and adopted by schools and governments throughout. Online classes, communication of learning activities through messages, and learning content on online platforms have become the norm of

the day. And in a true sense, there has been an honest attempt to bring together teachers and parents in this endeavour to continue the learning activities by the children, or at least to minimize the learning loss. Parents are being seen as the central agents, who will drive this kind of a model in their houses.

However, some questions need to be addressed on the technological divide, leading to creating, widening of an already existing learning gap; and the kind of challenges children are facing even if the technology is available. In this, there are also pertinent questions on the parental role that has been envisaged.

There has been a lack of understanding in the entire attempt to acknowledge the parents' narrative. Firstly, even when there is so much conversation on the increased and crucial role of parents, there has been a significant lack of conversation on exactly what is expected from the parents. This probably has been caused by a lack of understanding of what and how much the parents can do. Subsequently, there has been a very limited conversation on what can be the avenues to support the parents and the children to continue their regular learning activities.

Apoorva Bhatnagar, Senior Project Associate (M&E), Saajha
Kingshuk Roy, Research and Learning Lead, Saajha

II. CONTEXT

Saajha, a Delhi-based NGO, has worked to assist parents in getting more involved in their children's lives and education, for the last seven years. In the last year, the endeavours have moved remote from being in physical proximity with the parents, in schools, communities, and homes.

Thus, in Delhi and Maharashtra, Saajha reached around 8,000 households to stay connected with them through regular phone calls, understanding their well-being and challenges, and trying to assist them with relevant information, so that they can use those to try and assist their children's learning activities better. While in Delhi, the facilitators of Saajha have kept in touch with parents themselves, in Maharashtra, a similar model has been implemented with the help of government school teachers, where Saajha has assisted to enhance the teacher-to-parent connect model and through that, improving parental role in keeping the learning activities going. Through these different modes of assistance, we have got some crucial and potentially relevant learning about the households.

The households: Most of the households that Saajha has worked with include the ones sending their children to the government schools belonging to the marginalised section of society, in terms of economic and social status. Most of them are labourers involved in economic activities in the unorganized sectors, like working in factories, construction sites, shops, or as housemaids, etc. Some of them are involved in small self-income, like owning a small shop, or driving an auto, etc. They are the ones losing out on jobs significantly during the crisis period. A small sample survey of these households in Delhi, towards the end of September 2020 revealed that in the six months from the start of the lockdown till then, fathers in the households lost their incomes of around 4.5 months on average, while mothers lost their income of around 5.5 months on average. This has also made the aforementioned households more vulnerable to the attacks of the crisis. For most of them, uncertainty around the future, and maintaining the households in the wake of withheld income were the core of their worries. A lot of these people covered are migrants to the cities.

Another mark of the households was the limited exposure to the institutional education of the parents and the consequent challenge in getting involved in the children's education. Another small survey in Delhi revealed that most of the parents were not educated beyond the 10th standard. Given a chance, they preferred other members present in the households to guide children in their education, who usually are more educated. Most of these members are educated at least till 12th standard and beyond, the survey revealed.

Challenges for the children: As mentioned earlier, one of the major questions regarding the move to shift the learning activities to virtual was unequal access to technology. During the crisis, a lot of households did buy smartphones solely to continue their children's studies. There have been numerous reports, narrating stories of the extent parents have gone to make technology available to their children. This has been reflected in our experience. Around 86% of households we reached seemed to own at least one smartphone and close to 75% of the households owned a TV with cable. However, the fact that the average number of children in the households is well above the average number of smartphones owned, tells us a story that available devices in the households are not enough to cater to the educational needs of children. This story has been confirmed by many parents we spoke with in both locations.

Secondly, substantial challenges remain in terms of the children coping up with the mechanisms. The biggest challenges which were reported from the children were that they don't know what to study and they don't understand the concepts required to complete the work they are getting virtually. This indicates the requirement of support at the levels of explaining concepts to them. In addition to the constraint put in front of the parents in the form of low exposure to institutional education, we found that there is a serious glut for the students and parents in terms of actual learning.

Thirdly, the problem was the lack of planning and execution in terms of regular learning activities. According to our experience, many students were not studying regularly and with a proper plan. Around 40% did not have a timetable in the initial phases of our intervention.

Parental support and their challenges: As stated earlier, there has been a lack of substantial clarity of expectations from the parents, among all the proclamations about the importance of their roles. Our experiences taught us certain things about the exact nature of parental involvement with children during this period, their support, and their vulnerabilities.

We found that the kind of support parents are doing mostly is confined to giving away their internet device to the children for studying, getting the stationery and books for the children, and reminding the children to study every day. Interestingly, there have been some engagements between children and parents in aspects not directly related to studies. They have found this time of togetherness to be spent on activities like playing indoor games, listening to stories together, and parents teaching children to recite poems, doing household chores together, or simply being there together in the same space. On the other hand, the kind

of support not so prominent by the parents, at least in the initial phases of our interventions, came out to be aspects like getting children admitted to online tuitions, helping them out with timetables, or explaining concepts to them.

We also found from the experience that the biggest challenges faced by the parents included their lack of understanding of online platforms and the ways to understand and plan for their children more effectively.

Another interesting facet of the challenges was the lack of connection with teachers from the households. We found a lot of households not connecting with the children's teachers, even when it was evident that they could benefit from such connections. The reasons included--not realizing the need, not being able to understand what to or how to talk to the teachers, and being hesitant because of not knowing if it would be appropriate to connect to the teachers.

The silver lining: Even if there are substantial questions to be answered and challenges to be tackled, the situation is not entirely bleak. Our experience also showed us that all of the challenges can be worked upon, and the situation can be improved. For example, when the households were supported with in-person call support on these challenges, the situations indeed improved.

From the same set of households, we learned that several parents started helping their children in creating and maintaining their timetables now. As a result, there have been around 11% more children having a timetable and around 10% more children studying more regularly now. There has been more awareness regarding where to get worksheets from. As a result, close to 4.7% more households reported getting worksheets regularly now. Several parents

contacted the teachers when they felt the need to.

On the other hand, these connections have been a learning experience for the teachers also. They are much more aware of the household situations now and are likely to customize their models for teaching to cater to the different needs of the children as well as to leverage their home resources. Our survey in Maharashtra shows that for more than 70% of the teachers, these calls were a learning experience, as they learned more deeply about their students' lives. More than 55% of the teachers felt that they improved their communication skills through the project. 66% of these teachers wanted the program to continue in the future.

III. CONCLUSION

The crucial learnings derived from these experiences and stories of households are as follows:

a) The policy needs to first understand the situations of the households properly, understand their capacities and challenges and set specific expectations accordingly.

Otherwise, there is always a chance of a gap between the expectation and the ground reality, and confusion in the absence of knowledge of the specific role one can play.

b) Even if remotely, there is a value in providing in-person support to the households, in absence of physical proximity. Of course, the ambit of the present piece is not to judge if it is more or less valuable than providing technological solutions.

The RTE isn't restricted to only academics, but also to the holistic development of the child which isn't possible without an active inclusive role of parents. Therefore, it is important to re-evaluate the role of parents and act accordingly.

Crises are also periods when characters are built, not only of people but of systems as well. Hopefully, we will learn from the experiences of this unprecedented crisis, as a system, and will move towards a more equal post-COVID-19 world, at least in terms of ensuring better mechanisms for the development of the children.

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Building a Culture of Preparedness in Schools of Delhi

Manu Gupta, Abhishek Das

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, tens of thousands of children have been lost simply because their schools were not safe enough. They studied in schools with improper structures, hazard-filled rooms, and lacked knowledge of how to protect themselves from disasters that have too often claimed lives. Children are at risk in the place we expect them to be safest – their schools. Living up to this responsibility is critical. Why? The answer is two-fold.

First, the statistics from disasters themselves make a compelling case. Among all public amenities, schools and their students are one of the most vulnerable groups during any disaster. Of more than 200 million people affected by disasters every year (2010 had 250 million), over 1/3rd are children. Typhoon Linda in Vietnam in 1997 destroyed over 2,200 schools; 74% of schools were damaged in the Columbia earthquake of 1999, and the Gujarat earthquake of 2001 saw 1,880 schools collapse. The numbers were even greater in the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the 2008 China earthquake. 8,000 schools were destroyed or damaged and 17,000 children were killed in the former. 10,000 students and 7,000 schools perished in the latter. These are just a handful of examples.

Second, within every community, some institutions carry more weight than just their normal functions. Schools are perfect examples of this. Both legally and socially, education is viewed as a fundamental right of citizens around the world. This basic premise ensures that schools occupy a special status within every community and position them to become 'safe havens'. Perhaps most significantly, the respect and social position a school institution commands forms an ideal environment to cultivate the 'culture of preparedness' that is a foundation to reduce risk. Children carry information home to their families and communities, acting as messengers of awareness.

Schools are also more than a place to learn. In the aftermath of a disaster, education services are one of the most important ways to restore the sense of routine in the community. It plays a key role in facilitating the psychological healing of children and adolescents through peer interaction and a sense of normalcy.

II. INTEGRATING DISASTER PREPAREDNESS INTO SCHOOL LIFE

At this point, we must ask the mission-critical question: How do you integrate disaster preparedness lessons and practices into normal school life? School-level disaster management does not usually feature in a teacher's job description. So, while enthusiastic about the concept, the burden of additional responsibility often dilutes the impact along the way. Even attempts to introduce the subject as part of the formal curriculum may not be adequate.

Manu Gupta, Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society (SEEDS).
Abhishek Das, Senior Associate, Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society (SEEDS).

Ideally, therefore, the training approach to school safety should be a 'complementary' one, where teachers can view the subject as an extension of their existing curricula. Much work still needs to be done on interpreting disaster reduction through mainline subjects. For example, lessons on life-saving skills can add value to existing classes on physical education. Similarly, science classes can provide a useful framework to understand cause-effect relationships, helping students reflect on the inherent links between us and our natural environments.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers need to provide a balance between the theoretical and the practical. There is no use in knowing the history of cyclones in the region if one does not know how and when to take shelter under a tree when a cyclone strikes or being able to name types of fires but unable to operate a fire extinguisher.

III. EMPOWERED CHILDREN: THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

The investment in empowering children is well worth it. As incidents reflect, practical knowledge in the hands of children can bring about truly amazing events.

In December 2004, a young British student was on vacation in Phuket, Thailand. As the water dramatically receded from the shoreline, others stood mesmerized by the sight. 10-year-old Tilly Smith, however, recalled her geography lessons on the warning signs of a tsunami. The knowledge allowed her to sound the alarm that led to the evacuation of the beach and hotel, saving the lives of a hundred people.

In the same way, a group of children in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, India, were able to detect and warn their village that Cyclone Nisha was approaching in November 2008. When the adults verified that the storm was indeed headed toward them, the community was able to evacuate quickly and safely.

Both these stories have a common key thread. The children had gained practical life-saving knowledge at school. Incidents such as these demonstrate another key facet. Children need not be mere recipients of emergency aid or risk reduction support. They can also be leaders in cultivating and practising a culture of disaster safety. With their unique perspective and energy, they can be a dynamic and powerful force of change.

IV . SEEDS APPROACH

SEEDS place children at the heart of its school safety initiatives. We use an effective three-point agenda – learn, reflect, empower

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to engage the students on three levels.

To Learn: Students deepen their awareness about hazards and risks when they understand realities and learn facts. Recent natural disasters are well-documented and shared. These serve as case studies for teachers as well as students. Wherever needed, disasters are simulated with the help of portable models. The learning process is strengthened by changes in the curriculum (where possible).

Movies, workshops and online training modules (such as the Global Open Learning Forum on Risk Education) can be useful resources in this regard.

To Reflect: Students analyze factors leading to human casualties and injuries in disasters so that they can recognize development practices and human actions that can cause disasters or prevent them. Students are connected to their local communities and families and share their learning with them.

To Empower: Students take small but definitive action towards reducing risks in their environment. School students, teachers and management together develop disaster management plans for their schools. In the process, they discover existing structural and non-structural weaknesses. Efforts should be made to ensure that the school community takes ownership of the plan and makes the necessary updates.

In practical terms, this translates into some of the following:

- Raising awareness of disaster issues through lectures, discussions, posters, drama (street play), and demonstrations
- Using hazard hunt maps and checklists to identify and address vulnerabilities outside and inside the school
- Identifying the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders
- Preparing a school evacuation plan

- Building emergency response skills such as rescue and first aid
- Keeping contact information of all facilities and resources for emergency management at hand
- Conducting mock drills to test the evacuation, rescue and first aid skills acquired by the students
- Promoting School Safety Clubs to sustain risk education.

V. STRENGTHENING SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE

Yet, training alone will not suffice to make schools safer. As a young student from Nepal commented in an essay competition, "…it is our right to have a safe school. We do not build our school building ourselves. But if it is very weak, then an earthquake will destroy it and kill us. Why should children die from the weakness which others create? That is not our fault. So, we request all our parents, teachers to build safe school buildings for us."

Take the 8.0 magnitude earthquake in China in May 2008. Over 10,000 children were crushed to death in their classrooms. Yet, all 2,323 pupils at Sangzao Middle School escaped with their lives. A miracle magnified when you consider that just 32 kilometres north, the collapse of Beichuan Middle School had buried 1,000 students and teachers. The credit rests with Ye Zhiping, the principal of the school, had pushed for funds from the county education department to widen and strengthen concrete pillars and balcony railings on all four stories, as well as secure the concrete floors.

At the same time, the 1999 Turkey earthquake showed us that fifty percent of the injuries and three percent of the deaths were caused solely by falling hazards. Looking around schools, it is common to see heavy books lying unsupported on wobbly

library shelves, flammable chemicals not safely stored in the labs, glass panes that can easily shatter, narrow stairways and corridors, or blocked alternate exits. Just addressing these issues can have a profound impact.

