

Challenges Of Teaching-Learning System During the Pandemic: With Special Reference to The School Education Sector

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Abstract: Schooling years are regarded a vital part of a child's life as it provides valuable training to the child with regard to growth, development and knowledge. It helps the child in becoming a successful and responsible member of the society. There is saying that the 'children of today are the hope of tomorrow'. However, with the advent of the pandemic, and the consequential closures of educational institutions, there are numerous obstacles and challenges for the schools, teachers, students and parents, which might prove detrimental to the overall teaching-learning system and a risk of affecting our future generations. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight these challenges so as to bring about awareness for one and all.

Keywords: Challenges, Pandemic, Teaching, Learning, School education, Inclusive Education.

Introduction

From time immemorial, we have witnessed that every event that unfolds has a bearing on our lives, resulting to several unintended consequences. The entire world, over the past few months is on hold due to Covid-19 pandemic. Primarily a health-related issue, then effecting economy and significantly influencing the education system mostly. The pandemic has altered the entire teaching-learning experience. It has made everyone an e-learner. With the closure of educational institutions as a temporary measure to tame the further spread of the novel corona virus and its uncertainty, online classes have become the new normal. Finding the resilience to rise to the occasion is the need of the hour for educators, students and parents. However, even when students return to classrooms, the technological impact in learning will remain dominant. In addition, who knows, Covid-19 may just be the push needed by educational institutions to morph into a live business-venture. The pandemic has left the entire world petrified. Several countries have come up with efforts to mitigate further impact of school closures. For instance, UNESCO is rendering supports to the communities, particularly vulnerable and marginalized to facilitate unhindered education for all through online learning. As per UNESCO report, the pandemic has affected more than 1.26 billion learners across 191 countries.

Likewise, India with the rest of the world has imposed closure of educational institutions in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus. Because of which, 91% (320 million students, UNESCO report) ranging from school students to postgraduate and research scholars have been equally affected by these closures. The crucial activities of education sectors around this period like board examinations, nursery school admissions, entrance tests of various universities and competitive examinations, among others have taken a severe setback. Since no immediate solution to fight and stop the outbreak of Covid-19 is found yet. The closure of educational institutions will not only have a short-term impact on the continuity of learning but also give rise to far-fetched health, economic, mental and societal consequences to many young learners. The most affected structure of schooling and learning by these closures are on teaching and assessment methodologies. Likewise, only a handful of private schools and colleges have been able to cope with online teaching methods. Whereas, the rest, on the other hand is still struggling to catch up due to low-income and lack of access to e-learning options. For a change, e-Learning is being viewed as an interesting and interactive alternative compared to regular classroom situation. Nevertheless, Covid-19 has prompted experts to redefine the conventional mode of education. Since digital education appears to be a reliable solution to fill in the void for classroom education during the pandemic period to minimize the chances of spreading to students until normal classes resume. In the near future digital education is expected to be an integral part of mainstream school education. This will enable inclusive education by facilitating learning across diverse corners in the country. More so, it will provide opportunities for educators to come up with customized learning solutions for every student.

Technology has completely revolutionized the entire learning system. It has enabled each student connect with excellent education, which is not easy through traditional ways. It has made learning more interesting, personalized and enjoyable. Developing a purposeful and well-defined online course to support the instructor and learner calls for devotion to appropriate time and embedding the applicable aspects into the e-learning environment. The educational institutions in India, from schools to

universities, can therefore, use this present adversity as a blessing in disguise and make digital education a major part of the learning process for all learners for the future. A paradigm shift in the education sector in India for the past few months have been observed as schools and teachers are compelled to adapt with the new normal. In the absence of a comprehensive action plan, for the complex Indian school education system divided by multiple boards of unequal standards the advantages of excellent learning will be acquired only by a section of teachers and students, who can adapt and afford it.

