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Policy Brief

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Anand, K., Bali, M., Banerji, A., Ranjan, M., Jain, S., Khan, F., Singh, A. and Lall, M.

Background to Covid 19

The recent worldwide Covid 19 pandemic has thrown the entire education system off-kilter. Most governments worldwide have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics data, over 91 per cent of learners¹ are affected worldwide with 188 countrywide closures of educational institutes (UNESCO, 2020a²). Similarly, the decision to close educational institutions in India is affecting nearly 300 million students enrolled in 1.4 million schools and 51,000 colleges (Nanda and Pretika, 2020). However, this closure of schools and colleges has opened up new avenues and platforms in the virtual world. Accordingly, both government and private EdTech companies are promoting their digital learning platforms vigorously (Shukla, 2020). Though these digital initiatives are fruitful for those who fulfil all the prerequisite criteria to access digital learning, such as having an internet connection and a digital device (laptop or computer) at home, for the lower strata of the society, deprived of such resources, these initiatives generate inequalities, anxieties, and challenges, both for teachers as well as learners (UNESCO, 2020c).

This policy brief starts with a description, of initiatives undertaken by the Central government, State governments, and EdTech companies to mitigate educational issues arising out of Covid 19. It also highlights the challenges experienced by students, teachers, and parents from divergent sections of society, specifically the disadvantaged and vulnerable, such as migrant children, girls, and ‘nowhere children’³

The final section gives an overview of the emerging educational disruptions induced by such challenges, and focuses on analysing the impact of Covid 19 on education, from a different perspective, to identify the gaps in access, usage and pedagogical skills.

Government Initiatives to Mitigate Covid 19

The draft National Education Policy of 2019 envisions schools to provide digital infrastructure to students. The policy has placed special emphasis on enhancing digital literacy for all learners (Government of India [GoI], 2019, p. 95). To pursue this, the government has taken various initiatives to promote digital learning in the past few years. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) started a programme ‘National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology’ (NMEICT) to use the potential of ICT to make the best quality content accessible to all learners in the country, free of cost (Press Information Bureau, 2019). Under current circumstances, the Central government and State governments have started initiatives to mitigate educational issues arising out of Covid 19.

Initiatives by and guidelines from the Central Government: The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is promoting its Information Communication Technology (ICT) Initiatives such as the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER)⁴, Diksha⁵ and e-Pathshala⁶ for school textbooks and resources. In addition, online courses (such as SWAYAM⁷) are also being promoted through various government websites⁸ and can be accessed

¹Learners enrolled at pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary levels of education (ISCED levels 0 to 3), as well as at tertiary education levels (ISCED levels 5 to 8).

²UNESCO: Accessed from: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponses>

³The ‘nowhere children’ are those who are neither at school nor involved in any economic activities (Samantray et al., 2016). Mostly these children are part of seasonal migrant families, not registered at any school and involved in ‘invisible’ housework.

⁴National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) is a digital initiative launched by the Ministry of Human Resource and Development which offers students access to e-books, e-libraries and e-resources.

⁵The MHRD has launched the National Digital Infrastructure for Teachers (DIKSHA) portal to equip teachers from 1st class to 12th class into the world of e-learning. The platform is available for both teachers and students requiring learning material.

⁶Through the portal students from class one to twelfth can access the audio, video material and e-books of different subjects. This digital initiative is a venture of NCERT.

⁷SWAYAM is an initiative of Government of India for the students pursuing education from class 9th to 12th and also for the aspirants seeking the undergraduate and post-graduate level degree, SWAYAM facilitates study material at one destination.

⁸MHRD, the National Institute of Open Schooling, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and the University Grants Commission (UGC)

by students free of cost (Hindustan Times, 2020). It can be inferred that the Central government is issuing guidelines and advice to its various autonomous bodies such as Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), Kendriya Vidyalaya (KVs), Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV), National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and others to orient them towards the use of various online portals, and e-learning materials it has developed over the years. The government is also advising teachers to synchronise their teaching in such a way as to maximise the use of all the available material and portals (Hindustan Times, 2020).

Initiatives by State Governments: State governments have resorted to different media to reach out to teachers and students, ranging from social media to portals and e-learning platforms. For instance, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal are mulling over the idea of using Doordarshan to remove access barriers (The Hindu, 2020). However, the West Bengal government has shelved its plan for virtual classroom learning, which it had announced earlier for senior classes, citing logistical issues. Both parents and teachers opposed the initiative by West Bengal government citing issues with the time slot (Deccan Herald, 2020).