An abundance of school buildings around the world suffers from serious structural flaws and falling hazards that make them increasingly vulnerable to hazards and stresses. Specialist agencies can help carry out detailed structural analysis and retrofitting.

VI. BUILDING A CULTURE OF PREPAREDNESS

The heartening fact is that more and more schools and teachers are embracing basic levels of school safety. Concerted steps towards creating awareness on disaster risk reduction among all school students, irrespective of the location, have begun. As the numbers grow, this 'culture of preparedness' will spread, garnering popular support and goodwill.

SEEDS has been working on building this 'culture of preparedness' among school children through different programmes for over two decades now. The latest iteration of our flagship programme on school safety has been operational in 51 public schools across the East District of Delhi since 2017 with the generous support of Honeywell India 2017. The programme has reached over 55,000 children, 44,000 parents and 3,000 teachers equipping them with skills and knowledge to cope with different kinds of hazards and stresses, including the likes of the recent pandemic. But it is to be acknowledged that we still have a long way to go even within the state of Delhi, which has over 5,500 schools at last count.

A contextual example of our school safety initiative is from the recent onslaught of the pandemic which demonstrates how children can be active stakeholders in every step, from successful planning to hands-on
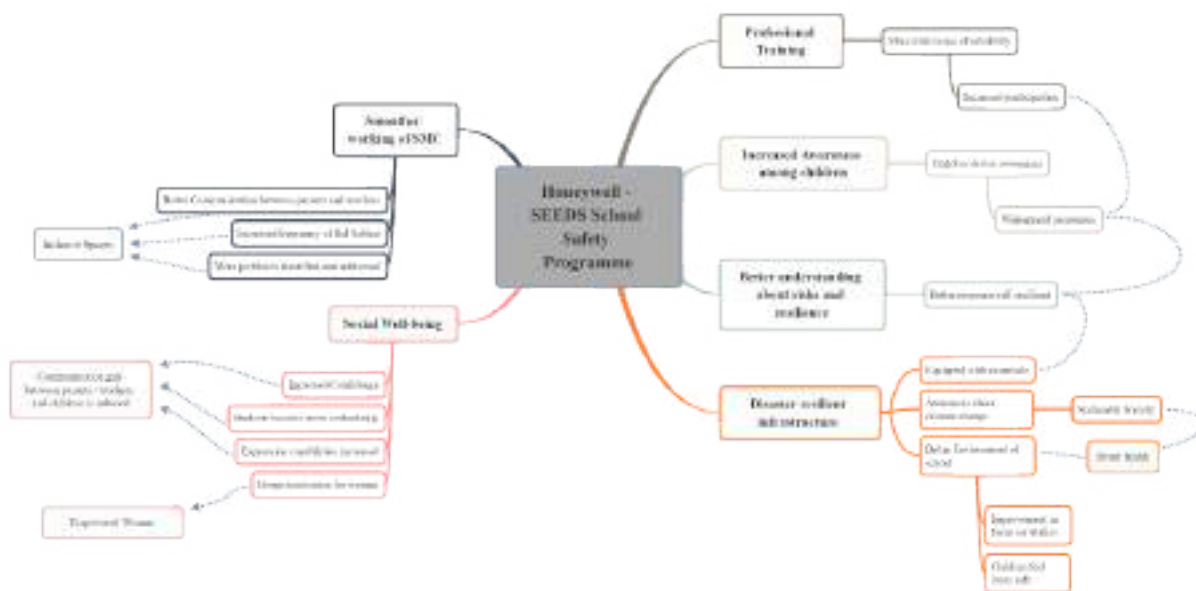
Figure 1*: Mind map of outcomes of our School Safety initiative in Delhi, captured from a stakeholder survey.*

training, to ensure creating a safe environment for them. (clear graphic needed)

Case Study: Preparedness in Schools Aiding Resilience towards COVID-19

While the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event that the children were not trained for, our approach and existing mechanisms to deal with risks and stresses proved effective. The student task forces that were formed during the programme on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) were quickly trained online on appropriate behaviour and information toolkits to counter myths. They in turn worked towards building awareness among their peers and family members on the safety practices for COVID-19 through innovative means such as poems, videos, etc.

Additionally, the parents and community members who are members of the School Management Committee (SMC) became volunteers during the lockdown for the relief distribution process by SEEDS among vulnerable members of the society.

Moreover, the training on mental health that was delivered as part of the programme helped the teachers themselves cope with stress during the lockdown and in turn, helped the children with online sessions once the schools restarted virtually after an elongated period of being shut down.

Beyond those immediate positive outcomes, school management, teachers and students were involved in search and rescue, fire safety, and first aid training, as well as the creation of school disaster management plans and mock drills during the programme. An important lens that is part of our approach is that of inclusion. Our programme covered a special school instituted for hearing and speech impaired children along with children with other disabilities where specially designed educational material and incorporated aids such as coloured flags and sirens are used during mock drills. The teachers have also been given sensitivity training for their special needs. The school has also been made structurally disaster-resistant and serves as a model for inclusive preparedness.

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COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health Issues in Children: Role of Positive Psychology and Emotional Intelligence

Pooja V. Anand

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought not just fear of physical health issues but that of mental health issues too. The COVID-19 pandemic made it inevitable for us to incorporate numerous lifestyle changes such as washing hands more frequently, wearing a mask, using sanitizers, etc. More importantly, it impacted the way we carry out our daily activities, particularly our social interactions. Social distancing became an important norm to be strictly followed to prevent the spread of the virus.

This led to various educational institutions being closed and most classes happening online. However, even though the 'curriculum' aspect is being covered through online classes, the 'connection' aspect is being missed. This has hugely impacted children because social connections with teachers, classmates, and significant others play an important role in shaping the personality of the child. This is leading to feelings of boredom, loneliness, and sadness in children. It is suggested that positive psychology and emotional intelligence can play a significant role in helping our children cope more effectively with the pandemic and its effects.

Since this is the first time in the recent past that people, particularly children, are facing such a situation, it may impact their mental health in a damaging way and up to a great extent. Hence, this paper will focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and will suggest various measures to deal with this situation positively.

II. IMAPCT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN

Childhood is one of the most critical phases in one's life. According to many theories of child development (Erikson, 1950; Vygotsky, 1962), childhood and significant events that take place in childhood have a major impact on the child's personality. In the socialization of a child, various people such as parents, teachers, relatives, and friends and factors play a significant role. Positive experiences with these people and institutions help in shaping the personality of a child in a healthy way. However, negative experiences or lack of certain resources may lead to many mental health issues in the child.

According to Gupta and Jawanda (2020), some of the positive impacts of the pandemic on children are learning new educational skills, developing greater inner strength, developing relationships and empathy while some of the negative impacts

Dr. Pooja V. Anand, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, India

are feelings of deprivation in terms of education, anxiety about the future, health issues, and addiction to the internet.

Although studies from the medical field show that children are minimally susceptible to COVID-19 however, they are certainly hit hard by its impact in various domains such as psychological, social, and emotional.

Impact of COVID-19 on schooling

With the sudden advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, children are experiencing deprivation in a lot of ways. Schooling plays a key role in the socialization and development of the child and provides a formal structure for teaching and learning. Children are taught various subjects and key skills at school. In a broad sense, schooling provides a range of experiences to the child which is much more than the curriculum. At the moment schooling has just been mostly restricted to keep the teaching and learning process going online and conducting regular tests and exams for assessment.

Hence, all this has led to feelings of deprivation in students in a lot of ways. They are deprived of the formal school setting, physically meeting their teachers, meeting and interacting with their classmates, participating in school assemblies, enjoying

their lunch break, playing in the park, etc.

At the same time, they have been inevitably burdened with more screen time with all classes and activities taking place online. All assignments have to be submitted online as well. All extra-curricular activities including celebrations like teachers' day, children's day, independence day, are being organized online by the schools where rehearsals, as well as final performance, take place online. More screen time is leading to many physical health issues in children such as poor eyesight, backache, headache, etc.

According to UNICEF (2020), 'This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact may be lifelong'. Countrywide school closures were imposed in 188 countries affecting more than 1.6 billion children and youth. As per the report, at least one in three of the world's school children were unable to access remote learning during COVID-19 school closures. There are also threats to child survival and health. Also, the risk of violence against children increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 on interpersonal relationships of children

Apart from learning various aspects of the curriculum, children also learn various crucial skills like public speaking, singing,

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dancing, fine arts, and sports at school. Apart from this, schooling also provides opportunities for children to hone their social skills. This is often done in the classroom where children are taught how to take turns while talking, maintaining discipline, asking questions, and participating in class discussions. In addition to this, social skills also develop with numerous interactions of the child with their teachers, non-teaching staff, and their friends at school. Children learn valuable lessons in caring for each other, sharing, active listening, etc.

However, this structure of schooling has been disrupted by the pandemic. Social distancing has been advocated to prevent the spread of the virus. Due to this all schools, colleges, offices were closed or functioning with minimum staff members and most workings had to be carried online. This led to a new and uncharted era of online education. Therefore, educational institutions now had to face the challenge of recreating the teaching-learning process online. It cannot be denied that this has opened new vistas for teaching and learning and opened many windows of opportunities for both teachers and students to learn new forms of technology. However, it cannot be denied that even though the curriculum is being taught online, there is a huge lack of social interactions which even though are happening in an online format cannot in any way replace or substitute face-to-face interactions. Not only this, due to norms of social distancing, children are not able to go to public places such as gardens and parks which provide yet another important place for social interactions. Sprang and Silman (2013) found that 30% of children and 25% of parents in isolation or quarantine met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.).

According to Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to the well-being of children and families because of challenges such as financial insecurity, caregiver burden, and confinement-related stress. They present a conceptual framework of the centrality of family processes in buffering against risk in the context of COVID-19 and promoting resilience through shared family beliefs and relationships.

Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic along with bringing dangers to physical health is also contributing to numerous mental health issues in people particularly children across the world, as outdoor play has been curtailed and social connections have been disrupted.

This is leading to boredom, sadness, loneliness, and pessimism in children. Social interactions in their varied forms provide warmth and support to children. The lack of social connections is creating a vacuum in the lives of children. At the same time, many children are getting infected with the virus, or their family members are infected, and the general fear of the pandemic is adding to the woes of our children.

Sama et al (2021) in their study in Punjab found that 73.15% and 51.25% of the children showed signs of increased irritation and anger respectively and 18.7% and 17.6% of parents also mentioned symptoms of depression and anxiety respectively which were increased by changes in their sleep, diet, weight and more screen time.

Banerjee and others (2020) did a systematic review of the original studies done on COVID-19 and impact of lockdown on psychological well-being in the South Asian countries of the World Psychiatric Association Zone 16 and found an increased

prevalence of non-psychotic depression, anxiety, somatic concerns, alcohol-related disorders and insomnia in the general population.

Loades et al (2020) in their rapid systematic review reported that children and adolescents are more likely to report high rates of depression and anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends. They suggested that preventive support should be offered by clinical services and be prepared for an increase in mental health problems.

A study by Yeasmin et al (2020) showed large proportions of children suffering from mental health disturbances in Bangladesh during the period of lockdown. The authors suggest that implementation of psychological intervention strategies, improvement in household financial conditions taking care of children may help in improving the mental health of children.

All these researches points to significant issues in children brought by the pandemic. However, these issues can be handled positively if we try to look at them optimistically. The following discussion is about how the entire movement of positive psychology and its various constructs, especially emotional intelligence can be used in dealing effectively with the pandemic.

III. POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

Positive psychology is a recent movement in Psychology that grew as a reaction to traditional psychology. Traditional psychology mainly focused on the weaknesses in people while ignoring the good aspects of people and their life. In contrast, positive psychology focuses on the strengths in people and aims to provide a balanced and more complete view of human functioning (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti,

2011). Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Its main concerns are strengths, happiness, well-being, and flourishing. Some of the important constructs studied in positive psychology are optimism, hope, gratitude, resilience, and emotional intelligence.

Let's understand how positive psychology can be used to deal with the pandemic. Well, positive psychology teaches us to focus on the good aspects of life as well. It seems difficult though to look at the pandemic with a positive lens. But here's how we can do so and apply this to ourselves and our children. First of all, the pandemic has given us all a new perspective about life. This pandemic has allowed us to look within ourselves, understand ourselves in a better way, practice healthier lifestyles, and have more time to think and reflect upon various aspects of life. At the same time, it has also brought families closer. Hence, we can teach our children to value each life experience and take it as learning for life.

Children can be taught to be optimistic during this time. They can be taught how the same experience can be understood positively. Children can be given various experiential exercises in positive reframing.

In a cross-sectional analysis of the mediating relationship of resilience, social support, and adaptive coping mechanisms between COVID-19 stress and acute stress disorder, Yang et al. (2020) found that students who used higher levels of positive refocusing, positive reappraisal, and positive planning had lower levels of psychological distress. Hence, instead of only looking at the pandemic as a dangerous situation they can also be taught how it can be used to learn new skills as well as spend more time with their family members. High-quality connections have been found to contribute to an individual's ability to cope

with difficult times as well as positively contribute to health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). Likewise, children can be taught about hope by helping them develop goals for the future and trying out different pathways to achieve them. For developing hope, movies with hopeful themes can be watched with them and hopeful stories can be read out and discussed with them. Children can be taught the value of gratitude even at such difficult times and express gratitude to God, their parents, and teachers.

