



Cover Page



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COVID-19: TRANSITION FROM CLASSROOMS TO ONLINE EDUCATION AND EMERGING DILEMMAS

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the entire world to its very roots. The world economy and socio-political structures started faltering. It brought the so-called resilient economies to their knees. All the major sectors of economy tottered amid the gloom of corona virus. Most vibrant sectors of economy are brought to the grinding halt. Airline industry, tourism, transportation, petroleum, food and beverages, agriculture, education and health are all adversely affected save Information Technology (IT) sector. Entire health system around the world is stretched to its limits. Only solution the world leader could offer was the 'Lockdown'. They were just mute spectators. 'Lockdown' became the universal solution and majority of countries implemented it. This forced everything to unprecedented crisis. Education system is one of the most affected one. The Central and the State Governments which so far were relying on 'Lockdowns' realized the impact it had on the entire education system. The stakeholders could not keep mum and wait for the tide to pass. As knee-jerk reaction everybody started talking about online education. Without any planning and technical expertise schools, colleges and universities started teaching online. This transition from classroom to online education was done in haste and was ill prepared. And overnight teaching online surged to unprecedented scale. Most of digitally untrained teachers started teaching digitally. In hours students started complaining about the connectivity issues and lack of smart phones. Students from poor families especially from low fee private schools and government's schools found themselves high and dry without any classes. This paper highlights the problems the entire education system under went in the wake of COVID-19. The transition from conventional classrooms to online learning with its advantages and disadvantages is analysed in detail.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, E-learning, Digital-Divide and Social Segregation.

Introduction

Ailments and diseases have been human companion from the days of yore. Throughout the history, plagues and pandemics have annihilated millions of humans. These pandemics have ravaged the humanity again and again during the course of history. Sometimes these pandemics out brakes are meek and mild but at others they are poised to wipe out the entire civilization. In the recent time COVID-19 pandemic which originated from Wuhan (China) in the month of December 2019, is also a very deadly with transmissibility at 5 and clinical severity at 4 to 7 in the Pandemic Severity Index (PSI). It is considered a "very high severity" quadrant. It is the most severe one since the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. Dwelling upon COVID-19, Bryan Walsh states, "COVID-19 marks the return of a very old and familiar enemy throughout the history; nothing has killed more human beings than the viruses, bacteria and parasites that cause diseases." (1) This pandemic (COVID-19) is taking toll on human life in a massive way and putting human life at jeopardy.

Definition

"The word pandemic comes from Greek word 'pan' which means 'all' and 'demos' means 'people or population'. Pandemics mean 'all the people'. "Pandemic affects all." (2) A pandemic is disease outbreak that spreads across countries and continents. World Health Organization (WHO) declared "Covid-19 to be a pandemic. An outbreak is when an illness can happen in unexpected high number. An outbreak can last for months to years." (3)

Brief History of Pandemics

From the earliest of times ever since the humans started migrating across the world, contagious diseases also accompanied them. Some pandemics were mild while others were very dangerous, pushing the entire humanity to the verge of total destruction. As the trade advanced, civilizations grew, human and animal interaction increased, the danger of pandemics increased simultaneously. Humanity has witnessed many pandemics of which some of them need special mention. The earliest reference of pre-historic epidemic that spread in a valley of China was some 5000 years ago around 3000 BCE. This site is still preserved and is called 'Hamin Mangha'. In 430 BCE, Athens was struck by a plague killing about 10000 people a huge chunk of population in that period of time, Antinine Plague in 165-180 A.D. which lasted for about 15 years killed about 5 million people, Justinian Plague 541- 542 A.D. killed 30-50 million people. Then came the Black Death 1347-1351 A.D. which killed about 200 million people, highest in human history. Recently in 1918-19 Spanish Flu killed 40-50 million people. Now we are facing COVID-19 which has already killed 4.8 million people as on October



Cover Page



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15, 2021. Even the developed countries like the USA, Italy, France, Spain, U.K. failed to cope with the situation. Let us throw some light on the global and Indian education scenario in the wake of COVID-19.

Global Education Scenario

Ever since the COVID-19 has been taking its toll, the entire fabric of education system is breaking. ‘Lockdowns’ all across the globe forced the educational institutions from kindergartens to universities to close their doors for indefinite period of time. “Education has been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with 1.53 billion learners out of schools and 184 country-wide school closures impacting world’s 87.6 percent of world’s total enrolled learners.” (4) No one in their wildest dreams imagined such type of situation. This sudden closure of schools, colleges and universities has brought innumerable short- and long-term impacts on the students especially the most vulnerable ones. And the vulnerabilities related to our education system came to the surface. After the initial shock, there was a quick knee-jerk reaction from all quarters of education sector to adopt online education. Their first reaction was to go digital as if it was the only panacea available.