Some examples of state initiatives are:

Facilitating E-Learning (Haryana and Jammu): To mitigate issues arising due to Covid 19, in addition to the initiatives by the Central government, the Haryana government has advised teachers to schedule their classes from 9:30 to 12:30 pm via phone, WhatsApp, and other available e-learning platforms. It has advised teachers to resort to email to attend to student queries (Tribune, 2020). The Director of School Education, Jammu, has issued a circular asking schools/teachers to work online and create WhatsApp group for students from class 6th to 12th to establish a direct interface with them. The advisory directs that for primary classes, home assignments should be given through the parents (Ansari, 2020).

Cancellation and postponement of examination: In the wake of the pandemic, both the Central and State governments have either postponed or cancelled various board and entrance examinations (Hindustan Times, 2020). To cater to the needs and anxiety of both teachers as well as students due to Covid 19, an advisory to all schools has been issued by the Central Board of

School Education (CBSE), recommending schools to promote students of class 1 to 8 to the next class up. In cases where annual examination process had not been completed due to the pandemic it also advised schools to promote students of class 9 and 11 to the next class, based on their school's internal assessments⁹ (CBSE, Press Release, 2020).

Initiatives By EdTech Companies: The pandemic is proving to be a boon to EdTech companies, many of whom are making a lot of money (Ghosh, 2020). Online (virtual or e-learning) education in India is already a booming industry and with this pandemic, it is witnessing an unprecedented growth in a very short time span (Ghosh, 2020).

- Well-established EdTech companies such as Vedantu, Toppr, BYJU's, Simplilearn, as well as start-ups like Eupheus Learning have suddenly been in demand both from schools as well as students and their families (Verma, 2020). They are witnessing a surge in enrolment for their live classes since the lockdown has been announced (The News Minute, 2020).

- Toppr has recorded a 100 per cent month on month increase in the number of students (Bhattacharya, 2020). Many schools are also 'tying up' with these EdTech companies (such as Vedantu) (Soulunii, 2020).

- There is a sudden rise in schools approaching Business to Consumer (B2C) companies to develop digital interventions and curriculum-driven solutions like online reference books and at-home digital learning tools. Start-ups like Eupheus Learning and Class Up have seen rapid growth during lockdown (Sannith, 2020).

Some of the EdTech companies like Vedantu are providing free access to their complete learning platform to students, parents as well as teachers in the cities of New Delhi, Bengaluru, Kerala, & Hyderabad (Mishra, 2020). In a bid to target K-12 students, BYJU's is also providing free access to its educational app to students until the end of April 2020 (Soulunii, 2020). ViDU is offering assistance to schools with setting up live online classes and providing assessment solutions (Soulunii, 2020). LEAD School, which has over 800 partner schools across India has initiated Leadschool@Home programme (BWEducation, 2020). Big companies such as Apple, Google, and Microsoft are also offering

⁹For instance, the Uttar Pradesh government has decided to promote students up to class 8 to the next respective class without any examination (Ansari, 2020b). Similarly, the Assam Higher Education Council has decided to promote students to the next class without conducting final examinations. In addition, the Bihar School Examination Board (BSEB) has announced to promote students from 1 to 9 and 11 to the next class without examinations (Ansari, 2020c).

their services (such as iCloud Google Classrooms, and Microsoft team) to schools for free (Chakravarty, 2020).

Initiatives by Schools: Schools have had to transition completely to online digital platforms to address the ongoing education disruption due to the Covid 19 lockdown. The shift to online mode of learning has its own additional set of challenges at school level unlike in the higher education spaces. The school children are still learning to use digital technology specifically for their education and are dependent on their teachers and classroom community for their growth and learning. However, the Covid 19 crisis has led to major innovation and behaviour changes in this regard, with schools making a sudden transition to digital classrooms (India Today, 2020). The schools (mostly private ones) have been attempting ‘a digital ramp-up’ by initiating technology-enabled learning programmes to teach in an innovative way using online platforms and tools. This is to ensure that a child’s learning schedule is not affected due to the school’s closure (Saraswathy, 2020).

Teacher training initiatives: There are several initiatives taken by schools to train teachers to enhance their digital skills to conduct their teaching online. For instance, the Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE) decided in March 2020 to provide IT training to about 81,000 primary teachers through focussed intervention across 1,000 centres in Kerala, India. This special IT training was “arranged with the inclusion of necessary support files, video tutorials, resources, and so on in the teachers’ login on Samagra portal¹⁰ to ensure zero quality loss, along with requisite monitoring mechanisms such as accurate online attendance” (cited in Your Story, 2020, para.4). Schools run by Mumbai’s civic authority, have been making use of digital technology in teaching and training all their teachers to use digital platforms like Zoom, Telegram, Twitter and others for more than 5 years (Priolker, 2020). Another group of schools reported that they have commenced the new academic year with online classes via Google Classrooms and Zoom platform and have thus stayed connected with their students (Saraswathy, 2020). In order to train teachers (at a private school), they are being provided training in the form of “webinars, YouTube videos and master classes for questions related to the time table, managing children attending e-classes among others” (cited in Saraswathy, 2020, para.6). Teachers are also undergoing a process of learning and unlearning in their pedagogical styles, and have slowly started adapting to this new medium of

learning (Saraswathy, 2020).