In addition to these life lessons being given at home by parents, children can also be taught these things in a more structured and formal way by their school through their online classes and interactions. Here a very important aspect of positive psychology called 'positive education' needs to be emphasized. Positive education refers to teaching, not just academic skills but also well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). Even though classes and interactions are happening online these things can be practiced. Hence, apart from teaching the curriculum, children should also be trained in how to maintain and enhance their happiness and well-being. Children should be taught various skills for optimistic thinking, gratitude, resilience, and emotional intelligence and should be encouraged to develop their character strengths.

Research has shown the crucial role of developing character strengths on depression (Schutte & Malouff, 2019), anxiety (Freidlin et al., 2017), and many other mental health outcomes. These can be taught through various online platforms and online sharing circles. Many researches have shown that people can experience resilience and satisfaction even in difficult circumstances (eg. Masten, 2001; Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). A study by Brouzos et al. (2021) which investigated the effectiveness of group online positive psychological interventions to mitigate the psychological impact of the COVID 19 pandemic found that the intervention based on enhancing participants' strengths and resilience was effective in alleviating the impact of the pandemic and boosting resilience as well as showed significant decreases of the intervention group on psychological distress. A research paper by Waters et al. (2021) emphasizes the role of positive psychological factors in buffering, bolstering, and building positive processes and capacities that may help in coping well with the pandemic. These evidences reiterate the significant role that positive psychological attributes can play in coping with the pandemic.

IV. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

One of the most significant problems brought by the pandemic was feeling of loneliness, boredom, sadness, and depression. Children are reporting experiences of deprivation in a lot of ways like feeling deprived of school experiences, feeling deprived in terms of fewer face-to-face interactions with their friends as well as feeling deprived of other significant experiences of going to public places like parks, playing with their friends, etc. The pandemic has led to uncertainty and anxiety in children due to home confinement, disruption in their education, physical activities, and opportunities for socialization (Jiao et al, 2020). If these emotional conflicts and distressing emotions are not properly managed it may lead to severe mental health issues in our children.

The construct of emotional intelligence can play a significant role in this regard. *"Emotional intelligence involves*

competencies related to understanding and managing one's own emotions, understanding others' emotions, developing and maintaining satisfying relationships with others, and channeling one's emotional energy to create a positive self" (Anand, 2017). According to the 3S model of emotional intelligence (Anand, 2017), emotional intelligence involves key competencies of understanding our emotions, managing our emotions, understanding the emotions of others, and developing and managing relationships with others. The model also emphasizes another aspect of emotional intelligence which is the development of 'Self-positive' by the adequate utilization of our emotional energy.

Let's see how children can be trained in emotional intelligence to cope with the pandemic. First of all, children can be trained in various techniques of self-awareness through very simple exercises. They can be taught various feeling words so that they can understand their emotions in a better way as well as communicate effectively about their emotional state to other people. This will equip them to share their feelings with others in a more meaningful way. Then children can be taught various techniques of managing their emotions constructively. They may be trained in reframing events positively, yoga, meditation, sharing with others to manage their emotions in a better way. As discussed above, this can also be done through watching movies with them, reading books with them, and discussing various

educational themes. Next, children can also be taught the importance of empathy and to help out other children in need of emotional help and support. For this, they need to be taught how to be considerate and accepting of the emotions of other people. Children should also be trained in developing and maintaining healthy relationships with their parents, teachers, and friends. Lastly, children should be taught the importance of emotions and how they can be utilized effectively to create a positive self.

V. CONCLUSION

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in so many ways. One of the most significant impacts it has created is on the mental health of people particularly our children. The lockdown and the norm of social distancing have led to many experiences of deprivation in our children concerning missing out on valued school experiences such as classroom teaching, classroom interactions with teachers and classmates as well as other valuable opportunities for social interaction outside school. This has led to feelings of boredom, loneliness, sadness, and even depression in many children. Positive psychology with its focus on strengths, hope, optimism, well-being, and flourishing and particularly emotional intelligence with its focus on understanding and managing emotions, empathy, and developing and managing relationships can play a significant role in helping our children cope effectively with the crisis brought about by the pandemic.

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Digital Education, Learning Crisis, and Children: The Case of Assam

Rishabh Bezbaruah, Shivani Chauhan Barooah

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."
– Nelson Mandela

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, more than 180 countries temporarily closed their schools, leaving close to 1.7 billion children and youth out of school when COVID-19 was at its peak. The pandemic deprived children in the poorest countries of almost four months of schooling compared with six weeks for children in high-income countries. It has been projected that the pandemic will reverse the gains of the last 20 years of global progress made on girls' education, resulting in increased poverty and inequality (Berkhout et al., 2021). The prolonged closure of schools at the height of the pandemic during 2020 was required to prevent community transmission. However, it disproportionately affected the marginalised and vulnerable children – aggravating the learning crisis and exacerbating existing inequalities – affecting over 320 million students in India (Modi and Postaria, 2020). This paper will present a brief commentary on the learning crisis in Assam due to the closure of schools, highlighting the digital divide which exacerbated the remote schooling in urban and rural areas and the way forward.

The case of Assam

Assam has a major share of its state population consisting of children who are under 18 years of age, accounting for about 40.9% of its total population (see table 1). Hence it becomes imperative for relevant stakeholders to ensure a nurturing environment for them as they are future citizens of the country. While there have

Indicator	Population (in numbers)	Relative percentage
Total Population (All ages)	3.12 crore	-
Population below 18 years of age	1.27 crore	40.9 (with respect to total population)
Boys below 18 years of age	65.59 lakhs	51.4 (with respect to the population below 18 years)
Girls below 18 years of age	62.08 lakhs	48.6 (with respect to the population below 18 years)

Source: *Government of India. Census India, 2011,https://www.censusindia.gov.in /2011census/c-series/c-13/DDW-1800C-13.xls.*

Table 1: *The population of Assam below 18 years of age*

Rishabh Bezbaruah, Knowledge Products Consultant, UNICEF State Office, Assam.
Shivani Chauhan Barooah, Assistant Professor, TISS, Guwahati off Campus, Assam.

been significant improvements in the key indicators for children in Assam over the years, for instance, the infant mortality rate has decreased from 47.6% in 2015-16 to 31.9% in 2019-20, under-five mortality rate has decreased from 56.5% in 2015-16 to 39.1% in 2019-20 (National Family Health Survey-5, 2019-20). However, the situation has not improved for other indicators, with the drop-out rates of children from both primary and secondary levels in Assam being the highest in the country amongst the other states. A drop-out rate of 10.1% at primary level, and 33.7% drop-out rate at secondary level during 2017-18 was recorded in Assam, as per the data released by the Centre in Lok Sabha (Thomas, 2020). The situation presents a dismal picture even when it comes to those enrolled in schools of

Assam. The Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2018 looks particularly at the learning levels – foundational skills in reading and arithmetic of the children

Not all children enrolled in Standard III could read Standard II level text during 2018 in Assam. For Standard VIII, which is considered as the last year of compulsory schooling in India, where children are expected to master their foundational skills, the percentage of children enrolled in Standard VIII in Assam who could read a Standard II level text was significantly better, but not all children could read the same during the same year. A disparity can be observed (see table 2) between children enrolled in government and private schools – where children enrolled in Standard III and Standard VIII of private schools of Assam fared comparatively better than their government school counterparts.

II. WAS ASSAM READY TO SHIFT TO DIGITAL LEARNING?

The ASER 2018 report points out that Assam had already been reeling under a learning crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic. As soon as the educational institutions across the country were closed last year education in India which has always been delivered through classroom-based teaching suddenly shifted to digital mode. The digital platform became an indispensable tool in ensuring education and its continuation (Pitroda, 2020). Now the real question is, "Was Assam prepared to shift to the digital mode of learning?"

The answer to this question can be articulated by understanding and observing different factors that restrict the continuation of the digital mode of learning.

Indicator	% of children in specified standard who can read Standard II level text
Children in Standard III (All schools)	19.9
Children in Standard III (Government Schools)	14.4
Children in Standard III (Private schools)	35.4
Children in Standard VIII (All schools)	60.8
Children in Standard VIII (Government Schools)	58.1
Children in Standard VIII (Private schools)	70.8

Source: ASER Centre. ASER 2018 - Rural. ASER Centre, 2019, pp. 77-78, http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/346.html.

Table 2: *Percentage of Children in Standard III and VIII Who Can Read Standard II Level Text in Assam in 2018*

1. Electricity

Access to electricity plays an important role in ensuring the continuation of education

through digital mode, as it is required to power devices and get connected to the internet. In Assam, the Saubhagya scheme has been able to provide electricity to over 100% of households, however, the situation becomes different when we look into the duration of electricity received by the households in Assam ("Mission Antyodaya

Number of hours	% of villages receiving electricity in a single day
More than 12 hours	16.19
Between 9 and 12 hours	33.12
Between 1and 8 hours	39.69

Source: "Mission Antyodaya 2017-18". Mission Antyodaya,2018,https://missionantyodaya.nic.in/ma2018/ preloginStateElectricityReport2018.html.

Table 3: *Percentage of Villages in Assam Receiving Electricity in Specified Hours in a Single Day during 2017-18*

2017-18"; Saubhagya Dashboard). Approximately one-fifth of the villages received electricity for more than 12 hours in a single day, while only about two-fifths of the villages received electricity between one and eight hours in a single day in Assam during 2017-18 (see table 3). Given such a scenario, a continuation of digital learning becomes a challenge.

2. Access to computers and the internet

The Household Social Consumption on Education in India Report based on the 2017-2018 NSSO presents the stark disparity between rural and urban areas of Assam when it comes to access to the internet and computers.city received by the

Facility available	% of urban households	% of rural households
Having a Computer	30.8	3.7
Having Internet facility	46.9	12.1

Source: Government of India. Household Social Consumption On Education In India. Government Of India, 2021, p. 246, http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Report_585_75th_round_Education_final_1507_0.pdf. Accessed 14 Jan 2021.

Table 4: *Percentage of Households in Assam Having Computers and Internet Facility*

households in Assam ("Mission Antyodaya 2017-18"; Saubhagya Dashboard)..

However, not all households in urban areas of Assam had the same level of access to computers and internet facilities. The top 20% households in terms of quintile class of Usual Monthly per Capital Expenditure (UMPCE) located in the urban regions of Assam had comparatively better access to computers and internet facilities, compared to the poorest 20% of households. A similar

Gender	% of people by gender who can use a computer	% of people by gender who can use the internet
Male (above 5 years of age)	12.7	21.2
Female (above 5 years of age)	7.0	11.5

Source: Government of India. Household Social Consumption On Education In India. Government Of India, 2021,pp. 249 250, http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/ Report_585_75th_round_Education_final_1507_0.pdf.

Table 5: *Percentage of Persons of Age 5 Years and above with the Ability to Operate Computers and Use Internet*

disparity can be observed for the poorest 20% and the top 20% of households in rural areas of Assam as well.

Along with that, when one looks at the capacity to operate computers and use the internet through a gendered perspective, it was observed that more males above 5 years of age can operate computers and use the internet, than females in the same age range in Assam (see table 6). A conducive environment in a household also plays an important role in encouraging learning along with access to facilities, however, not all the students have the luxury to attend online classes in such an environment. Data from the Census 2011 points out that around 33.2% of households in Assam have only one dwelling room (Kundu, 2020).

Therefore, it is important to note that different perspectives need to be taken into account, such as the economic and social status of households, gender, etc. in ensuring that digital learning can be adapted by everyone in Assam, thereby closing the digital gap between students. If one does not account for the same, the digital divide will be further widened, hindering the progress made in the education sector in Assam so far.

3. Widening of the digital divide

Medium	% of children who received learning materials through
Whatsapp	81.4
Phone Call	18
Personal Visits	13.0
Others	10.1

Source: ASER Centre. ASER 2020 Wave 1 - Rural. ASER Centre, New Delhi, 2020, p. 66, http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/371.html.

Table 6: *Percentage of Enrolled Children Who Received Learning Materials Through Different Mediums During 2020 in Assam*

Household Resource	% of children					
	ASER 2018			ASER 2020		
	Government	Private	Government & Private	Government	Private	Government & Private
Smartphone	29.8	51.4	36.1	52.4	78.3	60.7
TV	37.6	61.9	44.6	41.8	55.6	46.2

Source: ASER Centre. ASER 2020 Wave 1 - Rural. ASER Centre, New Delhi, 2020, p. 56, http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/371.html.

Table 7: *Percentage of Enrolled Children Having Access to Smartphone by School Type and Year*

The Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2020 Wave 1 quantifies the digital divide observed in the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the closure of schools in Assam due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, digital modes of learning gained prominence to ensure the continuation of learning, the majority of the learning materials for children enrolled in schools were shared on WhatsApp (see table 6). While children's access to smartphones and TV in Assam increased between 2018 and 2020, not all children enrolled in schools of Assam had access to smartphones and TV. Children enrolled in government schools of Assam had comparatively lesser access to smartphones and TV for digital learning, compared to their private school counterparts, putting the latter at an advantage over the former in ensuring the continuation of their learning during school closure (see table 7). The disparity in access to smartphones and TV between government and private school enrolled children in Assam, ultimately affected their access to recorded and live online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children enrolled in private schools of Assam had

School Type	% of children being able to access videos/recorded classes	% of children being able to access live online classes
Government	9.5	3.5
Private	20.4	12.0

Source: ASER Centre. ASER 2020 Wave 1 - Rural. ASER Centre, New Delhi, 2020, p. 76,
http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/371.html.

Table 8: *Percentage of Children Who Were Able to Access Videos/Recorded &*
Live Online Classes in Assam by School Type in 2020

Parents' Education level	% of children enrolled in Government School	% of enrolled children who received family support
Low	83.9	55.6
Medium	75.1	80.8
High	50.9	91.5

Source: ASER Centre. ASER 2020 Wave 1 - Rural. ASER Centre, New Delhi, 2020, p. 47,65,
http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/371.html.