Digital learning has many advantages in itself like no physical boundaries, more learning engagement experience unlike traditional learning. It is also cost-effective and students get to learn in the confinement of their comfort zones. However, digital learning has some limitations. Since, face-to-face interaction is perceived as the best form of communication compared to the rather impersonalized nature of remote learning. Globally, online education is gaining its momentum. In India, however, we still have a long way to go before digital learning is seen as mainstream education. State governments are the largest providers of education. However, they are plagued by several challenges including large teacher student ratios, infrastructure and lack of quality training amongst teachers, scarcity of Sign Language instructors and interpreter for Inclusive e-Education. The coronavirus pandemic is a stress test for education systems around the world. With many different approaches being taken by countries worldwide, the coronavirus crises are an opportunity for policy makers to learn from each other and co-operate to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The ongoing worldwide pandemic of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is caused by SARS-CoV-2. Efforts to control this virus failed and began to spread worldwide after it was first identified in Wuhan, China. On 11th March 2020, the WHO declared it a pandemic. More than 186 million cases have been confirmed and more than 4.01 million confirmed deaths as of 10th July, 2021 attributed to the virus. The pandemic has affected almost every field of human activity- Social, Political, Economic, Religion, Education, etc.

Importance of School Education

The school education system in India is divided into four levels: lower primary, upper primary, high school, and higher secondary. The lower primary stage is divided into five “standards”, upper primary stage into two, high school into three, and higher secondary into two.

School years are the most important part of a child’s life. It gives precious training to the child in terms of knowledge, growth, and development. The school provides knowledge for being a successful and an active member of the society. It also educates the students on becoming a responsible citizen. It has been rightly said that the children of today are the hope of tomorrow. Therefore, this implication is parallel to the future of our country, and is reflected through the quality of our present system of education. A school must therefore arouse inquisitiveness in the young, receptive minds and imbibe them with the necessary tools to be better human beings.

With the advent of the pandemic, and the consequential closing down of schools, there are many obstacles and challenges for the schools, students, parents, and teachers which might prove detrimental to the overall teaching-learning system. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight these challenges and also integrate some measures with an aim to ensure quality of school education in our society.

Challenges of Teaching-Learning System in the School Education Sector

COVID-19 came unexpectedly and altered the lifestyle of people all around the world. Out of the many impacts of COVID-19, an important area of impact was the closure of schools. In the beginning, most governments decided to temporarily close the schools to trim down the impact of Covid-19. Schools were reopened after sometime, which accelerated the number of infection rates and therefore they had to be closed again. The closing down of schools has brought about numerous challenges which are highlighted below:

1. Lack of Resources: Despite of the schools being closed down; the students are attending classes through online medium. However, on the other side, many school children and teachers are struggling to obtain the gadgets and other resources required for online classes.

2. Digital teaching: Teachers who were once experts in using the blackboard, chalk, books, traditional and conventional teaching are forced to adopt new method of teaching which is to be done digitally. Many teachers are still finding it very difficult to adjust to this new anomaly.

3. Illiterate parents: Educated parents are helping their children in whichever they can during the pandemic, but there are many illiterate parents and their feeling of helplessness to help in their children’s education.

4. Mid-Day Meal: Free meal is the only reason for coming to school for many children in India. The Mid-day Meal Scheme has been successfully serving this purpose for a long time. However, with the closure of schools, many children cannot avail free meal endangering their survival and nutrition. Since most of these children belong to rural poor families, there are reports of child labor for supporting self and family.

5. Low-budget Schools: The pandemic has affected so many areas in the school education sector. One such area is the low-budget private schools. Due to the mandatory closure of all educational institutions, these low-budget schools are unable to maintain themselves due to the high expenses/expensive resources involved in facilitating the students and teachers with the new method of teaching-learning system. Moreover, there are schools that cannot pay monthly salaries to its teachers as a result of the lockdown.

6. The great digital divide: There is a great digital divide in rural and urban schools. As per a recent survey, over 75% students find it hard to study online, over 80% students need assistance to shift from offline to online and over 25% students responded that they need some kind of training to pursue education through online mode. It has been observed that students from urban schools have an edge over their peers belonging to rural schools in terms of access to learning resources and help connected with the present online teaching-learning system.

7. Vernacular content: Another challenge face by the schools is the language. Adjusting to online teaching-learning is easier for English medium students and teachers due to the readily available tools, applications or content. However, this creates a problem when vernacular languages dominate the Indian school education system. Only a negligible number of ed-tech firms provide vernacular content.