Impact on Teachers and Students: A cursory glance at the available grey literature shows that only a handful of schools and parents are able to reap dividends of the offers mentioned above and participate in this virtual teaching-learning process (Chaudhary, 2020). Numerous practical issues are impeding the success of online learning/education or virtual learning models. Stakeholders are encountering many challenges and obstacles that reflect some of the persistent realities of Indian society, such as caste and class divide, as many of these challenges are directly linked to socioeconomic backgrounds. A significant section of the population remains excluded from access to learning due to sudden and unexpected changes in the education process.

The issues emerging out of these changes are more than just access. As per the National Education Technology Plan (2016), the digital divide is defined as:

- The Access Gap (socio-economic status of the school, geography, household income)
- The Usage Gap (opportunities to use technology actively for both teachers and students)
- The Pedagogical Skills (and Digital Literacy) Gap (of teachers) (Holland, 2018)

The following sections give an overview of the emerging educational disruptions and focus on analysing the impact of Covid 19 on education, from a different perspective, to identify the gaps in access, usage and pedagogical skills.

The Access Gap: Disadvantaged/ Marginalised/ ‘Nowhere’ Children

The pandemic is an unfavourable condition for the lower middle classes and economically weaker sections of society since its outbreak has created a widening gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. Those who fulfil all the prerequisite criteria to access digital learning, such as having internet connections or data packs, digital devices like laptop or computer, smartphone, storage devices, and physical space, come in the realm of the ‘haves’ whereas, those are deprived of such resources fall in the category of the ‘have nots’ (UNESCO, 2020c). Although the vulnerabilities of both the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ is a grave concern in the current scenario, this section will largely focus on

¹⁰ Samagra Portal is a common integrated program to facilitate the paradigm shift from the conventional demand-based model of governance to an all-inclusive, holistic, proactive and entitlement-based model.

the ‘have nots’, specifically a group of children who have few or no opportunities of online learning due to the closure of educational institutions. These are migrant, ‘nowhere children’ and children belonging to the economically weaker section of society (Kundu, 2020).

Financial Constraints/ Limitations: The Global Business Coalition for Education (2020) report states that the global pandemic will lead to “millions of the most vulnerable and marginalised children trapped in a worsening cycle of poverty that would devastate their communities” (para.4). The plight of the daily wage earner and migrant labour is evident from the shutdown of many factories and construction sites in urban areas leading to reverse migration (The Times of India, 2020). The fear of joblessness and acute poverty coupled with anxiety and lack of social security for family members has forced thousands of migrant workers to return to their native places (Lal, 2020; NPR 2020; Kundu, 2020). Consequently, economic uncertainty and crisis resulting in reverse migration (due to absence of viable job for parents and loss of family income) intensify child labour, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy and child marriage. (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Such a situation leaves a debilitating impact on the increase in the number of ‘nowhere children’. There is also an apprehension that the lifting of lockdown will trigger another wave of reverse migration invariably escalating the number of school dropouts.

Technical Access Gap: The National Sample Survey 2017 (p.47) on education indicates that the access gap is already wide between urban and rural areas. It reported that only 23.8 per cent of the households of students in India have internet access. In urban areas, 42 per cent of households have access to the internet as compared to 14.7 per cent in rural areas. It is also evident from the available literature that students belonging to low-income families, migrant groups, and girls are not in a position to have access to technological devices that promote continuous learning during the lockdown. These children either do not have digital devices at all, or need some assistance in form of data packs, internet connection, and physical space to access e-learning platforms. The major issue for them is financial constraint while accessing tech enabled learning. The educational institutes (particularly in rural and remote areas) are also unable to provide online classes to groups (as mentioned above), who have limited access to technology. One of the important components of digital learning is access to technology. In the absence of access to materials and tools, tech-enabled learning

will not only elude a large chunk of population in providing learning benefits, it will also expand the gaps between the children of the ‘haves’ and ‘have not’.

The Usage Gap: Covid 19 Induced Education Disruption is Multidimensional

The education model promoted by schools are based on certain assumptions and pertain to a belief that every learner and teacher has access to the medium of internet and uninterrupted electricity (Singh, 2020). In light of this, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has issued a letter giving directions to teachers, students and parents on the methods to use their time at home effectively during the lockdown. The letter emphasises the need for a digital mode of teaching and learning in the present situation. For instance, it illustrates how teachers have been provided with a ‘golden opportunity’ to upgrade their skills in the field of on-line teaching, e-content, self-creation of videos, lesson plans and assignments (CBSE, 2020, p.1).