Table 9: *Percentage of Children Enrolled in Government Schools and Who Received Family Support*
for Learning in Terms of the Educational Levels of Parents During 2020 in Assam

relatively better access to their recorded and online classes than the children enrolled in government schools of Assam (see table 8)

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4. Parental support

Parental education levels play a very crucial role in the type of education and facilities being provided to their children. It was observed that the children of parents with low educational levels had mostly enrolled in government schools, while only about 50.9% of children of parents with high educational levels had enrolled in a government school in 2020 (see table 9).

The educational level of parents is an indicator of the household's socio-economic status. According to the ASER 2020 report mentioned above, as the parents' education level increased, the likelihood of a child attending a private school along with the household having access to a smartphone also increased.

Along with that, the parents' education status also played a key role in children receiving support from them to continue learning activities at home during the pandemic in 2020. As the level of education of parents increased, the support received by the children in continuing their learning also increased. On the other hand, parents with low educational levels were not able to provide support for the learning activities of their children. There is no doubt about the fact that the rapid shift to digital learning in 2020 has largely affected students from socially and economically vulnerable sections, which if not addressed, will lead to further deterioration in the gains made in the education sector so far in the state.

Disadvantaged students will be driven away from education due to the learning gaps and losses incurred during the closure of schools, increasing the rates of dropout. In a survey conducted by the Right to Education

(RTE) Forum, Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS) for Champions for Girls' Education, around 63% of children were not certain about returning to their schools in Assam.

The immense economic and social implications brought by the pandemic on disadvantaged families have also increased the cases of child marriage, child labor, child trafficking, gender-based violence, amongst others, which have reversed the gains made in the field of child rights. According to the Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (ASCPCR), during the lockdown in Assam, around 216 cases related to violence against children were registered – 113 cases of sexual abuse against children, 13 cases of child labor, 47 cases of child marriage, 3 cases of abduction while more than 40 cases related to other offenses (Ghatak et al.; Karmakar, 2020).

III. THE WAY AHEAD: BLENDED LEARNING

As the first wave of the pandemic had been brought under control, schools reopened in Assam from January 1, 2021, only to be closed in April 2021 due to the impending second wave. It is apparent that children, because of their gender, age, socio-economic status, learning abilities will face immense barriers in returning to their schools later.

Gram Panchayats, Village Child Protection Committees, local councils along with women's groups such as the Mahila Samakhya and Kishori Sangha can play an important role in monitoring dropouts and encouraging children to re-enroll, especially in rural areas of Assam. The Village and Block Child Protection Committees will also have to be strengthened to safeguard children against abuse and violence. Teacher training will also be crucial in ensuring inclusivity in schools, to bring

back children facing exclusion due to the digital divide, along with the provision for mental health support, especially for those children directed impacted by the pandemic (Ghatak et al., 2020).Thus, active participation from the community is essential in ensuring a safe future for children across the country.

Moreover, according to experts, educational institutions will have to adjust to these sweeping changes brought in teaching-learning after the advent of COVID-19 and adopt a blended learning approach, making teachers not the only source of information for the students in the future. The distance learning methods like e-learning, virtual classrooms, online repositories, which were unused and unheard of before, will take center stage in future. According to various experts and educationists, the blended learning model is here to stay in a variety of forms. We might have a future of education where some teachers will teach students online from home and some others might just take physical classes depending on the convenience and need of the students. In the United States, about 33% of all post-secondary students take at least one online or distance education course while studying in face-to-face institutions (Mishra, 2020). There are many other possibilities to this blended model of learning with the course work being divided into the segments of synchronous (live online interaction) and asynchronous teaching (discussions, forum,

quizzes, group activities, journals). As the National Education Policy 2020 has shifted the focus on the learner and their freedom to choose from (academic, extra-curricular, and vocational courses) and navigate through courses and credits from one institution to another, in the same manner, this blended mode of learning will offer students a lot of scope for critical thinking and application-based learning if used in the right manner.

However, if infrastructural facilities for the same are not provided, teacher's capacity building, training exercises, availability of technology, connectivity, and bandwidth issues are not addressed in every nook and corner of the state then this blended learning will remain a dream unfulfilled for the student community. At the end of the day, we need to accept the fact that the basic goal of education is to instill a passion for learning, that too lifelong, in the students where they learn, unlearn, and relearn at every stage of their life and career.

The effort needs to be made by all the stakeholders involved in the process of education starting from the State, educational institutions, teachers, students, and most importantly parents of these young and questioning minds. Education is not a privilege; it is a right. One can hope that the digital divide is bridged soon and education for all is a reality for millions of children across states and nations.

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Institutionalizing Social Audits- Creating Accountability in Times of COVID-19

Mohd Tarique

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been almost three years since the horrifying Muzaffarpur Children Home abuse case came to light. The sheer amount of brutality and naked failure of the child protection system shook the conscience of the country. A case where more than 50 children were abused and assaulted, with the torture of the highest degree, meted out to children who resisted. It exposed the complete collapse of the child care system where the civil society organization running the institution, officials entrusted with the safety of children, and members of the child welfare committee (CWC) were all found involved in the crime. (The Hindu Business Line, 2020; BBC, 2020)

Soon after Muzaffarpur, Pune's Katraj Madarsa case happened where 36 children were rescued after allegedly being sexually abused. Almost the same time, the Deoria shelter case came to light when a 10-year-old child managed to escape from the institution and reached the police station. Then there was a case reported at a hostel for tribal children in Rajura, Chandrapur. The list just goes on and on. These institutions with closed doors have children living with all sorts of vulnerabilities. The current pandemic has not only put the institutional population under the high-risk groups but also disturbed the emotional and psychological state of these children.

One thought that situation would change after the Muzaffarpur case but

unfortunately, it didn't. While we have been working on social rehabilitation for these children on the orders of the Supreme Court, once a child rescued from Muzaffarpur asked me, 'We were rescued and getting all the support now, but there must be more children like us. Can they not be saved? Can the government save them?' I had neither the courage nor any words to respond to her. Words of a 10-year-old child left me speechless.

II. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN LIVING IN CHILD CARE INSTITUTIONS

The state is responsible for providing a safe, healthy, and positive environment for all its children. In fulfilling this mandate and its commitment, the state is required to establish institutions where children who need care and protection of the state, are housed. These institutions are not just shelters but also provide a rare opportunity for these children to overcome the odds of their lives. The way children are treated while living in these institutions not only impacts their present but also shapes their future. Therefore, creating a positive experience, safety and compassion being at the core of that, becomes our duty, and "social audits" can play a huge role in creating this positive experience. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation far more critical and vulnerable for the children living in these institutions. As the periodic monitoring visits got disrupted

Mohd Tarique, Assistant Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS); Director, Koshish-TISS Field Action Project.

due to COVID-19 restrictions, the situation in the institutions was left at the mercy of the institutional staff.

Rehabilitation of children restored with their families was also impacted due to restricted ground visits. For instance, the social rehabilitation of children rescued in the Muzaffarpur Shelter Home Case. As part of the rehabilitation plan provided to the state, every child who is restored with the family is required to be visited every month. However, for several months, these visits did not happen because of restrictions imposed due to COVID-19. This happened with the children who were in Bihar as well as those restored in other states.

With the direct impact of the pandemic on supervision, resources, volunteers, and other kinds of support coming to institutions, for many organizations, it became difficult to continue serving children. The fear of the spread of the virus, too, resulted in compromise or disruption in the services. While we discuss the rationale for institutionalizing social audits as a foundation for creating systemic accountability, especially during the COVID-19 situation, it is imperative to understand the vulnerabilities of children who reach these institutions. These children come from extremely vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds. Many of them are homeless and/or without parents or families. The fact that these children are living in these institutions is in itself evidence of ruptured and unwelcoming family structure. Impacting most of the children, there is a pain of being unwanted with damaged emotional health. Addressing the rehabilitation needs of such children requires prolonged and unwavering investment from the government. The pandemic made the situation even worse. The feeling of being unwanted or being a burden was reinforced when several institutions started discharging children

from their custody. Many were asked to leave during the pandemic despite not having any appropriate place to go to (Abraham Thomas, 2020).

It is well known that the distress caused due to the pandemic impacted one and all. However, for children who already battle the trauma and emotional distress, this meant added realization of their vulnerability. It certainly affected the emotional health of children.

One of the worst-hit activities for institutions was counseling, meaning a direct impact on psychological support available for children. The custodial nature of the institutions only added to their vulnerability. While everyone awaits the normalcy to return, the life of a child living in an institution has moved farther from normalcy.

III. INCREASED IMPORTANCE OF "SOCIAL AUDIT" AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Social audit is one systemic mechanism that can be extremely crucial in not only preventing the crimes against children and ensuring their safety but could also be an opportunity to communicate that these children matter and are valued. This simple message may go a long way in healing the trauma of being in hostile circumstances and living through abuses.

Coming with the background of abuse and severe neglect, most children reaching these institutions have a compromised sense of dignity. There is a fear of uncertainty that keeps the mind occupied and scared, always. Often the experiences of betrayal or abuse by a closely known person results in difficulty in trusting people thereafter.

Unfortunately, the abuse and trauma that these children get rescued from and come to the institutions for safe shelter are not so

uncommon even inside the institutions. While the purpose of these institutions is to provide care, children's experiences are often very different. Memories are of being governed and not cared for. More than 500 child care institutions were shut down for different kinds of irregularities after an inspection was done in all states on directions from the Ministry of Women and Child Development, following the Muzaffarpur case (Economic Times, 2018).

In the absence of a regular social audit system, it is highly unlikely that abuses would get reported. This is true for situations of neglect and poor quality of services as well. These children often receive their entitlements as 'favors' done by the institution. The need for dignity is often overpowered by the constant comparisons with the original circumstances and everything appears better then. The impact of COVID-19 has further enhanced that feeling. The discrimination, therefore, gets justified in the head itself. Instead of seeking their rightful dues, many may accept whatever is being provided. Add to this their emotional vulnerability as we have a population whose resilience is hugely conditioned. These are children who have the need to feel safe, and also, feel wanted. The memories of lockdown are very harsh. Unlike an open community setting where people are free to voice their opinion, children living in institutions live within the command of the administration and may not be able to resist when needed.

It is this vulnerability of children that provides immense significance to the methodology for the social audits in institutions. At present, we have a system of monitoring and assessment where the focus is on compliances of administrative provisions. Unfortunately, this system not only fails to capture the 'real issues' but also prevents escalation. There is a need for a

mechanism where the 'Lived Experiences' of the children living in these institutions are captured while allowing a fair opportunity for the implementing agencies to put forth their concerns and difficulties. Instead of focusing on the administrative and infrastructural concerns or financial compliances, the focus should be on capturing the experience of those living in the facility. An important aspect of an inclusive methodology would be to include all stakeholders and attempt to understand each one's experiences, limitations faced, assessment of capacities/ skills, and thoughts on what would enhance the efficiency. Unless there is a matter of serious violation, abuse or misconduct, the approach should be to help the institution in improving its services and removing the lacunae.

The importance lies in speaking to children for whom these institutions are established. While it is ensured that records are maintained and kept straight, lived experiences of these children are rarely considered and, therefore, the real situation doesn't come out easily. The state may use this in planning effectively to improve the quality of services and care and enhance the levels of accountability. The process must remain inclusive where the institutions' concerns and needs are also examined and not just the issues related to the quality of implementation.

Often these institutions are run by the state in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs). Mostly this 'partnership' is in the form of funding given by the state. These CSOs running the institutions may have apprehensions, given their regular experiences, where audits are merely an inspection with very little or nil space for them to flag the difficulties, they face. It is important to understand that more than an inquiry into their functioning; this

has to be an effort to understand ways that can help them improve. People would be able to appreciate and accept this design. The power dynamics between a CSO and state effectively means CSO being held accountable without looking at the state's role adequately. Social Audit methodology must be able to address this imbalance of authority.

In our work across different states, we have realized that the larger cause for our dysfunctional institutions lies in the apathy we have today towards the poor and the growing absence of compassion. As a society, we need to collectively reflect and see what kind of world we want to create for ourselves. There is this indifference that we have towards the poor and no amount of suffering of such persons bothers us. Except for stray incidents, by and large, there is collective silence when it comes to the distress of the poor. The plight of the children is not any different. This might be where our larger failure lies. It is not about one institution or the state, but a larger systemic failure where the suffering of the poor and disadvantaged are hardly noticed; there is no mechanism to enable reporting as well. The Muzaffarpur shelter horror should be taken as learning and everyone should immediately look at their institutions; just to ensure that similar abuse is not taking place there. One is not implying that all places would have a similar kind of abuse going on. However, unless we check, we won't know.

Can there be institutional abuse happening at different places? Can we be any state that comes and says that its institutions are clean? As a country, we have a deep commitment to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our children. While many other possible steps are being taken to improve the quality of life for our children in vulnerable conditions, social audits are the best-suited tool to ensure that.

It is time we not only seek social audit to be made mandatory for all institutions but also establish an independent institution for the purpose. This kind of Central Agency for Social Audits, an independent body with a clear mandate and dedicated resources, is essential. Anything lesser or stop-gap arrangement will not work.

There is a political vulnerability that comes along with the decision to conduct a social audit. The states must understand that though this one decision may make them vulnerable politically this is something that they ought to do to ensure the protection and safety of children. As a country, we owe it to our children and ourselves. We need to make this system work. Let us ensure that through social audit there is a system that creates an experience of happiness. These children need to recall this period as a period when they had support and not a period where they were abandoned or left alone. The pandemic means increased emotional distress, stress, and anxiety for people. However, if these are the only emotions that we are letting our children experience, we would be causing a deep wound to them. Let them feel the compassion and affection that every child deserves. The feeling of 'being cared for' and 'being wanted' is going to heal them magically; this is the least we can do for our children. And there can be no better instrument to do this than a social audit!

