COVID 19's Effect on Early Childhood Education

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Along with fear and anxiety, one of the most common feelings and experiences that the pandemic has forced upon people, is stress. Life was brought to an abrupt halt by repeated lockdowns and movement restrictions. The institution that is affected most by these decisions, to ensure safety and security, is the schools and subsequently the students who are children; because as soon as the lockdowns and restrictions were lifted, offices markets and other services functioned as normal in a phased manner. The only institutions that remained shut, and still are, were the schools. 1.5 million schools in India were forced to shut down and remain shut due to the ongoing pandemic (Sharma, 2021). One may point out that schools resumed as well. Nonetheless, as observed, schools were opened only for teachers and at the most for students enrolled in the board classes such as classes tenth and twelfth, with only fifty percent strength allowed at once (Chopra, 2021). All hopes were shattered when the second wave hit the country and schools were forced to completely shut down once again. 247 million children from elementary and secondary schools have been affected due to this (Sharma, 2021).

This has not only induced fear and anxiety amongst all the stakeholders, but it has also put students' future at risk. As an attempt to adapt to the demands of the circumstances, government bodies and regulatory authorities have come up with alternative ways of organising classes and assessing the progress. Although these attempts are made in the best interest of students, how are they going to affect the course of their education ahead is debatable (Sarfaraz, 2020).

While students in the secondary and senior secondary classes can share and express their voice and opinions on matters related to their life and education, it is the students at the beginning of their academic life, who do not have any choice but to rely completely on the judgement of adults sitting either in offices of some regulating authorities or the ones in their families. The difference in the nature of activities and engagement in early years in school varies hugely. This accounted for the learning goals and skills developed or to be developed amongst children. While with children in higher grades, there is a possibility of assigning tasks, and expect them to finish the same either independently, or with minor help and support. Again, the nature of support would be different. Children in higher grades would require help with developing and understanding conceptual structures or with meaning-making. Hence, there is no pressing need for continuous supervision. Whereas children in their primary grades, especially the ones from the kindergarten grades to grade one and two, the primary tasks with them are to teach them to read and write. This requires the development of a range of fine motor skills, such as holding a pencil, drawing certain strokes gradually and following the dotted lines. At times, the teacher has to literally hold the hand of the children to teach them how to draw a certain stroke, which is not possible in online classes. Hence, it is on the parents to perform these tasks so that the education of their child is not affected. Another important task for any teacher in these early years of her students is to culture them into the ways and norms of the school. At times, children have to be literally caught and made to sit in one place physically. It's basically the transition from a child to a student, which requires the teacher to properly engage with the child and gain a minimum level of trust of the child. Now, by the sound of it, one might presume that this poses all the challenges on the part of the teacher. Nevertheless, it is equally challenging for children to transition to students under the circumstances such as now.

Compared to the earlier when the child had to go to an actual school, it was easier for the child to accept and begin transitioning into a student. Whereas, now a child has to get used to being part of a virtual space, in an age where a child probably does not understand the meaning of this term itself. For a child getting used to the processes of school within the comfort of the home might sound convenient, but it is equally difficult for a child in his early years to perceive the same place as his/her school for a certain period of time during the day and comfortable home during other.it is needless to say that there are families which do not have enough space to provide the child with a different or isolated

room to attend classes. In such a situation, a child might have to struggle to concentrate on his/her class, which comprises people s/he knows nothing of, when his/her family is sitting right in front.

Attending online classes also requires a basic understanding of the functioning of technology. As a result, children completely depend on their parents for technical help (Bahamani et al., 2020). In such a scenario, children with working parents are at a high risk of being put in a conflicted environment at their home. Parents working in varied sectors have different work-related demands and hence might feel pressured or disturbed while having to assist their child repeatedly so that they attend the class with no difficulty (Durante et al., 2020). Moreover, on occasions, parents have to assume the role of a professional teacher or counsellor as and when needed. For example, schools come up with various activities to deal with the monotony of classes and ensure better engagement and interest on the part of the students, such as cooking without fire. These activities are taken up starting from grade one, and, at times, it includes baking activities as well. These activities often require continuous supervision and the physical assistance of an adult. Hence, one of the parents has to be present with the child all the time. This forces the working parent to either request for leave or work while sitting with the child, which leads to divided attention. This surely affects the work discipline of the parent and puts them under stress. This stress often leads to a conflict between parents on sharing responsibilities. A child, while struggling with getting used to a place and system called a school, also struggles with the feeling of guilt and helplessness. This puts the child under extreme stress to pick up pace in academics (Wirth, 2020). Not just that, a child might be pushed to feel responsible and learn things as quickly as possible, be it navigating technology or handling tasks independently. This not only leads to early exposure to technology which can have lasting undesired impacts but also hinders the quality of the process of learning.

Further, attending online classes have a major impact on the health of the students (Mehdi, 2020). Early years are marked by physical activity and play. Online classes leave lesser scope for tasks that involve physical movement. Being seated in one place, glued to the screen, has severely affected the overall health of the children. Longer screen hours severely affect the eyes of the children. Moreover, with an ongoing pandemic when children are already forced to stay inside their homes, being forced to stay in front of the screens and not being able to move around adds to the feeling of isolation.

For children belonging to the EWS category, the situation is even more critical. They have been enrolled into schools, but are practically out of the schooling system. Their parents cannot afford multiple devices for each child to attend classes or at times even a single device and neither a good network connection (Iftikhar, 2020). For some of those who have by some means managed to arrange a device, they lack the requisite skills and knowledge to support their child as needed. Most of them have never been to schools themselves, neither they are efficient with the use of technology. As a result, these children, even if they do attend classes, do not benefit from them much. Their parents cannot hold their hand to help them draw the strokes as asked, since they probably never held a pencil themselves. Neither can they help with technological issues as needed.

Under these conditions, children might be admitted to school in primary grades and passed at the term-end examinations. But one cannot ignore the issues that are emerging in this online mode of learning, especially for students in their early years of education. The development of the foundational skills of reading and writing that do require physical engagement to a certain level is being severely compromised. As a result, students do get promoted to higher grades, but they might not be able to keep up with the demands of these higher standards. Their lack of efficient reading and writing is not only delaying their process of learning, but also severely affecting it. If proper interventions are not made in time, this is going to lead to numerous other issues that might not be visible at the moment but will creep up later. This might range from an affected self-concept to poor performance, behavioural issues, academic stress, drop out and many more. Students when unable to perform might feel incapable and gradually start losing interest in schooling.

Therefore, it is imperative that the concerned authorities and stakeholders take cognisance of the issue and start planning interventional strategies that have a wide reach so that this

situation does not extrapolate into a range of issues that damage our education system. These interventions could be curricular reforms that cater to the emergent needs of these students or remedial measures to provide added support. Government can also team up with NGOs to increase its impact and outreach. Collaborative initiatives are needed on part of the government, society, schools and other stakeholders so that this situation is efficiently dealt with.

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