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COVID-19 PANDEMIC: IMPACT AND CHALLENGES BEFORE EDUCATION

Ms.Arshdeep Kaur(Assistant Professor)

Dev Samaj College of Education for Women, FZR City

thind.arsh7@gmail.com

98554-28635

Abstract

The sudden outbreak of a deadly disease called Covid-19 caused by a Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) shook the entire world. Around 32 crore learners stopped to move schools/colleges and all educational activities. The outbreak of COVID-19 has taught us that change is inevitable. It has worked as a catalyst for the educational institutions to grow and opt for platforms with technologies, which have not been used before. The World Health Organization declared it as a pandemic. This situation challenged the education system across the world and forced educators to shift to an online mode of teaching overnight. Many academic institutions that were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approach had no option but to shift entirely to online teaching-learning. The spread of COVID-19 has sent shockwaves across the globe. The public health crisis, unprecedented in our lifetimes, has caused severe human suffering and loss of life. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a severe impact on higher education as universities closed their premises and countries shut their borders in response to lockdown measures. Although higher education institutions were quick to replace face-to-face lectures with online learning, these closures affected learning and examinations as well as the safety and legal status of international students in their host country. Perhaps most importantly, the crisis raises questions about the value offered by a university education which includes networking and social opportunities as well as educational content. To remain relevant, universities will need to reinvent their learning environments so that digitalization expands and complements student-teacher and other relationships.

Keywords: COVID-19, Impact, Challenges, Education.

Introduction

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, so do the risks we face. The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped at national borders. It has affected people regardless of nationality, level of education, income or gender. But the same has not been true for its consequences, which have hit the most vulnerable hardest. Education is no exception. Students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents and eager and

able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shutting out when their schools shut down. This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education systems – from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs. While the educational community has made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, children and students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the Internet, television or radio. Teachers also had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of teaching, for which they may not have been trained. In particular, learners in the most marginalised groups, who don't have access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a severe impact on higher education as universities closed their premises and countries shut their borders in response to lockdown measures. Although higher education institutions were quick to replace face-to-face lectures with online learning, these closures affected learning and examinations as well as the safety and legal status of international students in their host country. Perhaps most importantly, the crisis raises questions about the value offered by a university education which includes networking and social opportunities as well as educational content. To remain relevant, universities will need to reinvent their learning environments so that digitalization expands and complements student-teacher and other relationships. Reopening schools and universities will bring unquestionable benefits to students and the wider economy. In addition, reopening schools will bring economic benefits to families by enabling some parents to return to work. Those benefits, however, must be carefully weighed against the health risks and the requirement to mitigate the toll of the pandemic. The need for such trade-offs calls for sustained and effective coordination between education and public health authorities at different levels of government, enhanced by local participation and autonomy, tailoring responses to the local context. Several steps can be taken to manage the risks and trade-offs, including physical distancing measures, establishing hygiene protocols, revising personnel and attendance policies, and investing in staff training on appropriate measures to cope with the virus

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 to everyday life meant that as many as 40 million children worldwide have missed out on early childhood education in their critical pre-school year. They thus missed a stimulating and enriching environment, learning opportunities, social interaction and in some cases adequate nutrition. This is likely to compromise their longer-term healthy development, especially those children from poor and disadvantaged families. In technical and vocational education and training systems, vulnerabilities including low levels of digitalization and long-standing structural weaknesses, have been brought to light by the crisis. Disruptions in work places made it difficult to implement apprenticeship schemes and work-based learning modes, key elements of a functional and market-responsive technical and vocational system. In the

higher education sub-sector, while online learning has generally taken place through recorded lectures and online platforms, some universities have postponed learning and teaching until further notice, due to the lack of information technology (IT) infrastructure for both students and teachers. Questions also remain about how to harmonize semesters and academic calendars, as some programmes have been successfully implemented online, while others could not be.

Research highlights certain dearth such as the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online teaching, the information gap, non-conducive environment for learning at home, equity and academic excellence in terms of higher education. This article evaluates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning process across the world. The challenges and opportunities of online and continuing education during the COVID-19 pandemic are summarized and way forward suggested. As schools have been closed to cope with the global pandemic, students, parents and educators around the globe have felt the unexpected ripple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. While governments, frontline workers and health officials are doing their best slowing down the outbreak, education systems are trying to continue imparting quality education for all during these difficult times. Many students at home/living space have undergone psychological and emotional distress and have been unable to engage productively. The best practices for online homeschooling are yet to be explored.

Impact of Crisis on Education

While the long-term impact of the crisis is uncertain, the **pandemic may affect public spending** on education as funds are diverted into the health sector and the economy

11% of public expenditure was devoted to education before the pandemic*

The spread of **COVID-19** has sent shockwaves across the globe

Economic pressures

Global economic activity is expected to fall by at least **6%** in 2020

Some countries have introduced short-term support measures:

Supply of digital learning devices



Financial support to students and schools



Funds for safety and cleaning equipment



Positive impact of COVID-19 on Education

Though the outbreak of COVID-19 has created many negative impacts on education, educational institutions of India have accepted the challenges and trying their best to provide seamless support services to the students during the pandemic. Indian education system got the opportunity for transformation from traditional system to a new era. The following points may be considered as the positive impacts.