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Digital Education Governance in the light of COVID-19 Pandemic in India| Insights from Policy

Pooja Pandey

I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Indian education system is one of the largest education systems in the world with 1.5 million schools and 247.8 million students (Bordoloi & Ranjan, 2021). Despite implementation and administrative challenges, the Indian education system has been an important site of innovation and constant upgradation. The 21st century particularly has witnessed proliferating hopes on integrating digital education into mainstream education to make the country ready for the fast-evolving digital societies (Paul & Aithal, 2018). While a systematic assessment of the progression of digital education in India is still missing, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought us again at a juncture that calls for a critical evaluation of the issue, especially from a policy standpoint.

II. THE POLICIES

The government initiative around digital education can first be traced back to the year 1972 with the scheme of Education Technology (ET). The scheme was centered mostly around procurement and application of computer devices in schools which later emphasized computer literacy/classes in schools (through the Computer Literacy and Studies in Schools (CLASS) Project, 1984-85). The National Task Force on Information Technology and Software Development (IT Task Force, 1998) made more pointed recommendations to introduce IT in schools and to make computers more accessible through a range of government schemes but only in secondary and higher levels of schooling (DSE M., 2017). Further revisions were made to the schemes in 2004 and then in the year 2010 (named ICT@Schools) which emphasized providing computer-aided education at secondary and higher secondary levels in government and government-aided schools; establishing smart schools to act as technology demonstrators; increasing teachers' skill-set to adopt ICT in education and finally developing e-content through the help of designated bodies like Central Institute of Education Technologies (CIET) and other states/regional bodies. The scheme also promoted partnering with private organizations.

All these initiatives, along with the visions under the National Education Policy (NEP) (1992), Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan (2005), and National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 on using education technologies for improving the quality of education in India led to the formulation of a standalone policy in the year 2014 called the **National Policy on ICT (Information Communication technology) in Education** (DSE, 2012). The policy defined ICT as *"all devices, tools, content, resources, forums, and services, digital and those that can be converted into or delivered through digital forms, which can be deployed for realizing*

Pooja Pandey, Research Fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy.

the goals of teaching-learning, enhancing access to and reach of resources, the building of capacities, as well as management of the educational system." The policy recognized not just the challenges and potentials to integrating ICT in education but also the criticality of ICT literacy, competency, and skills through the incorporation of different courses and training as a part of the school curriculum (CIET). The policy also referred to the requirements for children with special needs (CWSN) and children under non-formal education or the ones who have dropped out (through options of ICT integrated open and distance learning).

After the policy, the much-hyped Digital India campaign (2015) furthered the cause of digital education, mostly in principle than practice (Pathak, 2020). It focuses on infrastructure creation, service provision, and digital empowerment. It has several initiatives for school education (like E-Basta, E-Pathshala, Online Labs (Olabs), SARANSH, SHAALA Darpan, etc.) and appears promising to many (Saini, 2018), but a systematic assessment of the usefulness and outreach of these schemes is still missing. In addition, initiatives like the National Optics Fibre Network as a part of National Information Infrastructure and National Knowledge Network attempted at connecting rural panchayats and providing broadband connection to important service institutions, including education but their actual implementation has been sub-optimal (Pitroda, 2020).

More recently, NEP 2020, through sections 23 and 24, has emphasized greatly technology use & integration as well as equitable use of technology in education. An autonomous body called National Education Technology Forum (NETF) is proposed to be created to lead the decision-making process and research in deploying technology most efficiently for education. Emphasis is also on popularizing and promoting the use of existing government platforms like DIKSHA, SWAYAM, etc. The policy hopes to mitigate the digital divide in India through the Digital India campaign. Lastly, the NEP proposes a range of initiatives to ensure equitable digital education (section 24.4). These guidelines are, however, directed mostly at state boards, government schools, and proposed school complexes and are not so much about private schools and other players.

III. THE PANDEMIC EXPOSING THE GAPS

The marginalized children

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the greatest change has been witnessed by the schooling systems in India. The pandemic has created many difficulties for children, which transcend beyond just education, the brunt of which is once again faced by marginalized children (Singh, 2020). The year 2020 has also seen a sudden emphasis on digital education in the country. In response to the pandemic, in particular, the Ministry of Education, GoI has been issuing a series of guidelines and reports (e.g. Digital India report, PRAGYATA, NCERT, PM E-Vidya programme) which are either a revival of existing initiatives or are a set of guiding principles. This appears to be more of a 'damage control' approach than a systematic assurance of equitable digital education in the country. Literature also challenges online education as a viable solution to the COVID-19 education crisis. Issues of access to devices, appropriate platforms, easy technology, content accessibility, teacher readiness & training, assessment alternatives, parental attitudes, skill sets, etc. are some of the prominent issues with online learning during the pandemic (Azim Premji University, 2020).

The impact is mostly on children from rural areas, economically weaker households, girl children, migrant children as well as children with disabilities (Bordoloi & Ranjan, 2021). Recent studies by Oxfam India (2020), Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy (2020), Save the Children India (2020), etc. provide compelling anecdotes to the plight of students and how in the long run, this digital education divide might result in subsequent drop-outs and discontinuation of education.

Private vs. Public

Another issue that has completely skipped policy attention is the deep divide between the public and private schooling systems and their approaches to digital education in mainstream classrooms. India's online education market is projected to grow to USD 1.96 billion with around 9.6 million users by 2021 (The COVID-19 pandemic may increase the numbers even further), a large fraction of which will be through primary and secondary supplemental education (KPMG India & Google, 2017).

More than 3000 start-ups have cropped up since 2013. Some of the major drivers of this industry have been: increased internet penetration, dissatisfaction with existing modes of education delivery, bandwidth increase, rising middle-class population, government push through campaigns like Digital India, low-cost alternatives, rise in disposable income, and job market demands (NASSCOM, 2018).

Even during COVID-19, studies have indicated longer study hours and teacher readiness for online education in private schools than their government counterparts (ASSOCHAM, 2020). The private Ed-tech in particular has had a thriving year with the ongoing pandemic (Patawari, 2020).

IV. SOLUTION

a) There is an urgent need to systematize digital education initiatives in the Indian schooling system. The first step is to review and update the National Policy for ICT in School Education as part of a larger exercise to develop comprehensive guidelines (or a new policy) on digital education in India.

b) While there is a massive potential to unleash the Ed-tech space in India (Bhutoria, 2019), it is equally important to bring in place a standard code of conduct/guidelines to ensure non-exploitation and accessibility. For instance, section 42 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act as well as the 2018 guidelines by Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on **Making ICT Accessible for Persons with Disabilities** mandates that all ICT products must be made accessible for persons with disabilities. Any new policy/guideline on digital education must enforce that in principle as well as practice.

c) In some cases, government schools are already collaborating with private players to extend Ed-tech services in government classrooms (e.g. Educational initiatives, Idream education, central square foundation among many others). A closer assessment of such partnerships and more such cogent examples might make a stronger case for the need for digital education as an equalizer.

d) There is a need to identify the large pool of existing digital resources under the central and state governments. Many such resources have been mentioned in the recent India Report, Digital Education. These resources should be made available to the student at large, especially in rural and remote areas. It will become important to make these contents multi-lingual and the teachers equipped to use these digital

resources to maximize learning opportunities for all the students.

V. CONCLUSION

There are speculations to adopt a blended learning model (as also suggested in the NEP) after the pandemic which will essentially use a combination of physical classes as well as online learning. Even without the pandemic, the country has witnessed a surreal growth in digital technologies that seems to be only expanding. We are currently in a unique timeframe to strengthen the governance of digital education in India. With sanctions from NEP 2020 as well through recent government announcements like PM E-Vidya programs, the government's intent to push digital education is amply clear. The priority now should be to bring in place a system of digital education governance which is not just efficient in quality and delivery but is also an equalizer for children from marginalized backgrounds who have been denied their equal rights to education for decades now. This will truly be an opportunity to create a new normal.

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Post Pandemic Schools- Where do we Begin?

Shailendra Sharma

Which class do you study in? For years, this question has been a starting point of my conversation with unknown children. Invariably, within no time, a reply would come and on most occasions, children would mention the section also. They would say, "I am in 3rd B or 6th A".

For the last few months, I have realized that instead of initiating a conversation, this question leads to a muted or confused response. Children have not been to school for more than a year. Most of them have now been promoted to the next class without physically being in class for even a day. It can be quite perplexing for children to adjust to their notional new class.

The other day, Suraj, a child from a Delhi Government School asked me, "My father got a message from the school that I am now in class 9 but I don't know anything about class 8. Do you think I will be able to follow my class 9 textbooks?". Suraj's question not only reflects his dilemma but also that of most parents and teachers. Like Suraj, we ask ourselves and each other, what would be the starting point for schools when they reopen – should it be the point where schools closed or the point where children may have slipped back?

To know the answer, let us first see what schools did after the closure, and second where children are likely to be by the time the schools reopen, and finally how do we propose to address Suraj's concerns.

When the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, schools were closed without any forewarning, restricting the movement of everyone, including children, severely. With so much extra time in hand, both parents and children were clueless about how to utilize this time. As a result, anxiety and uncertainty exacerbated. Most schools quickly got around to devise online and offline strategies to resume teaching-learning activities. In the process, many of them tried to recreate the experience of traditional classroom learning into online classes.

One set of educators were excited by the prospect of online methods being the answer to not just the immediate challenge but also a long-term solution to all types of learning needs. Some others were mindful of the digital divide. The inability of a large proportion of children to reliably access a device with the internet came as a real issue as online classes progressed.

In these circumstances, Delhi Government schools attempted to overcome the digital access issue by creating a semi-online approach. For classes up to grade 10, subject-specific or generic worksheets were created and sent to students through WhatsApp. For classes 11 and 12, there were online classes, designed and delivered centrally by a pool of government school teachers. Despite a slow start in the beginning, by the end of 21 weeks, about 91% of students of KG to Class 10 were accessing worksheets through WhatsApp. According to teachers and parents, during the district-wise review of the interventions, several schools and community-led initiatives were observed to enhance access to worksheets over time. Heads of schools

Shailendra Sharma, Principal Advisor to Director of Education, Government of NCT Delhi

PC: Department of Education, GNCTD

and School Management Committee (SMC) members secured donations of new or old working smartphones and shared them with the students living nearby. Thus maximum students were able to access the worksheets. In addition to that, parents of 7% of students collected printouts from school. However, 2% of students could not be reached. Out of this 98% who received the worksheets, 83% reverted to their teachers. Hence, against the total enrolment in these classes, schools were able to establish a two-way communication channel with 81% of students, Suraj was one among them.

For classes 11 and 12, the online attendance ranged from 89% to 97% in 12 subjects. Though the online classes were conducted by the Academic Unit of the Delhi Government centrally through a pool of shortlisted teachers, the respective subject teachers in schools, too, joined the class and recorded the attendance of their students. They also reached out to those students from their class who could not attend the live online class, guided them to see the recording, and gave inputs over the phone. While the worksheet was an interesting way to connect with students, its content

received a mixed response. For some parents, it was a good way to get them updated with what constitutes the course of their child's class as the cell phone was in their possession for most of the time. Many of them have enthusiastically shared that for the first time in so many years, they came to know what their child is learning. However, for some parents and most teachers, the content was too simple. They felt it is not enough to challenge the child to learn more.

Towards the end of the session, when there was a window of opportunity to open schools as the COVID-19 cases were steeply declining, the priority was given to classes 9 to 12 to open. This was done to stay aligned with the decision of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to conduct exams for classes 10 and 12 in offline mode. At this point, two contrasting issues emerged. First, there was no apparent requirement of learning assessment till class 8 as children could be promoted under the no-detention policy. Second, an absolute requirement of year-end exams in classes 9 to 12 as otherwise there was no basis for promoting the child to the next class. The contradictions between teaching-learning

and exams, particularly board exams, were apparent as there was an insistence on the part of the CBSE to hold conventional, in person, pen and paper exams even though throughout the year the teaching-learning activities were completely in online mode. This insistence continued till there was no option for the board to hold in-person exams due to the onset of the second wave of COVID-19 by then. As a result, instead of children, it became a testing time for the board as it had to declare the result without conducting any exams.

The key learnings from the last academic year have been that technology is not enough, we need enterprise. It cannot be that teaching-learning would be experimental but assessment would be completely conventional. This is the dilemma of Suraj. Because he feels that no matter what is taught in class 9 now or through whatever means the teaching-learning process is conducted, he might end up being assessed through the same pen and paper test as in the past. The difference, as compared to last year, would be that now his progression to the next class would be contingent upon him securing the pass marks.

Another issue that students like Suraj will face, when school reopens, is that his teachers might be keen to bring him up to speed. He has not physically attended class 8, worksheets were too simple and now he is just one year away from the board exam. In these circumstances, he needs to catch up a lot but might not be able to do so due to such a long gap, rather it could be where he ought to be soon enough to get on with the class 9 curriculum. In effect, if Suraj has been among those nearly 25% children of class 8 who could still not read even a paragraph from his textbook or do simple division when schools closed, the chances of him slipping further back on basic competencies are very high. In such a situation, the pressure to get up to grade 9 level might be too overwhelming for him. He may not be able to get back to even where he was before the lockdown because the rest of his class, minus children whose foundational learning skills were already low, would be marching ahead.

