COVID 19 and The Magnified Learning Crisis

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Abstract

COVID-19 has thrown educations systems across the globe out of gear. This is when India and several countries are already in the grip of a learning crisis for over two decades. Children especially girls from marginalised background have also faced challenges in education continuity which require digital connectivity. Countries across the globe are adopting a host of strategies to combat the crisis. It is pertinent that India designs its own inclusive and equitable home grown solutions to face a protracted crisis like COVID-19 that threatens to turn back decades of advancement through pro education policies and programmes.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Learning Crisis, Curriculum, Teacher, Technology in Education*

COOVID 19 and the magnified learning crisis

Today we are living in what is potentially one of the greatest threats in our lifetime to global education, a gigantic educational crisis. School closures have left millions of children out of school, and as we learned with Ebola, once schooling is interrupted, there is a real risk that children will not return to school. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 320 million children and youth in 132 countries are out of school. This is 59.9 percent of the total enrolled learners in the world[15]. From amongst those out of school, marginalised girls are more at risk than boys of dropping out of school altogether following school closures. Data[16] from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone estimates that approximately 743 million girls are out of school due to the COVID 19 crisis.

Learning Crisis a lived reality - For almost two decades, education systems around the world have been grappling with a learning crisis as many students in school were not learning the fundamental skills that are needed for life. The World Bank's "Learning Poverty" indicator – the % of children who cannot read and understand at age 10 – stood at 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries – before the COVID 19 outbreak started.

We stare at a future where the pandemic further worsens these outcomes even more if we do not act fast. Moreover, countries like India have very unequal education systems, and these negative impacts will be felt disproportionately by children from the bottom of the socio-economic stratum. Children in India are far more susceptible to struggle in such a situation with the insufficient financing for education, especially to support schools, teachers and students to fight re-emergence of the virus and to stay safe from the indirect effects of further outbreaks. In the wake of the global pandemic that we face today, the immediate impact on children and youth is a loss in learning and increased dropouts. Teachers are without the knowhow and experience of using digital skills, parent's involvement in children's education process is minimal and sporadic, and the government is also grappling with gaps and challenges in connectivity, hardware, integration of digital tools in the curriculum and teacher's readiness in using technology effectively.

Beginning the school year late has completely disrupted the lives of many children, their parents, and teachers. A low-income country like India has vast inequalities in terms of educational opportunities available for children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The pandemic has amplified these inequalities to have an even larger negative impact on children's learning levels. The first reaction of the Indian Government to this crisis is providing distance learning. There are several government agencies and private players offering online tutoring classes hurriedly launched to coincide

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[15] https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

[16] Ebola: beyond the health emergency. Summary of research into the consequences of the Ebola outbreak for children and communities in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Plan International, February 2015

with the school calendar year. But they act as fillers in the absence of face-to-face classroom learning. The media of transmission comprises different online platforms[17].

The International Telecommunication Union, UN's internet and telecoms agency, estimates that around 54% of the global population - or 4.1 billion people - use the internet. But only one in five people in the least developed countries are online. Data collated by World Economic Forum (2019) reveals that, in India, 75 percent population does not have a smartphone and only 40 percent have a mobile phone. Technology is yet to penetrate remote areas, and thereby relying exclusively on it would imply that we fail to reach the most marginalised children and their families. Alternative means (paper-based resources) require resources and political will which are yet to gain acceptance in India.

Furthermore, school closures have impacted social relationships and peer-to-peer interactions. The role of parents and families becomes critical in this scenario - a role they are ill prepared to play with the low education levels and economic and social distress caused by the pandemic. Support through some of the most common communication media (Radio, TV, SMS messages) is the minimal requirement in staying connected. Schools also provide children with their most nutritious meal of the day. The mid-day meal programme, essential for cognitive development and well-being of children, stands suspended in the wake of school closures.

Information about the likely path of the pandemic changes day by day, influenced by the uncertainty around which mitigation measures India is taking. The process of reopening of schools might be the last step the government takes as authorities will want to reduce agglomeration or the possibility of a second wave of the pandemic. If the reopening of schools is delayed, India needs to adhere to the Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools and ensure to not use them as temporary health facilities. This will avoid the risk of contamination and delayed return to school. The mission of education systems is to overcome the learning crisis we were already living in and to respond to the pandemic that we are all facing. The challenge today is to try and reduce the negative impact that this pandemic will have on learning and schooling, and to build on this experience to get back on a path of faster improvement in learning.