- Move towards Blended Learning: COVID-19 has accelerated adoption of digital technologies to deliver education. Educational institutions moved towards blended mode of learning. It encouraged all teachers and students to become more technology savvy. New ways of delivery and assessments of learning opened immense opportunities for a major transformation in the area of curriculum development and pedagogy. It also gives access to large pools of learners at a time.
- Rise in use of Learning Management Systems: Use of learning management systems by educational institutions became a great demand. It opened a great opportunity for the companies those have been developing and strengthening learning management systems for use educational institutions.
- Enhance the use of soft copy of learning material: In lockdown situation students were not able to collect the hard copies of study materials and hence most of the students used of soft copies materials for reference.
- Improvement in collaborative work- There is a new opportunity where collaborative teaching and learning can take on new forms. Collaborations can also happen among faculty/teachers across the world to benefit from each other.
- Rise in online meetings- The pandemic has created a massive rise in teleconferencing, virtual meetings, and webinars and e-conferencing opportunities
- Enhanced Digital Literacy: The pandemic situation induced people to learn and use digital technology and resulted in increasing the digital literacy.
- Improved the use of electronic media for sharing information: Learning materials are shared among the students easily and the related queries are resolved through e-mail, SMS, phone calls and using different social Medias like WhatsApp or Facebook.
- World wide exposure: Educators and learners are getting opportunities to interact with peers from around the world. Learners adapted to an international community.
- Better time management: Students are able to manage their time more efficiently in online education during pandemics.
- Demand for Open and Distance Learning (ODL): During the pandemic situation most of the students preferred ODL mode as it encourages self-learning providing opportunities to learn from diverse resources and customized learning as per their needs.

Negative impact of COVID-19 on Education

Education sector has suffered a lot due to the outbreak of COVID-19. It has created many negative impacts on education and some of them are as pointed below:

- Educational activity hampered: Classes have been suspended and exams at different levels postponed. Different boards have already postponed the annual examinations and entrance tests. Admission process got delayed. Due to continuity in lockdown, student suffered a loss of nearly 3 months of the full academic year of 2020-21 which is going to further deteriorate the situation of continuity in education and the as students would face much difficulty in resuming schooling again after a huge gap.
- Impact on employment: Most of the recruitment got postponed due to COVID-19 Placements for students may also be affected with companies delaying the on board of students. Unemployment rate is expected to be increased due to this pandemic. In India, there is no recruitment in Govt. sector and fresh graduates fear withdrawal of their job offers from private sectors because of the current situation.
- Unprepared teachers/students for online education- Not all teachers/students are good at it or at least not all of them were ready for this sudden transition from face to face learning to online learning. Most of the teachers are just conducting lectures on video platforms such as Zoom, Google meet etc. which may not be real online learning without any dedicated online learning platform.
- Reduced global employment opportunity- Some may lose their jobs from other countries and the pass out students may not get their job outside India due to restrictions caused by COVID-19. Many Indians might have returned home after losing their jobs overseas due to COVID-19. Hence, the fresh students who are likely to enter the job market shortly may face difficulty in getting suitable employment. Many students who have already got jobs through campus interviews may not be able to join their jobs due to lockdown. The Indians who have been doing their jobs abroad may lose their jobs. Recent graduates in India are of also fearing for withdrawal of job offers from corporate sectors because of movement restriction in the current pandemic situation
- Access to digital world: As many students have limited or no internet access and many students may not be able to afford computer, laptop or supporting mobile phones in their homes, online teaching-learning may create a digital divide among students. The lockdown has hit the poor students very hard in India as most of them are unable to explore online learning according to various reports. Thus the online teaching-learning method during pandemic COVID-19 may enhance the gap between rich/poor and urban/rural.
- Some significant issues associated with distance learning strategies like the availability and access to digital devices with internet connectivity, the need for safe learning spaces, creating capabilities for

teachers, families and students to operate and navigate digital devices, and engaging lesson plans for disabled students and other marginalized groups should be addressed by Govt. and the stakeholders

Challenges in Teaching and Learning

With the availability of a sea of platforms and online educational tools, the users—both educators and learners—face frequent hiccups while using it or referring to these tools. Some of the challenges identified are summarized as follows:

- Broadly identified challenges with e-learning are accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning and educational policy. Many countries have substantial issues with a reliable Internet connection and access to digital devices. While, in many developing countries, the economically backward children are unable to afford online learning devices, the online education poses a risk of exposure to increased screen time for the learner. Therefore, it has become essential for students to engage in offline activities and self-exploratory learning. Lack of parental guidance, especially for young learners, is another challenge, as both parents are working. There are practical issues around physical workspaces conducive to different ways of learning.
- The innately motivated learners are relatively unaffected in their learning as they need minimum supervision and guidance, while the vulnerable group consisting of students who are weak in learning face difficulties. Some academically competent learners from economically disadvantaged background are unable to access and afford online learning.
- The level of academic performance of the students is likely to drop for the classes held for both year-end examination and internal examination due to reduced contact hour for learners and lack of consultation with teachers when facing difficulties in learning/understanding.
- Student assessments are carried out online, with a lot of trial and error, uncertainty and confusion among the teachers, students and parents. The approach adopted to conduct online examination varies as per the convenience and expertise among the educators and the compatibility of the learners. Appropriate measures to check plagiarism is yet to be put in place in many schools and institutions mainly due to the large number of student population
- School time also raises social skills and awareness besides being fun for the children. There are economic, social and psychological repercussions on the life of students while they are away from the normal schedule of schools. Many of these students have now taken online classes, spending additional time on virtual platforms, which have left children vulnerable to online exploitation. Increased and unstructured time spent on online learning has exposed children to potentially harmful and violent content as well as greater risk of cyber bullying. School closures and strict containment measures mean more families have been relying on technology and digital solutions to keep children

engaged in learning, entertained and connected to the outside world, but not all children have the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to keep themselves safe online.

- In the case of online learning majority of the learners are from rural villages where parents are mostly illiterate farmers. Students are engaged in assisting parents in farm activities such as agriculture, tending to cattle and household chores. Some students even requested to postpone exam time towards the afternoon since they had to work on the fields during morning hours.
- Some students expressed that they had to attend to their ailing parents/grandparents/family members and take them to hospitals. By evening, when they are back home, it becomes difficult for them to keep abreast with the lessons. Parents whose children are in lower grades feel that it would be better to let the children repeat the next academic year. Majority of students do not have access to smartphones or TV at home in addition to poor Internet connectivity. There is no or less income for huge population due to closure of business and offices. The data package (costs) is comparatively high against average income earned, and continuous access to Internet is a costly business for the farming community.
- Online face-to-face classes (video) is encouraged by most; however, some students (economically disadvantaged) have expressed that the face-to-face online class consumes more data packages. The teachers are in dilemma as to whom to listen to and which tools to adopt. Some think pre-recorded videos could help; however, this would restrict interactions. It is difficult to design a proper system to fit the learning needs and convenience of all students.

However, the challenges do not end with the immediate crisis. In particular, spending on education may be compromised in the coming years. As public funds are directed to health and social welfare, long-term public spending on education is at risk despite short-term stimulus packages in some countries. Private funding will also become scarce as the economy weakens and unemployment rises. At tertiary level, the decline in the international student mobility following travel restrictions is already reducing the funds available in countries where foreign students pay higher fees. More widely, the lockdown has exacerbated inequality among workers. While teleworking is often an option for the most qualified, it is seldom possible for those with lower levels of education, many of whom have been on the front lines in the response to the pandemic, providing essential services to society.

Strategies for Prevention

Preventing a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe requires urgent action from all. Education is not only a fundamental human right. It is an enabling right with direct impact on the realization of all other human rights. It is a global common good and a primary driver of progress across all Sustainable Development Goals as a bedrock of just, equal, inclusive peaceful societies. When

education systems collapse, peace, prosperous and productive societies cannot be sustained. In order to mitigate the potentially devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and stakeholders are encouraged to pursue the following policy responses:

✓ **SUPPRESS TRANSMISSION OF THE VIRUS AND PLAN THOROUGHLY FOR SCHOOL RE-OPENINGS**

The single most significant step that countries can take to hasten the reopening of schools and education institutions is to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks. Once they have done so, to deal with the complex challenge of reopening, it is important to be guided by the following parameters: ensure the safety of all; plan for inclusive reopening; listen to the voices of all concerned; and coordinate with key factors, including the health community.

✓ **PROTECT EDUCATION FINANCING AND COORDINATE FOR IMPACT**

The pandemic has pushed the world into the deepest global recession in living memory which will have lasting effects on economies and public finances. National authorities and the international community need to protect education financing through the following avenues: strengthen domestic revenue mobilization, preserve the share of expenditure for education as a top priority and address inefficiencies in education spending; strengthen international coordination to address the debt crisis; and protect official development assistance (ODA) for education.

✓ **BUILD RESILIENT EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediate challenges of safely reopening schools and positions them to better cope with future crises. In this regard, governments could consider the following: focus on equity and inclusion; reinforce capacities for risk management, at all levels of the system; ensure strong leadership and coordination; and enhance consultation and communication mechanisms.

✓ **REIMAGINE EDUCATION AND ACCELERATE CHANGE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The massive efforts made in a short time to respond to the shocks to education systems remind us that change is possible. We should seize the opportunity to find new ways to address the learning

crisis and bring about a set of solutions previously considered difficult or impossible to implement. The following entry points could be to the fore of our efforts: focus on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups; offer skills for employability programmes; support the teaching profession and teachers' readiness; expand the definition of the right to education to include connectivity; remove barriers to connectivity; strengthen data and monitoring of learning; strengthen the articulation and flexibility across levels and types of education and training.

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