Indian Education Scenario during COVID-19

Education plays a pivotal role in the overall development of the citizens of the country. The Right to Education ACT 2009 (RTE) was passed by Parliament of India on 4th of August 2009. It made a law to give free and compulsory education for the children between 6-14 years in India under Article (21A). This historic ACT came into force from 1st April 2010 onwards and India became 135th country to make education as a fundamental right of every child. Going to schools and learning the life skills are the finest welfare public policy of the governments. To up skill the children is the Nation’s duty. Even one day’s absence to school affects adversely the child’s confidence next day. Just imagine the little fingers out of practice for about six months. Can we estimate the exact impact of COVID-19? With Corona virus pandemic forcing the schools around the globe to close doors. The children are forced to sit at their homes. And the right of every child is suddenly on tenterhooks. More than 320 million students in India were out of their classes. Fifteen lakh school doors were closed in India. More than 37.5 million college and university students returned to their homes. Rural India is the worst hit. The peripheral parts of cities, small town, villages and far-flung areas are worst hit. Central and state governments were on their toes. The sudden closure of all education institutions made them act frantically and all took online route as an alternative to class room teaching.

Resorting to Online Education

Globally we see a transition from class rooms to online education. In Finland, the Finish National Agency for education guides schools started online classes free of cost through various apps such as Moodle, Google classes, Ville, Teams, 0365 and ZOOM etc. In China Ministry of Education launched an initiative entitled, “Ensuring learning undisturbed when classes are disrupted.” France launched online portal “Ma classe a la maison”, (My class at home). In Japan different strategies are formed at District and school levels. They are using big grounds and facilities to safe and healthy teaching. In South Korea, government raised the education budget to 4 percent and purchased equipments for teachers and students. Uruguay become the first country to provide all its students smart phone devices with internet connectivity. Saudi Arabia government is using 19 DTH channels with 127 supervisors from the classroom of Riyadh. In India too education portals such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, e Pathshala, SWAYAM PRABHA are launched, but their relevance and effectiveness is yet to be seen.

Think fresh and take new Guards

COVID-19 pandemic has given the education stakeholders to take fresh guards and to think in a novel way. But this is not an easy task to change everything overnight. In this regard Manos Antoninis, Director of Global Education Monitoring Report divulges, “There is an obvious tension between teaching children under the same roof and creating an environment where students learn best. But COVID-19 has showed us that there is scope to do things differently, if we put our minds to it.” (5) UNESCO expressed its worries about the girls who will be worst hit and it will lead to increase the dropout rates. Online education is certainly not capable to substitute classroom teaching. Online education cannot engender the interactions as is done in class rooms. But during the school closures when there are no alternatives but to resort to online education, we need to acclimatize with the prevailing situation and to fight back with whatever tools we have in our possession.

Measures Taken to Restart Education

COVID-19 has shaken the world to its very roots. Most of the countries have temporarily closed educational institutions to contain the infection of COVID -19. Government of India also did the same. As high as 91 percent students across the world suffered from the lockdowns that almost extended globally. Most of the governments taking to online route as an alternative to the class room teaching and most of them believe that teaching online is a very smooth exercise to fight the hindrance caused by Covid-19. Central government in India and some of the state governments do believe the same. The decision-making authorities quickly swung into action



Cover Page



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to start online education to the students. Governments came up with e-learning program. Many ed-tech companies offered classes on attracting discounts. Such initiatives are welcomed by the stakeholders. Digital learning was not a primary concern before covid-19. It came to the centre stage during corona crises. We need to integrate digital education with mainstream education. The massive open online course (MOOC) is an online course. MOOC is big opportunity for many Indian students. Kerala Government took a wonderful initiative by arranging free internet access to schools. It took lot of measures to mitigate the corona impact on the schools. The launched Kerela Fiber Optic Network which provided fast internet access to educational institutions. It took proactive measures to deliver meals to their homes. The education department started telecasting of online classes through a medium-Victers TV channel. This helped students with uninterrupted internet connections. All other state governments are also doing their level best to restart the education system by means of online teaching techniques.

Advantages and Disadvantages on on-line Learning

There is no doubt that during Covid-19 lock downs and institutions closure, the transition from the classroom teaching to online teaching has become buzz word. Online education has many merits. Some of the merits are:

Study from Home

Online e-learning does not require the students to leave their homes. They can learn from their homes. All they need is an uninterrupted power supply and high-speed internet connection, smart phone and a computer.