A structured rapid assessment through tele-calling methodology is effective to gather information to design a response strategy[18]. The database can facilitate learning during lockdown and a recovery phase for parents, School Management Committees, and teachers. Disseminating COVID-19 related messages on social distancing, handwashing and ways of engaging with children, especially through SMCs, is important. During the recovery phase, there should be a *"Safe Return to Schools"* campaign focused on adherence to social distancing norms, and by supporting local bodies in disinfection of these spaces[19].

Common communication points (religious institutes and public distribution spaces) in community will have to be leveraged to display signage. Traditional mediums of communication such as community radio system, spreading messages through mobile units having audio-video system, need to be tapped into. The resources will also be cascaded to parents through frontline workers. During such an emergency, a child's normal protective support gets eroded and increases the risk of diverse and newer problems, and also amplifies preexisting problems (disruption of social networks, limited learning material, no access to friends, too much exposure to social media, and negative news, difficultly in adjusting in the course of events), including parents' inability to cope with children's behavior and reaction during the emergencies and recovery phase[20].

Planned family and intergenerational learning activities in education response and recovery period could contribute substantially to ensure

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[17] The Diksha National Teachers Platform for India by NCTE, for example, provides quality teaching learning and assessment resources. Teachers can also create their own content and upload it on the portal. The NROERs by NCERT are repository of freely available open resources for different subjects and grades.

[18] Digital Policy for a Lockdown: How Tech Can Help Us Adapt to a Radically Altered World, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 2020

[19] Guidelines for Safe Return to Schools, State Education Department, Government of Karnataka, 2020

[20] Save Our Education, Protect every child's right to learn in the COVID-19 response and recovery, Save the Children, 2020

the quality of learning continuity as well as creating a literate environment at home and in communities in the long run. Countries are making use of a rich body of resources to sustain family learning by putting together useful open resources. Families in Schools Foundation in the United States has a dedicated webpage to COVID-19 resources, which also includes activities for children with special needs. The National Agency for Adult Literacy in Ireland has created a website with practical ideas for parents of children aged up to 12. In Australia, an online learning platform has been created for parents and caregivers to learn how to support children's learning at home. These resources greatly support families at a time when most countries globally have switched to a digital mode of education during the pandemic.

Take-home learning packages can contribute to reducing inequalities in access. To address the digital gap, countries such as Mauritania and Jamaica, have provided families with take-home learning packages, which include learning materials, play kits and practical guidance for parents[21]. Similarly, family literacy providers in Gambia distribute existing learning resource packages to families and, on request, provide one-to-one guidance to families in need.

The use of TV and radio, supported by media campaigns and guidance for parents, constitutes an effective tool to reach families[22]: In countries where comprehensive family-learning programmes did not previously exist, there is a growing recognition among policy-makers, providers and communities that families and parents play an important role in the implementation of remote learning programmes when broadcast through TV or radio or provided online. Some countries have already started integrating explicit instructions for parental engagement in their COVID-19 education

responses. For instance, Kyrgyzstan has launched a public campaign on the reading family, in addition to the embedded daily instructions to parents to support their children's homework that are broadcast through TV programmes[23]. In Gambia, where basic and secondary education is provided through platforms such as TV and radio, parents are given instructions on how to monitor their children's learning at home as well as to communicate with teachers, regional education directorates and heads of school in order to have access to reading and learning resources[24].

In Senegal, through a UNESCO project, learning modules were provided through television, to support parents in teaching young children and also improve to parenting skills[25]. Combining adult literacy programmes with family learning strategies is necessary to reach the most disadvantaged homes. Solutions for parental engagement in children's home-based remote learning need to consider the learning needs of adults as well. For example, in Canada, online adult literacy programmes are offered along with family learning programmes[26]. Social media constitutes a powerful media channel for informal learning, and family and intergenerational learning happens informally as well. For instance, family members engage in reading storybooks, play fun activities and games, and tell stories. Health-related knowledge and skills are passed on to families and communities informally in countries such as the Philippines, where families use online chat groups through social media to post and exchange information[27]. Under the current lockdown, these types of informal learning practices complement remote school learning as well as build on existing knowledge and learning practices at homes and in communities.

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Each of the efforts discussed above are, however, only a drop in the ocean as every child has a right to quality and continuous education, irrespective of emergencies. One must also not undermine the fact that caregivers feel stressed and burdened to play with children during and post emergencies, and thus need psycho-social counselling and peer support. Stimulation needs to be given to parents on having a positive role in child's life, socialising with peers to communicate and mitigate immediate challenges. These steps are critical to ensure 'zero' loss of learning for children, more so during emergencies, and India still has a long way to go.

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