8. Quality: The quality of content is another issue. Providing quality content is a major task for Ed-tech firms. However, it has been found that there is no check on the quality of content provided by the platforms to the students. Apart from this, there is also a question of quality education through online mode. Continuous efforts are being made by the government, schools and the teachers to facilitate quality education through online mode during these desperate times.

9. Access to internet and disparities: As per the Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India report, 23.8% of Indian households have internet access. Out of this, only 14.9% of rural households have access to internet compared to 42% urban households. Only 13% of people who were surveyed (aged above five) in rural areas are able to use the internet. Moreover, only 8.5% of females in rural areas know how to utilize the internet. Furthermore, just 4.4% of rural families have a computer as opposed to 23.4% of urban families.

Though online learning tools are hyped for being affordable, inclusive and customizable, it is not the same for getting access to the internet. There is an enormous gender gap in internet usage in India. As per the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) report (2019), 33% female have internet access as opposed to 67% male. The disparity was even more obvious in rural areas, where only 28% women had access to the internet, as opposed to 72% men.

10. Sudden change in learning platform: The unexpected shift in focus to online learning without proper planning resulted in the teachers trying their best to catch up and finding ways to teach effectively virtually. The schools are also trying to shape their curriculum to fit a format it was not actually meant for. Training given to teachers does not necessarily include skills required to carry out online teaching-learning transaction. This drawback on the part of the teachers could have an effect on their ability to communicate the learning material effectively to their students, which will result in poor quality of education.

11. Medium of instruction and communication barriers: Students using English as their medium of instruction may find it easier getting adjusted to the online mode of learning since most of the online tools and content are English based. However, online resources are very limited for most of the Indian schools which are dominated by vernacular languages. The challenges will become more evident due to these factors where face-to-face interaction will not be possible. If students cannot ask questions to clarify their doubts—due to internet connectivity issues or the organization of classes or are left to learn some materials by themselves, it could have an effect on their meaningful understanding of various concepts.

12. Increase in drop-out rate: Schools are likely to witness an increase in dropout rate due to the lack of a congenial atmosphere for teaching-learning. Young school students are in danger of getting distracted by leisure game consoles, social media at their comforts of home and therefore might not feel a sense of belongingness while taking online classes. Effective delivery of education is also at stake because learning at school level is very different from higher education. The same digital mode of education cannot be applied at every level of education.

13. Assessment and Evaluation: The shift from conventional face-to-face class to online mode has a severe impact on assessments and evaluation. It has been observed that assessments and evaluation through online is a challenging task. Teachers are being compelled to alter their assessment types to fit the online mode. Also, it is difficult to supervise the students on how they are learning and cannot ensure that they are not cheating during online exams. Furthermore, practical tests, laboratory tests and performance tests are not possible to conduct online. Moreover, students who lack access to the internet are unable to take assessments and evaluations. Assessment and evaluation of students' performance in online learning mode is easier said than done for both teachers and students particularly, technical competencies, teaching practicum and the assessment of practical skills. As per the UNESCO report 2020, stakeholders in countries with dependable ICT infrastructure and internet access, the sudden transition to online mode has been challenging. They also need training to deliver online learning successfully, but such facility is very limited especially in developing countries. Education disparities are a threat to the continuity of our education system at a time of unforeseen closure of educational institutions. Because, there are an inadequate number of computers, limited access to the internet and mobile

network, and shortage of ICT trained teachers in developing countries. Thus, even if online teaching-learning is a good opportunity to continue education during these desperate times, it is a challenging for developing countries like India.

14. Mental and Physical Health: According to UNESCO, the shutting down of schools has a negative effect on the mental and physical health of students, parents, and teachers. Due to closure of schools, young boy and girl students in rural areas may be compelled to fully support their families in whichever way they can. Girl students from poor families and rural areas are in danger of sexual abuse, forced labor, and early marriage. The rise in number of infection and death rates has also created a sense of anxiety and uncertainty among one and all, especially the mental and physical health of students.