To ensure that Suraj is supported in overcoming his dilemma and also to provide emotional support to him to overcome the impact of second-wave of COVID-19, government schools of Delhi have devised an action plan. As part of this plan, the teachers are being oriented on basic emotional counseling so that they are equipped with the tools to reach out to all children with the required sensitivity. An understanding of where children are emotionally and in terms of their current basic competencies would allow teachers to prepare children for simple teaching-learning activities that will gradually begin. We hope the emphasis will be on a supportive environment for children and on ensuring that the basic learning competencies of all children are in place. Based on the course covered, every month, there would be assignments and projects that children would be supported with and this would be their assessment for learning. The effort is to have a sensitive and aligned teaching-learning & assessment strategy, irrespective of whether schools reopen or not.

Suraj may still be apprehensive but it is the responsibility of the school to ease his anxiety, support him and start with where he is with no hurry to push or pull him, just to help him find his way forward.

BEST PRACTICES

05

Rethinking Education in India: Social and Emotional Learning in the Pandemic

Malavika. A. Srivathsa, Niveditha Bashkar, Ramya Sundaram

I. INTRODUCTION

Education as a fundamental, inalienable human right, as proposed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, was ratified by India in 1992 (UNICEF, 2019). Since then, India has enacted several legislations and formulated policies to ensure that every child in India has access to education.

The Right to Education Act of 2009, recognized as a fundamental right of every child, ensures free and compulsory education for all children aged between 6 and 14 in India and forms the keystone of child rights in the country. While the previous education policies have largely focused on increasing literacy and numeracy amongst the masses and ensuring equitable access to marginalized communities, there has been little focus on the nature of education or the pedagogy adopted in the classroom, until the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 came into existence.

The NEP (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) in its own words, attempts to address the unfinished agenda of the National Policy for Education of 1986 and 1992. The policy discusses the purpose of education and the indicators of "quality" education. A "good" learning space is inclusive and safe for all, and that provides a wide range of stimulating learning experiences for the learners. The purpose of education is to "build character, enable learners to be ethical, rational, compassionate, and caring, while at the same time prepare them for gainful, fulfilling employment". The aim then would be to nurture "holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with the key 21st-century skills" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

The Policy recognizes that education is to not only develop cognitive capacities such as literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and problem-solving – but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions. This new approach to education falls under the ambit of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

II. WHAT IS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a thought leader in K-12 education and has brought about many views around what Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) means. CASEL defines SEL as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." Further, SEL includes competencies that help nurture Self

Malavika. A. Srivathsa, Programme Associate - Social and Emotional Learning, Bhumi
Niveditha Bashkar, Senior Associate - Social and Emotional Learning, Bhumi
Ramya Sundaram, Programme Consultant - Social and Emotional Learning, Bhumi

Awareness, Self Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making in individuals (CASEL, n.d. - a).

The SEL competencies mentioned above help children in identifying their emotions, strengths, limitations, understanding empathy, kindness, and growth mindset. Benefits of SEL include improved academic performance, classroom participation, and behaviour, better emotional management, and attitudes about the self, others, and community. (CASEL, n.d. - b).

III. COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a period of anxiety and uncertainty for all of us, especially school-going children. These challenging circumstances have forced students and teachers nationwide to pursue education in entirely new ways. While using new technology, they face new challenges with access to devices, data, and connectivity. Children and teachers alike have stayed resilient during these difficult times and have dealt with the lack of direction and support, the digital divide, unsafe environments, etc. which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

A group discussion conducted at Bhumi (NGO), Chennai, with 5 children from urban slum communities, revealed the challenges faced by teachers and children and has shed light on how they are adapting to this rapid shift in e-learning. During the discussion, children stated that while there were certain pros to online classes such as being able to have discussions on subject relevant topics with their classmates, they preferred going to school as they found it difficult to retain what they learnt during their online classes. This is coupled with the time constraints that come with attending an online class. Children also stated that spending more time with their teachers in a school setting helped them have a better social and emotional connection with their teachers and this, in turn, aided their learning journey. However, in an online setting, children mentioned that they find it difficult to clarify their doubts, find lessons longer and feel distracted when they watch a video (for pre-recorded classes) and take notes with the lack of interaction between their peers and teachers.

It is crucial, specifically now, that children must be taught how to recognize, accept, navigate their emotions and form meaningful relationships and support

opportunity to invest more time in their self-development. The workshops have been instrumental in reforming the classroom space to be more inclusive, equitable, positive and one that practices compassionate communication.

Pedagogical implications of the HELO Program

HELO classes are scheduled for children of later elementary grades once a week wherein the teachers facilitate lessons on SEL skills for the children. The lessons broadly fall under the 5 SEL competencies. These lessons have given space to children to think about and reflect on the world around them and share their experiences with their classmates.

At HELO, we emphasize developing 'Mindfulness' - a state of being completely aware of the present and paying attention to it, regardless of whether it is a positive or negative situation. We aim to inculcate mindfulness in classroom culture through Check-in/Check-out practices. A Check-In and a Check-Out, done at the beginning and end of a class respectively, is a small activity or a question to bring their attention to class, which raises their energy levels, and encourage them to think creatively. These

practices allow children to recognize how they feel coming into the classroom and allow the teachers to get a pulse of the group they are going to work with.

The program also aids and guides schools to integrate SEL as a part of the learning culture in schools. This is done in two ways. One is to have SEL themes for specific months and all the activities and discussions in the school should be held around the same. For example: During Kindness month, all classroom activities and lessons are contextualized to kindness and the concept is explored through real-life examples and scenarios. The second method is by building HELO clubs. The clubs serve as a space to identify and develop leaders, enabling them to become role models for SEL while creating an environment- free of judgment and conducive to learning.

During the pandemic, throughout which schools have remained shut, SEL has been introduced at homes through "Take-Home" activities that encourage children to reflect on the SEL skills that they learn during the class, share them with their family members and contextualize their learnings within their home and community environments. For example, a session on setting "classroom agreements" with their

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classmates leads to setting "home agreements[+]" with their family members. This has allowed parents space to bond, being in touch with what their child is learning, and support the social and emotional needs of their child.

VI. IMPACT OF "HELO" DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the world into being stuck indoors. Children from low-income households not only face the challenges of learning online but also bear the brunt of not having sufficient physical space or any privacy over a prolonged period.

Sarvesh*, one of the boys from our urban slum community projects, lives in a small one-bedroom house. The lockdown has been particularly difficult for him as he feels confined to space in his home that he shares with three other family members. As someone who values having his own space, he shared that he often got frustrated with not having someplace to go to where he could take some time off for himself, away from his family. This affected his interactions with his family as well. He told us that the activities learnt during the mindful check-ins have been particularly helpful to him when he feels stressed and angry at his current predicament. He has found that practicing mindful breathing helps him feel calm and serves as an escape. It has at least allowed him to have some space to think for and about himself, mentally and emotionally.

With schools being shut and learning being shifted online for more than a year, there is also a little distinction between the home and school space. Children are losing out on precious interactions with peers and teachers in the school setting, which is crucial to developing cognitive abilities and making sense of the world around them (McLeod, 2014). Chirag*, who is an only child, had previously shared that he missed seeing his friends and having fun with them. The lockdown had made him feel isolated as his parents were frontline workers. He found online learning boring and pointless. He reported that through the SEL classes, he has been able to learn more about his classmates and their lives, which he did not get the chance to do before or in other interactions within the online classroom setting - "I did not know that my classmate had the same goal as mine. I feel happy knowing about this similarity. Now we can discuss and work together!"

Children who have benefitted through our program have reported that they have realized, with conviction, the importance of being kind and helping each other, especially during these difficult times. Yamini*, a child at one of our communities narrated that she used to get annoyed when her peers frequently asked her doubts regarding academics. She was of the opinion that they should have paid attention in class. However, after a session on empathy, she was able to reflect on some reasons as to why paying attention in class is extremely challenging in an online setting. She is now more patient with others in such situations.

This has been a learning experience not only for the children but also for teachers. One of the teachers from our partnering school, Ms. Priya* remarked after one of our sessions, "I understood the fact that every student in the classroom comes from a different background; their emotions and feelings are unique, and the challenges that they are facing now are also unique. We need to approach them positively, be more empathetic, and support them to tackle their difficult situations.

+*Agreements are practices that are mutually decided by the group to be followed as norms*
* *denotes names changed for confidentiality reasons*

Another teacher, Ms. Leela whose husband recently had health issues, remarked after one of our workshops, "I feel extremely emotional when I can share openly in such a space. You have brought us all together. I have been quite stressed these past few months and have not been very positive. However, through mindfulness activities, I have been able to spend some time for myself and relax. We women, constantly think of taking care of our family, but we hardly think about taking care of ourselves. I think it is very important now to take care of myself and I have been able to do that."

VII. CONCLUSION

The goal for education, as laid down in the National Education Policy is to nurture "good human beings" capable of rational thought and action, possess compassion, empathy, courage and resilience, and have scientific temper and creative imagination, with sound ethical moorings and values" is admirable albeit lofty (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The pandemic has only left behind a wider gap to cover and has underlined the importance of mental health and well-being. The ideal step in this direction and the need of this hour is the inclusion of Social and Emotional Learning at the whole-school level in mainstream education systems.

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Karona Apni Suraksha

Nishant Baghel, Prerna Makkar, Siddhesh Mhatre, Devyani Pershad

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of children and communities everywhere. In India, with the shutdown of anganwadis and schools since last year, the education, nutrition and health of children have been adversely affected, with those from the poor communities being the worst affected. Due to the pandemic, Pratham's long standing model of addressing education gaps through in-person and hybrid learning approaches got disrupted and it pivoted to a completely online model for communication with communities.

This paper presents the recent online health communication campaign by Pratham, called *Karona Apni Suraksha*, which was an intense 6-week campaign launched in May 2021 in the midst of thesecond wave of the pandemic in India. *Karona Apni Suraksha* was the second such campaign since last year and was preceded by an online education communication campaign called *Karona Thodi Masti, Thodi Padhai* during the first wave of the pandemic in India. These campaigns reached communities across 21 states where Pratham had deep and trusting existing relationships.

II. RATIONALE

Unlike the initial days of the pandemic in 2020, much more was known about COVID-19 prevention and management when the second wave hit the country in 2021. However, there were several challenges like misinformation, false news, rumours and myths about the disease and vaccines that existed during this time. These were being spread at an alarming rate, exacerbating stress and angst amongst the communities and potentially undoing the positive measures undertaken to combat the problem. Pratham decided to use its extensive experience and networks in communities to help in this situation through an intensive health communication campaign called *Karona Apni Suraksha*.

III. CAMPAIGN

The objective of *Karona Apni Suraksha* campaign was to ensure delivery of essential, verified and accurate information related to COVID-19 to communities where Pratham works. These are typically low-tech and under-resourced communities where availability of such crucial information is scarce. Pratham specifically created and curated a repository of resources for this campaign - internally or in partnership with other organizations specialising in health-related content - such as videos, audios, posters, PDFs, SMS and WhatsApp messages that were most relevant, easy-to-understand and easy-to-use for these families and communities.

Multiple delivery channels such as SMS,

Nishant Baghel, Director, Technology Innovations, Pratham Education Foundation
Prerna Makkar, Advisor, Pratham Education Foundation and ASER Centre
Siddhesh Mhatre, Co-lead, Measurement Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, Pratham Education Foundation
Devyani Pershad, Head of Communications and International Collaborations, Pratham Education Foundation

WhatsApp, Zoom and YouTube were used to reach these communities 3-5 times a week. Further, a two-way communication channel was established with families, children, youth and other stakeholders in the community such as sarpanches, anganwadi workers, teachers and ASHAs. This two-way communication happened at least once in two weeks through clarification or feedback calls by Pratham central and state teams or through interactive sessions where participants could submit or ask questions to health experts on platforms such as Zoom and YouTube. The weekly plan of this campaign is presented in the table (Table 1) and sample content and messages are highlighted in the box (Box 1) below.