Tailor made, customized and flexible

The online courses are developed by teachers, educators and ed-tech experts. The courses and syllabus modules are prepared with utmost care by the best teachers in association with ed-tech experts providing students online learning through radios, televoice, texts, videos and other mediums. The students enjoy a certain degree of flexibility to study online.

Self-paced learning

The online learning provides students opportunity to set their own pace. They can choose any time of the day. There is no need to follow time zones because most of the courses do not follow time constraints. Students can revisit the site and study the material again and again.

Low cost and far reaching

Students are not required to leave their homes. They access educational material from their homes. Institutions are not required to maintain their campuses. No need to enroll students with high admission fees as is in the conventional system. Even the study material is provided through net. No expenses to buy books. The travel expenses are reduced. Besides, governments all across the world are providing these online learning apps free of cost. Digital learning has no physical boundaries

Boon for Disable Students

Online education is like a boon to disable students. No physical attendance is required in the institution. Students and learners with poor health are also benefitted by this mode of education.

Disadvantages

No system is error free. Every good system has some pros and cons. All good things have some lacunas in them. Online education also suffers from some demerits. Some of the demerits associated with online education are:

Digital divide

COVID-19 has shaken not only the economies but also has rattled the socio-political structure of many countries. India is no exception. At present there are about 600 million internet users in India. For all our tall claims of digital advancement, we have over 700 million people who don't have access to, or ability to surf, the world-wide-web. They are marginalized with lack of internet facilities. Students in remote areas and peripheral urban areas suffer the most. "A national lockdown requiring people to avoid all but essential movement out of their homes has a migrated a range of services to the digital realm. It's not just access to the government programs, finance and banking that is now being primarily delivered digitally. An enormous range of services sector activity is being delivered via remote working. Education and entertainment have gone electronic. This over whelming shift, driven by necessity, from physical to electronic mode, has highlighted the digital divide in the country." (6) In this regard Dr. Muneer writes: "The Starkest digital divide probably is evident in education, which is fundamental to any transformation." (7)

Poor internet connectivity

Poor internet connectivity is a norm in India. The erratic power supply plagues almost entire country. Both these services question the legitimacy of online exams, evaluations, interviews and other activities.

Social Segregation

The Governments' slogans' such "No Child Left Behind", "Every Student Succeeds," and "All Means All", appeared hollow in the country where 700 million people are still without internet connectivity. COVID-19 has already segregated the high fee private schools, colleges and university from the low fee schools and government institutions. The students from rich strata are using latest equipments and are almost unaffected during the school closures. But the students from lower income group are finding it hard to sustain



Cover Page



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the expenditure associated with it. They cannot afford smart phones, computers and internet connection. The students from the low-income groups are relegated to the periphery. Unless governments do something for all the students the idea of online education has limited success. Learning gaps are widening between the poor and rich. The poor are struggling to keep balance between having internet services to their children or to procure food for them. Uruguay is the only counter which provided personal device and internet connection.

Low level of interactions

In online classes there is hardly any interaction. There is one way interaction like that of a monologue. The two-way communication is difficult. Lots of confusion, noise and obstruction is created while having dialogues during the online session.

No check over cheating

Conducting online exams is a Herculean task in India. It is not without limitations and challenges. In India we have to go a long way. High degree of Skill and management required on the part of exam conducting authorities.

Conclusion

COVID-19 which originated from Wuhan, the Republic China in the month of December 2019, grabbed the entire world within two months. Infecting and killing people at a very rapid pace. Only solution in front of helpless world leaders was ‘lockdown’ in their respective countries. India too was no exception. The imposition of lockdowns forced people to stay where they were. Educational institutions were closed forcing students to stay in their homes. As the lockdown period was extended the concern to start e-learning took momentum. Education stakeholders such as governments, students, teachers, educators and parents made frantic efforts to cope with this extraordinary situation. Online education seems to be the only alternative in these trying times. ‘E-learning’ became a buzz word and intuitions started teaching online without much planning and preparation. Many problems such as affordability, internet connectivity and erratic power supply and the availability of necessary devices came to the forefront relegating almost 70 percent of Indian students out of their studies. But we cannot sit and wait for the tide to pass. Governments need to provide students all facilities required for online education so that no one should be left with. Governments, teachers, students and other stakeholders are required to work in unison and try to integrate online education with conventional classroom education in times to come. Despite its many disadvantages, online learning has emerged as viable solution. We have act and fight with whatever tools we are left with.

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