Socio-psychological preparedness of teachers: The digital wave amid the pandemic has cultivated ambiguities for teachers. These ambiguities are explained by the changing role of teachers as well as pedagogical practices in this digital age. As most of the teachers are compelled to translate their lectures and give notes to the students digitally (Singh, 2020), education in the virtual mode is taking the form of a monologue. This also levies burden on teachers to stick to old pedagogical practices to finish the curriculum through textbook learning. The teachers still have to use the old pedagogical practices to finish the curriculum, which was mostly based on textbook learning in the classroom which has now shifted to online platforms. Moreover, to facilitate online learning, teachers are expected to have the devices, internet connectivity and a reliable power source. This leads to an added financial cost, especially in Tier 2 or 3 cities and rural areas where the salary of teachers is not much. This situation has also brought forward inequities that a capitalistic private education brings along with it (Mudi, 2020). There is a deep-seated inequality between government school teachers and private school teachers emerging from this pandemic, as elaborated below.

Digital teaching is widening inequalities: As the classes shift online, the closure of schools due to Covid 19 has exposed the deep rooted inequalities in transmission of knowledge according to the type of management of schools. For municipal or government-run schools it is all the more challenging to conduct full-day online

classes (Priolker, 2020) due to resource constraints (infrastructure both for students and teachers) and also due to inadequate training of the teachers to use the digital medium. It is imperative to look at the ease or discomfort in adapting to the digital medium for conducting classes by teachers as most of them are more comfortable with the face-to-face classroom teaching (Zhong, 2020; Singh, 2020).

Increase in parental workload and equity concern for students: In the present scenario, parents are expected to assume the role of teachers and home school their children. There is a growing need for parents to prepare themselves with resources created for home-schoolers to cause minimal disruption to their children's education (India Today, 2020). Although, there is an assumption that many students from the middle and upper-middle class households are adapting to this virtual mode of education. In the absence of resource and technical knowledge (of parents), it is difficult for a large section of students to use digital devices and continue their online learning, not least because these children may face the problem of lack of learning materials.

Pedagogical Resistance: Teachers, due to the lockdown and classes shifting to online platforms, are switching between prepared videos and PowerPoint lessons and hosting live teaching via Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft team and others. Though most teachers and students are digitally literate and savvy, full-time online education is still a new experience for them (The Hindu, 2020). Many teachers are not trained adequately to handle the digital teaching style and are accused of being unwilling to adapt (Mudi, 2020). Moreover, teachers are struggling to adapt to a new way of teaching since, to conduct an interactive online class, the teacher needs to develop not only lesson plans, but also PowerPoint presentations, worksheets, assessment sheets and other materials (The Hindu, 2020; Kundu, 2020).

In addition, there will be an immediate impact on children in terms of loss in learning and increased dropout rates (Saavedra, 2020). It is understood that online learning directs the students away from textbook based learning and towards critical analysis and self-motivated education, which needs an adjustment in the pedagogical styles of the teachers (Mudi, 2020).

The Pedagogical Digital Preparedness and Skills Gap

The teachers are not trained and skilled enough to become proficient at using technology in such a short

period. To fill this gap many companies are organising training to up-skill them in technology (Srikanth, 2020). The online education sector is not guided by any standard norms or regulations by the government. There are no definitions and frameworks for online education. In some cases, online education even includes teachers sharing worksheets and study material on WhatsApp and training sessions on Skype. Therefore, it is an urgent priority for the government to regularise the online education sector and define standards and regulations for it and also to devise monitoring mechanisms and online assessment (Agha, 2020; Kundu, 2020).

Conclusion

In the face of the pandemic, the initiatives taken by the Central and State governments need to be translated by the teachers to reach the students. Teachers find it difficult to cope with online teaching mostly due to their lack of familiarity with technology. As evident from anecdotal evidence, all the initiatives and efforts from the government as well as private companies are focused on a specific section of society, which has the basic facilities to access portals, social media, and e-learning platforms. Amid such a grim reality, what the government is offering to students and teachers is not at all sufficient. Barring some respite from examinations, and offering some books for free on the National Book Trust and National Digital Library portal, the government has not announced anything specifically meant to provide concrete help to all the students and teachers belonging to every strata of society. The government is ignoring the plight of a large percentage of 'nowhere children' (who are likely to increase in this period), children belonging to the marginalised sections of society such as Scheduled tribes (ST), Scheduled castes (SC) and girls (UNESCO, 2020). Although, in this lockdown situation, schools are attempting to discursively mitigate education disruption, many of these schools do not have EdTech facilities. Consequently, these digital initiatives both by government and EdTech companies are, in a way, perpetuating the hegemony of elite schools in the education system resulting in the access and usage divide between rural and urban, and rich and poor.

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