Week	Themes	Topics
Week 1	Introduction & Prevention	Introduction Hand washing Mask making
Week 2	Prevention & Home Management	Social distancing Returning home Cleaning vegetables and fruits
Week 3	Home Care	Myth buster Taking care of sick at home Cleaning surfaces at home
Week 4	Testing at Home	Myth buster Correct use of pulse oximeter How to check temperature
Week 5	Vaccination	Myth buster How does vaccination work Vaccination in India
Week 6	Vaccination	Myth buster How to register for vaccination Side effects of vaccination

Table 1: *Weekly plan for the campaign*
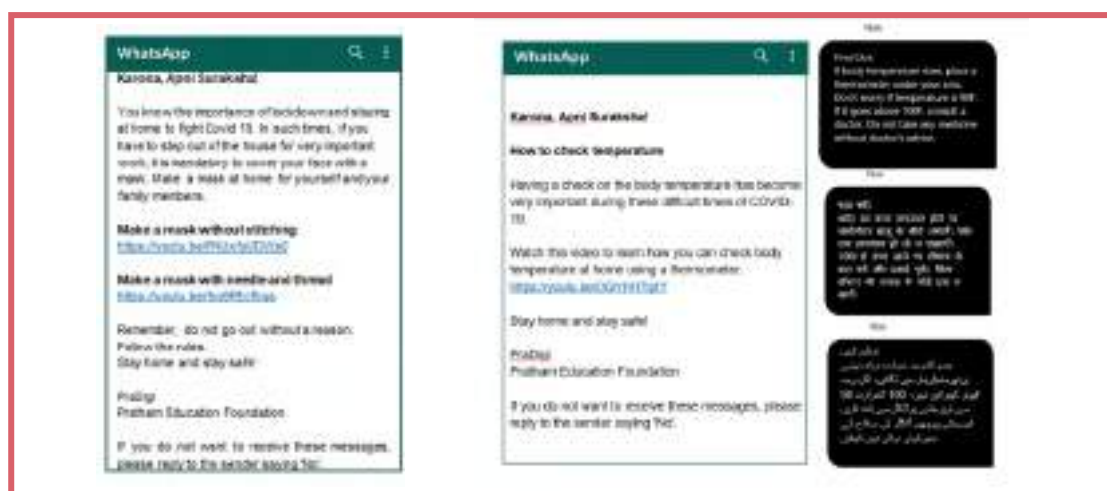
Box 1.1: *Sample WhatsApp and SMS communication*
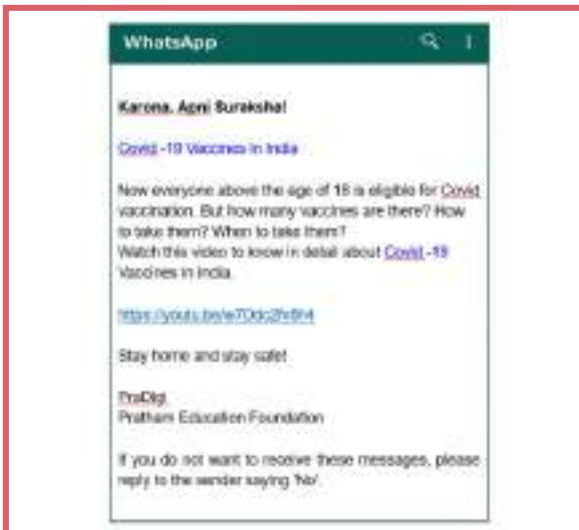
Box 1.2: Sample WhatsApp and SMS communication

As part of this campaign, activities to engage children were also designed with a view to educate them about themes related to COVID-19 so that the children could become champions to address these issues within their own communities. Some stories of children as champions in their families and communities are highlighted in the box (Box 2) below.

Story 1: Prithviraj, standard 6, student from Jaitapur village in Maharashtra

Prithviraj (Standard 6 student) is from Jaitapur village in Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Since the second wave of COVID-19 turned out to be rapidly spreading and devastating, it became very important for everyone to know how to keep themselves safe from the infection. Prithviraj's father was also worried about his family's health and everyone was quite scared of the situation.

When Pratham started sharing health and safety-related messages as a part of its communication campaign *Karona Apni Suraksha*, they felt a sense of relief. Ever since Prithviraj started receiving these messages on his father's mobile phone, he has become a COVID-19 champion of his family.

He makes sure that everyone washes their hands properly before eating anything, he keeps on reminding his father, mother and sisters to maintain social distancing and to wear a mask whenever they step out, he has also taken the responsibility of cleaning fruits and vegetables which they get from outside with the help of saltwater and cleans surfaces at home from time to time. He not just follows these measures himself but also encourages his friends to do the same in their families so that everyone could stay safe and healthy. His parents are very happy seeing him being so responsible and protective about his family.

Story 2: Bhagyashree, standard 5, student from Burka village in Assam

Bhagyashree Deka (Standard 5 student) is a girl from Burka village in Kamrup, Assam. Her father is a daily wage labourer and her mother is a homemaker. She also has two younger brothers. Since the second wave of COVID-19 has hit the communities, there were a lot of COVID-19 cases nearby and it was very important to follow precautionary measures to stay safe. But Bhagyashree's house was far from the market area due to which they could not purchase enough masks as per their need. They were over-using the masks they had, which was risky. When Bhagyashree learned about making masks at home by following very simple steps with the help of a video shared by Pratham on her father's mobile phone as a part of its communication campaign *Karona Apni Suraksha*, she jumped with joy. She prepared masks for everyone in her family which they could wash and reuse. Since this was a big problem for everyone in their neighbourhood, Bhagyashree and her mother started sharing this method with other people as well. Her friend Shimpi does not have a smartphone at home, so Bhagyashree also taught her the technique of preparing masks at home.

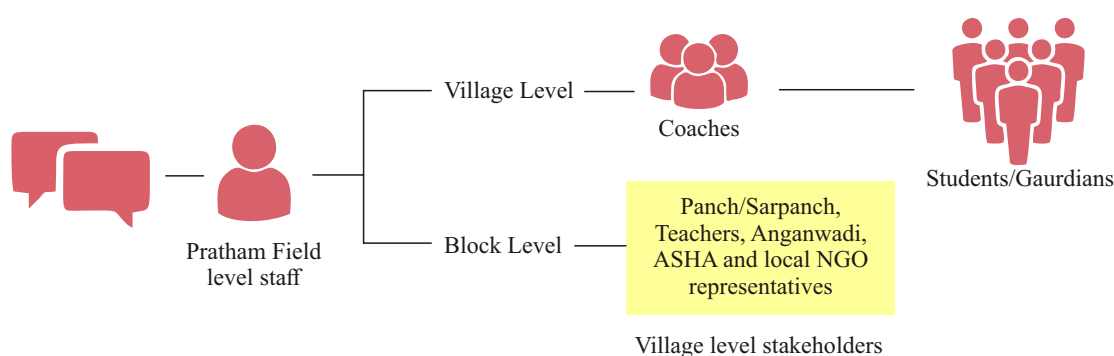*Box 2: Stories of children as COVID-19 champions*

Figure 1: Structure of reaching children and their guardians in villages

These children and their guardians were reached out in a most effective way through the existing network of Pratham field staff, volunteers and key stakeholders at the village level as presented in the figure (Figure 1) below. This communication model of rapidly and cost-effectively reaching the last mile contributed in equipping families and communities to better cope with the second wave and potential future waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, more than 26,000 communities in 21 states were reached through this campaign directly by Pratham and many more by the nearly 1,000 partner organizations that disseminated this content through their own networks. These partner organisations included other nonprofits, schools, universities and District Institutes for Education and Training (DIETs). The campaign at its peak reached over 600,000 contacts directly by Pratham and many more people indirectly. The content was delivered in 11 Indian languages and English.

In addition to the delivery of content and virtual interactions with the community, a fun and innovative way to test their COVID-19 related knowledge was also undertaken through the Karona Apni Suraksha quizzes. In two rounds, these quizzes were taken by nearly 1.2 million participants across communities with a large proportion of these at over 50% being children and adolescents under 18 years of age.

IV. LEARNINGS

The feedback and learning exercise undertaken by Pratham with a large sample of recipients had both quantitative and qualitative aspects to understand the following:

- Did the recipient read the message?

- Is the recipient able to recall the message and explain it in her/his own words?

- Is the recipient sharing or discussing the information in the message with another family member or with anyone else in the community?

- Did the recipient or another family member attempt the activity given in the video? (for e.g., mask making, using an oximeter, using a thermometer)

- Did the recipient find the content (a) very useful, (b) somewhat useful or (c) not useful? Why?

In this intense health communication campaign, the key learnings were as follows:

1. Leverage

- An efficient and effective campaign was designed rapidly by leveraging internal resources and external collaborations.

- Existing relationships and the trust built during pre-COVID-19 times were leveraged effectively to deliver content digitally that had high uptake by communities.

- A network of village volunteers and other stakeholders were leveraged to deploy the campaign rapidly and in the most cost-effective manner.

2. Effectiveness

- SMS and WhatsApp messages had similar uptake, with nearly 2/3rd of the recipients reading these messages.

- For messages where video content was additionally useful, more WhatsApp users at nearly 4/5th found the content useful compared to SMS users at nearly 2/3rd.

- Open discussion platforms like Zoom were found to be a very effective way of tackling misinformation around COVID-19 amongst village stakeholders.

3. Engagement

- Most community members who read the message could explain it in their own words, at nearly 9/10th.

- A large proportion of recipients shared these messages with their family members and other people in the community, at nearly 4/5th for WhatsApp messages and nearly 3/5th for SMS .

- The higher the frequency of two-way communication through calling recipients, the higher was their engagement with the content.

Further, a more structured survey has been undertaken by Pratham to gauge the knowledge, awareness, perceptions and practices of community members in relation to COVID-19. The phone-based *Karona Apni Suraksha* survey has been administered to over 16,000 respondents across 21 states in India.

V. CONCLUSION

Pratham recently concluded a large and successful COVID-19 related health communication campaign called *Karona Apni Suraksha* which built on its existing reach and relationships in over 26,000 communities across 21 states in India. This rapidly designed and cost-effective digitally delivered campaign proved to be an effective way of bridging the information gap in these low-tech and under-resourced communities in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic in the country. This essential, verified and accurate information is open-source and was additionally used by other organizations to share within their networks.

In this campaign, children and adolescents were actively engaged through messaging, activities and quizzes with the aim of improving their knowledge of COVID-19 so that they become practitioners and confident champions of COVID-19-appropriate behaviour in their own communities. The pandemic has kept children away from schools for more than 15 months which has adversely affected their learning and social interactions. In this scenario, Pratham has been using digital means of learning and communication with children and their communities in an attempt to make a positive difference in their lives during these difficult times.

Using Machine Learning to Accelerate School Enrolment of India's Most Vulnerable Girls

Alison Bukhari

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the 'precision targeting' approach of Educate Girls, to solving the crisis of out-of-school girls across India. If we are to meet the SDGs by 2030, which include achieving gender equality and quality education for all, we need to move fast and accelerate the rate at which we find and enroll girls in India's most remote villages.

The reasons behind girls' exclusion from school are complex, requiring mindset change and deep community engagement. However, the first problem is also to find the girls. With the use of machine learning predictions, we can locate the majority of girls in remote villages far quicker than with traditional methods; and with limited time and resources enroll them into school, helping to secure their education and their future.

Educate Girls is a non-profit organization that mobilizes communities for girls' education in India's rural and educationally backward areas. Working in partnership with the Government, Educate Girls operates in 18,000 villages of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. To date and with the government, we have ensured that 950,000 out-of-school girls are back in the classroom and have improved learning outcomes for more than 1 million children.

II. THE CHALLENGE

Despite huge advances in universal access to education in India, we still have the third-largest out-of-school girl population in the world. All too often discriminatory mindsets and practices keep girls at home or working in the fields. In 'normal' times it is estimated that 4.1 million girls aged 7 to 14 are missing from India's classrooms and this is widely considered to be a conservative number. It is, however, hard to know what the numbers are, as the problem becomes invisible if the girls are invisible.

Added to this we are now facing the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and school closures. The pandemic has been catastrophic for children, already facing a learning crisis, and now they have been kept out of school for a whole academic year. Behind the huge numbers of out-of-school children, hide the girls who have faced the shadow pandemic, bearing the burden of the lockdown and a return to old patriarchal roles in homes, sometimes facing abuse or child marriage. We are deeply concerned that when the schools reopen, a great many girls will be missing from the register.

Critical to enrolling girls into school is the local knowledge and community mobilization, but to implement enrolment strategies we first have to find the eligible girls. Villages have grown exponentially

Alison Bukhari, International Director, Educate Girls US

during the COVID-19 crisis, as huge numbers of families have returned home from the cities. The reverse migration in many areas has dramatically increased the number of children who should be in village schools, once they reopen. In one of our districts, Chitrakoot, our door-to-door survey has identified multiple villages where this has become a huge issue.

One village alone has seen 18 families return from cities across the country, with 27 children now waiting for admission in the village school. We have met drivers from Mumbai, a cook from Gujarat, all scarred by the trauma of the pandemic, lockdown, and now a lack of job security which has persuaded them to stay back in their village.

Planning for this will be an enormous challenge for the Government but, as this paper explains, Educate Girls has designed tools that can accurately predict where to find areas of the high density of out-of-school girls through a combination of community outreach and machine learning algorithms. Our key insight is that a large percentage of India's girls reside in only a few of its villages – so if we can predict where the highest out-of-school girl populations will be, we can make our work far more targeted and enroll many more girls quicker. And how we do this is through machine learning.

III. HOW WE GAINED OUR KEY INSIGHT

During our 12-year history, household visits and community outreach have been at the heart of the organization's success in getting girls back to school. However, the process has proven time-consuming and costly over the years, making our target of getting 1.5 million girls back to school by 2024 an immense challenge.

In the past, we would create a baseline

before working in a district and base our decision to work there on available public data. We would then go house to house and create our door-to-door survey, meeting families and identifying girls who were out of school, or at risk of not being enrolled.

Often, we would find that the public data was not accurate enough on its own and some villages would have a great many more out-of-school girls than we had thought. Indian Census is now outdated, and DISE data is also often 2 to 3 years old when we use it, and there isn't a single field in either dataset that captures how many out-of-school girls there are. Hence there is a need to find a way to triangulate from a lot of different data sources to solve this problem.

It was during the delivery of our Development Impact Bond between 2015 and 2018 that we gained a key insight into a potential way to improve the efficiency and impact of our work. The nature of this outcomes-based funding contract demanded that we dramatically improve the way we gathered and analyzed data. We started to see that in certain areas, 50% of the out-of-school girls were found in just 10% of the villages and 23% of villages had no out-of-school girls at all.

This information led us to the conclusion that if we could accurately predict where to find the areas where most out-of-school girls were living, we could precision target our work, conduct the door-to-door survey in half the number of villages, and still find the majority of out-of-school girls. Essentially, if we could go where the need is greatest, we could enroll many more girls with a similar budget, within a shorter time frame.

IV. THE SOLUTION

Together with our partner IDinsight, we decided to build a machine-learning algorithm to help us learn from our previous

surveys that measured how many out-of-school girls were in each village where we worked. By combining this historical program data with public data (such as the 2011 census and DISE educational dataset), we could teach an algorithm to identify villages in new geographies where we can expect to find the most out-of-school girls.