15. Challenges on Inclusive e-Education: The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Inclusive education is huge. With the school closures to tame the further spread of the corona virus, tens of thousands of students across the globe have been affected. In India, 70 million persons are identified with some sort of disabilities. Of which, about 2 percent get to see through school education and about 1 percent gets employed. The rapid paradigm-shift on the teaching-learning not only have increased vulnerability, which they already have been facing lately, but also the risk of being marginalized once again only gets widen, leaving them at a great disadvantage. The following are some of the challenges to Inclusive e-Education: -

- **Widening digital-divide in E-learning:** The sudden change on education has impacted children with special needs more than any others, as the widening digital divide in e-learning have plagued all efforts conducive for sustainable and inclusive e-learning situation. One reason could be that digital education platforms are not accessible and more so it does not cater much to students with special needs. There is lack of standard policies for digital access for disabled persons (Arman Ali, 2020). The prospect to online learning is possible only if it is provided in an accessible way.
- **Understanding multiple barriers to accessibility:**
 - a) Access to the built-in environment (easy navigation all around)
 - b) Access to admission procedures, websites, textbooks, notes, etc.
 - c) Access to teaching methodologies like Sign Language (SL) instructors and Interpreters, technology for hearing and visually impaired.
 - d) Access to examination methods- parameters, aptitude assessment, etc.
- **Lack of trained Sign Language (SL) instructors:** There is a scarcity of trained SL faculty who are sensitized to impart e-Learning with profound efficacy, in our institutions, which has resulted to worsening the situation.
- **Access to digital devices:** Inequalities of students in accessing devices available that seem to host many learning applications, and the increased learning reliance on digital-education by many students with additional learning needs, has contributed towards further challenges.
- **Exclusion from online-environment:** Students with disabilities faces exclusion from online environments. The main issue is in using, as a result of inaccessible learning design. For instance, learning applications that do not allow text size to be increased. In addition, there is denial of reasonable accommodations such as screen reader software or adaptive computer controls. And the need for training like coaching in how to use the equipment, one-on-one support services to navigating social interactions, etc.
- **Lack of Parental support due to digital illiteracy:** Families' access to technology and involvement in their child's online learning is reported to be negligible. For some families this may involve unequal access to the internet, or to devices such as smart phones, laptops or tablets, etc. Parents' lacking in digital knowledge only adds up further challenges.
- **Lack of support from schools:** The importance of schools responding flexibly to the needs of all students and teachers is considered to be of paramount. Strong and supportive team work always see the light of day, no matter the situation. And Inclusive Education always works best when the schools, staffs, teachers and parents, all come together in harmony of their work. For instance, teachers teaching in small teams and supporting each other with lesson planning and sharing of school resources. It is something that schools which provide inclusive education setting have always done. However, the need to show the same became very critical during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the severe disparities that exist between the rich and the poor, rural and urban areas, and between genders. These disparities reveal the drawback in access to school education, including virtual platforms. While a thrust towards online learning is reasonable in these desperate times, the existing system is not enough to serve as a suitable alternative to conventional learning. Following the present route, a failure or reluctance to build and toughen the education infrastructure will only drive the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged even further into the margins of society, and even worse, leave them behind. The deplorable statistics bring to light the significance of a comprehensive plan of action, in the absence of which a large number of school-going students will be unable to avail basic education in the days to come. Although various organizations are working to mitigate the challenges brought on by the sudden shift to online learning, there needs to be a dedicated support from the central and state governments to improve digital infrastructure for virtual learning and tailor the school syllabi and teacher training programs. UNICEF has suggested some support measures for continued access to quality education during this pandemic. This comprises the use of distance learning

strategies, assigning reading and exercises for home study, radio or television teaching of academic content, assigning teachers to conduct remote follow-up with students, and develop advanced education strategies. Technology has come to save the day for education, thus helping our students and teachers to bond virtually through online classrooms, webinars, digital exams, and so on. Everything is happening for the well-being of our students so that they can stay safe at home. We were not prepared for this, but it came, so the only solution is to go through this together, by updating the infrastructure and thinking of ways to carry out the situation and facilitating education to every child amid the pandemic.

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