The model was built by taking our existing door-to-door survey data, of around 3 million households, gathered during the earlier phase of our work, across 8,000 villages, and merging it with publicly available administrative and education data (sources that include 313 variables, i.e. indicators that look at socio-economic and socio-cultural parameters). IDinsight tested various machine learning models and gradually improved the accuracy of the predictions. Next, using these predictions, they created heat maps that identified geographic clusters of villages, or 'hotspots' with the highest density of out-of-school girls.
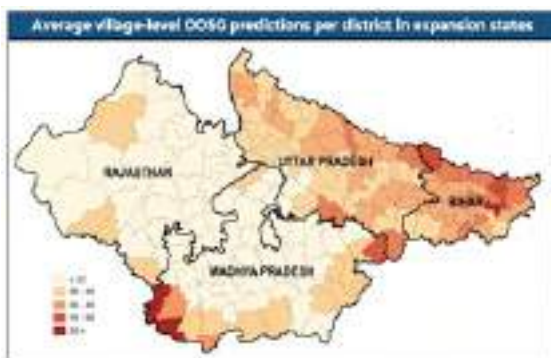
Figure 1 : Avg. village-level OOSG predictions

The machine learning algorithm now enables us to make the most of our field resources by selecting the high-burden clusters or 'hot spots', as a priority. Spot check surveys then allow us to assess accessibility to villages and plan for reduced travel time within clusters. Put simply, by hiring and deploying staff and volunteers to these clusters of villages, rather than working in all the villages in a given administrative district, we have been able to

find villages with two and a half times as many out-of-school girls per village, compared to those found through our traditional survey techniques.

It is also important to note that of the over 2 lakh children aged 5-14 that were identified as out of school, using these predictive models, approximately 64% are from scheduled tribe (ST) communities, 9% from scheduled caste (SC) communities and 18% from other backward castes (OBC).

Figure 2 : High-priority districts

In other words, over 90% of the children are from underprivileged communities, for which the equalization of opportunity through education has not yet been fully realized.

Since the algorithm was first created in 2018, we have refined it every year to increase precision – adding new data sources and data from more villages, as our door-to-door survey has grown to 5 million households. The plan is to refine the predictive model and apply it to 212,000 villages across 4 states in the Hindi belt, namely Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. Educate Girls will then be able to look at the data at a district level and prioritize the top 15-20% of villages per district, enrolling more girls into school faster. Over the next 5 or more years, the total impact of this algorithm will amount to more than 500,000 additional out-of-school girls enrolled in school than would otherwise have been possible.

V. WHERE TECHNOLOGY MEETS COMMUNITY

What is so pioneering about this approach is that it combines sophisticated technology such as machine learning and geo-tagged surveys, using smartphones, with readily available village resources (young, energetic, mission-aligned men and women) and deep community knowledge.

The use of technology has dramatically improved our targeting and efficiency, but it has to go hand in hand with the the team of village gender champions or Team Balika working on the ground, currently numbering 18,000 and a figure that will go up to 35,000 as we expand our work over the next 5 years.

Team Balika volunteers receive intensive training, ongoing mentorship, and support to help them identify the best strategies for enrolling the girls, who are currently working or kept at home. They are overseen by a cadre of field staff, again locally hired, to manage the teams and adapt on an ongoing basis the implementation plans, according to the village-level realities.

Strategies involve sitting with families and village elders, challenging damaging social norms, and presenting the benefits of and right to an education. Before the pandemic, we would then work in and alongside the school through classroom-based remedial education and support to school management committees. And now with the school closures as a result of COVID-19, we have a community-based curriculum delivered in safe spaces in target villages.

At the end of the day, it is the behaviour change communications that tips the balance and changes mindsets, such that families are then willing or happy to send their girls to school. This can be a long and engaged process, but with the right precision targeting, we can work in the areas of most

need and accelerate our ability to reach a large number of girls quicker and with fewer resources.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKING WITH THE GOVERNMENT

The pandemic and resulting lockdown continue to create incredibly difficult times for our communities but also learning for us as an organization. As the pandemic hit, the value of our data and our ability to identify those most in need through predictive analytics, became even clearer to us. When, due to the lockdown, we had to abandon our door-to-door survey, we were still able to help the government in their ration distribution, by using our predictive data to identify some of the most remote villages in need of government schemes. More often than not, as we experienced, the government had resources, but remote districts were not able to access them because of a lack of information. The predictions we can make as a result of the machine learning algorithm, are enabling Educate Girls and the Government to optimize operational inputs and locate those most in need.

And what is more, an out-of-school girl is likely to be much more vulnerable to child trafficking, child labour, malnutrition – both stunting and wasting, health issues linked to a lack of immunization, child and maternal mortality. The list goes on. Based on our experience of building an algorithm to help us identify out-of-school girls, and then our experience using our data to support the government during COVID-19, we feel confident that this approach could apply to other social issues and for wider geographical targeting. Cities could use this approach to identify the most vulnerable neighbourhoods, districts, and state administrations along with NGOs can accelerate their ability to meet child-centric Sustainable Development Goals through the

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ability to locate hotspots and deliver interventions quicker.

VII. CONCLUSION

If a problem is not quantified and located, it can become invisible. We cannot let another generation of girls become invisible and lose them to illiteracy and poverty and we have to find every last girl. There is an economic, health, and climate imperative to educate as many girls as we can, as quickly as possible, and what we need is the focus. If we can find the hotspots where there is the highest number of girls who are out of school and go there first, we can tackle large numbers of out-of-school girls, quicker and at a lower cost.

Educate Girls' five-year strategy is based on the prediction that 40% of India's out-of-school girls, c.1.56 million girls are highly likely to be found in just 5% of its 650,000 villages. While the numbers could have greatly increased post the pandemic, we know we can solve the problem much faster if we use our predictive analytics and target our resources to the villages with the greatest need.

Meher Chander, 6 years

BOOK REVIEWS

06

"Juvenile Justice- Impact and Implementation in India"

Author- G.S. Bajpai

Reviewed by: Enakshi Ganguly

Juvenile justice came into the public consciousness as an issue after the horrendous rape and murder of a physiotherapy student who came to be known as "Nirbhaya". The outcry over punishment (or what was perceived as not enough punishment) of the juvenile who was part of the group of perpetrators, led to the change in the law. Adult time for an adult crime was the demand. That led to the enactment of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2015 which introduced the possibility of transfer of children who had committed serious offences into the adult system.

Why do children offend? Who are the children who offend? What is their background? – These are important questions that need to be explored before any changes can be made in laws and policies that concern children. Unfortunately, at the time of the amendment, research that answered these questions in the context of India was still scarce. So a lot of us, including the Supreme Court of India, relied on international research.

In this scenario, this book on juvenile justice by Dr. G.S. Bajpai is very welcome. As the introduction to the book says- "There is an existing gap currently in the academic discourse about the treatment of juveniles before, during and after their conflict with the law. This book attempts to identify this lacuna in the Indian juvenile justice system and study its impact on our children".

The first four chapters deal with the theoretical context of the juvenile justice law and system, explaining the context, the legal backdrop. The rest of the book deals with the results of the study on the reformative and rehabilitative services provided in special and observation homes in Delhi, Haryana, and Punjab and identifies issues related to the implementation of the system's principles.

In all, nine observation homes and special homes (three in each state) in Delhi, Haryana, and Punjab were selected. 300 children and 30 staff of these institutions formed the sample for this study.

The schedule for the officials and inmates used a Likert scale procedure to calculate the index of performance.

The findings of the study are linked to recommendations for both preventions of crimes by children and adolescents as well as their rehabilitation. For example, the demographic profile indicates that those above 16 years or above are more vulnerable to offend. Although most of the offending children were literate, they lacked higher education. As the study recommends, "thus the dropout rates may be checked as a prevention strategy, as well as opportunities to continue education for those released from the homes should be provided …". The author has listed a range of parameters covering behaviour towards children who offend, services that need to be made available for them, infrastructure both at the

Enakshi Ganguly, Co-Founder and Advisor, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights

institutions as well as after they leave it. As he points out, Individual Care Plan is the 'fulcrum on which rides the efficiency of aims of rehabilitation and reintegration as envisaged in the Acts of 2000 and 2015". And all those who work on juvenile justice know that this remains one of the weakest links in an already broken system.

Despite provisions of the law that stress police behaviour being 'child friendly, in all three states the maximum percentage of respondents suggested that the police was hostile. Similarly, stigmatizing language is used, irrespective of the nature of the offence, which as the author points out reinforces anti-social behaviour among the young offenders. What is important to note is that against the popular perception that all

juvenile offenders are 'repeaters' and that is why the law needs to be punitive enough to be a 'deterrent', the study shows that 89.1% were first-time offenders. Most recidivists (over 80%) were 16 years and above and none of the children who had managed to continue studies up to graduation were recidivists. That itself points to the kind of support services that need to be provided and monitoring that must be in place, to ensure children do not re-offend.

In presenting the study, Dr. Bajpai has identified areas of intervention that can help to mend the juvenile justice system as well as enable the children in conflict with the law to make a fresh start. In doing so Dr. Bajpai makes an important contribution to the field of juvenile justice in India.

Know your Rights to Stay Safe

Author- Meghna Bhatia

Reviewed by: Swati Shukla and Mahima Bansal

In a country where children are under constant threat to violence, abuses against them go unrecognized even by their parents and teachers, let alone sexual abuse. Over 50% of children face sexual abuse or physical harm by someone close to them. Most children carry the childhood trauma of sexual harassment to the later stages of their life. It is time that we spread awareness and educate children, parents, and teachers to prevent child sexual abuse.

Since the issue concerns children and adults, both age groups need to find a way out of this together. The language of policies drafted by the government creates a gap in reaching the masses. It is more academically inclined. Academics and experts in the field access these documents but the principle agenda of the policy to reach out to parents and children at the receiving end is never achieved completely. Books like "Know Your Rights to Stay Safe" are an aid in bridging the gap between policymakers, parents, and children.

The book is written by Meghna Bhatia, a social entrepreneur and founder of the organization Our Voix that works for the prevention of sexual abuse.

Comics (or graphic novels) are a great resource for children and adults. The combination of words and illustrations makes for an effortless and interesting read. This book is a short, yet comprehensive resource comprising the rights of children. The book runs to 23 pages. The rights and acts included in this comic comprise issues like corporal punishment, sexual abuse, bullying, freedom of religion, and the need to understand child rights.

It covers one right in a one-page story based on the everyday experiences of children in private and public spaces. The central idea of the comic is to propagate awareness among children and adults about child rights, make parents understand that children are separate entities and need protection.

The book starts with defining "child" as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act, 2012. The author has tried laying down each example with a nuanced understanding of the civil, political, social, economic, health, and cultural rights of children. From there onwards, the book takes its readers to various experiences. The presentation of the book with narration and the related rights at the end of every instance encourages readers to think and relate them to their life. It also leaves them with the scope to explore more about each Article in the UNCRC.

This comic is a valuable piece of children's literature for parents, children, and schools. Children can then share this book with their friends and classmates and even bring it to shared reading sessions in the classroom. This comic will help children (irrespective of age) and practitioners to build vocabulary

Swati Shukla, Facilitator ECD Knowledge at Mobile Creches, Delhi.
Mahima Bansal, Junior Project Fellow, Department of Elementary Education, NCERT, Delhi.

and educate them about child rights and UNCRC. Parents can also read the book for their awareness and read to their children who are in the early stages of life. This book can be of help to both parents and teachers to start a conversation around sensitive issues. This may help create safe spaces for children in the future, where they will be able to express themselves freely. The book is available only in the English language. It is true to the fractal nature of the Indian context that few people understand and communicate in the English language. The discourse behind the book only present in English makes it difficult to reach the masses.

Ankita Ghosh, 10 years

OUR TEAM

OUR ADVISORY BOARD

OUR CHILD CONTRIBUTORS

Aryan Raj
Rukmani Devi Public School, Delhi

Ankita Ghosh
Ramjas School, Delhi

Bhawna Jain
Modern Convent School, New Delhi

Faizah Iqbal
Hamdard Public School, Delhi

Meher Chander
Spring Dales School, Delhi

Nandini Chanana
Delhi Public School, Gurgaon

Trishit Gupta
Modern Convent School, New Delhi

TEAM DCPCR

Anurag Kundu
Chairperson,
Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR)

———

Rakesh Bhatnagar
Member Secretary,
Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR)

———

B.C. Narula
Senior Consultant,
Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR)

———

Ayushi Khare
Consultant,
Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR)

———

Aditi Gyanesh
Journal Consultant,
Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR)

Our next issue:

We invite authors from across the globe to write for our journal's next issue to be published in April 2022 ! The theme is

"Second Year of COVID-19 Pandemic-Disrupted Childhoods, Disrupted Education"

COVID-19 has not yet ended and nor has our curiosity and need to understand the monumental impact it has left on young children. Children may not be the face of this pandemic, but the corona crisis has created significant disruption in their learning and development -- emotionally, mentally and educationally. To document, analyse and address its continued impact on children in the Indian context, *Children First - Journal on Children's Lives*, a peer reviewed, bi -annual publication, invites submissions for its second issue.

Authors can submit their papers under five categories, namely, research, voices from the field, critique and commentary, best practices and book reviews. We invite papers that will further understanding of the extent of the impact on children, suggest strategies to combat or mitigate those effects and help government authorities and other stakeholders to come forward to assist children to come out of these traumatic experiences.

To know more about the application process for the second issue, kindly visit our page at www.dcpcr.delhi.gov.in

Delhi Commission For Protection Of Child Rights (DCPCR)
Govt. of NCT of Delhi
5th Floor, ISBT Building, Kashmere Gate,
New Delhi- 110006 Contact- 011-23862685

Nandini Chanana, 17 years