Teaching Online: Challenges and Questions

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Abstract - **This is a short research article based on the challenges and questions arising due to online education of government school students. It has been written in the light of online learning during the temporary shutdown of the schools in the unexpected situation of COVID-19. Data collection for this study was done during April and May, 2020. An interview schedule was prepared and seven government school teachers from Delhi participated, voluntarily. These teachers were concerned for the classes till high school. Interviews were based on the online teaching experience of teachers from disciplines of English, Hindi, Mathematics, Science, and Social Sciences. With this piece the researchers tried to examine two main areas. Firstly, the methods and their impact used to teach different disciplines. Secondly, the student-teacher relationship during online learning.**
Keywords: **Online Teaching, Teaching Methods, Student-Teacher Relationship**

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the year 2020, the threat posed by COVID-19 is a news. World Health Organisation declared it to be a pandemic on March 22nd, 2020. As a result the central government implemented a nationwide lockdown in India. The government hinted for the situation to continue till June, 2020. In order to avoid possibilities of spread of infection the state government in Delhi declared a temporary shutdown of academic institutions. The declaration came on March 19th, 2020 for a period until March 31st, 2020. April is marked as the beginning of new academic session for most of the Indian states including Delhi. There prevailed aconfusion among the teachers, students, and parents about reopening of the schools.

The emergency situation called for immediate steps to cut the loss of academic session. In this situation'online' teaching seemed to be an alternative. Everyone thought of it to be a medium to ease schooling at home. The need of online teaching at the level of the school had never been so intensified. Whether schools are open shouldn't make any difference while talking about online teaching and learning.

It was thought that both the teachers and students can connect using digital medium. As soon as teachers took to online teaching, it opened a plethora of questions. This research article tries to investigate two of these questions which are as follows.

1. Effect of online teaching methods in different disciplines.
2. Relationship between the students and teachers.

To fulfil these objectives seven teachers from the government schools of Delhi were interviewed. These teachers were concerned with disciplines - English, Hindi, Mathematics, Science, and Social Science. The researchers talked about methods involved in traditional and online teaching. During the interviews use of technological disruptions and multimedia emerged as some important points. Teaching process and challenges were also discussed. It was found out that some of the subjects could be taught easily in online mode, however, there is no alternative for a physical classroom. Experiencesfrom online teaching and learning in these adverse circumstances can useful in future and once the schools re-open some of these can be implemented.

II. ONLINE OR VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Online teaching is considered to have many advantages as it doesn't restrict the teacher and student in the binary of time and space. To some it may seem to be an inexpensive, accessible, and a cinching alternative. It is said to be flexible and convenient both for the students and teachers. In this light the researchers wanted to study what happened when this method was finally used with government school students in Delhi.

Online teaching as a task appears to be easy, but it's not. What did the teachers do to make an online classroom? One of the teachers answered that contact numbers of the student from the last session were added in a WhatsApp group. Teachers named the WhatsApp group as per the grade, to keep it simple and easy. The groups were named as Class 6th, 7th and 8th etc. That's how an online class came into being. But making of a classroom on WhatsApp didn't ensure involvement of all the students. Here, the fundamental question is not related to the significance of this medium for those students who do not own a device nor do they have purchasing power parity for digital connectivity. Looking deeper into the issue layers concerning accessibility and other issues related to online education start unfolding.

One of the teachers said, "Here, accessibility depends upon your pocket size or ability to spend money." Largely students from weaker financial background are the ones to attend a government school. In such situations complexities arise and many of the students are forced to stay out of the online classes. The online class is not 'inclusive' nor does it have venues to allow participation of all. They shared their plight of not being able to make it accessible to the students.

As per one of the teachers, "In this course the ability of students was wasted because of not having a mobile phone." Available or otherwise, the mobile phone decides whether one will or not be attending the class; this was a new reality. The teachers showed their helplessness. In this context Wadhwa and Andrabi (2020) found that even the students living in remote areas are facing challenges concerning digital literacy because having a mobile phone is a luxury. A 17 year old student committed suicide because her family didn't have money to buy a smart phone. Situations like these are shocking and scary in situations where inkling of poverty is already disappointing (Sudarsan, 2020).

III. PARTICIPATION' IN ONLINE CLASSROOM

In these classes accessibility and participation is common problem and teachers are the first ones to struggle. The science teacher told that out of 60 students, only 25-30 students were present. He cited reasons of frequent change of contact numbers and not having the same registered in school record as due to which the students remained unreachable. He said, "Even if they have numbers, they might not be connected to WhatsApp." Those 25-30 students who were present in the classes frequently complained about not being able to use the mobile application in absence of smartphone. Many of them had to seek external help like from the neighbours. He disregarded online education saying, 'it is not effective at all.'

The Hindi teacher expressed one of the most practical challenges regarding WhatsApp classes. He said: There is a single WhatsApp group for all the subjects which pose a hindrance to providetargeted instructional support to each student. Keeping track of direction of discussion isextremely difficult because conversations related to other disciplines also take place in the same group. For this different groups for each subject can be formed, but being part of so many groups at the same time will make it even more difficult.

The mathematics teacher shared that less than 40 percent of students are able to join. He said, "Out of 51 students, only 20-22 do participate regularly. After making efforts, now 43-44 students are able to join, but almost ten of them do not present their homework." He added, "I don't find the 'read by' facility of WhatsApp trustworthy. Actually, you can learn about the real situation only by talking." He makes efforts to talk to the students at a personal level at a fixed interval.

Many teachers have repeatedly underlined the fact that in present circumstances only those students will be able to study whose parents are supportive. Support here means financial and emotional. There are some groups where more students are active depending on the number of smartphones in the family and internet accessibility. Using an example, one of the teachers stated, "If there is only one smartphone for two students and only the father owns it, would the children be able to study at 8.00 p.m. when the father returns from work?"

IV. TRANSFORMATION IN TEACHING PROCESS AND METHODS

Teaching to a class where structural inequality is high always remains challenging and more in such anomalous situations. It will continue to remain a challenging task for teachers because this is unprecedented. How teachers are able to conduct classes? The English teacher answered:

We tried teaching with the help of 'zoom application.' The option of talking to the students personally was available while using the zoom application, but (concerning child rights) sharing profile pictures, screen-time, and voice data wasn't considered safe and Ministry of Home Affairs also warned against it. Consequently, we stopped using it. Otherwise also it required using personal email-id which could pose threat to safety of teachers. After this, creating separate groups for different classes was another option. At the end all the teachers teaching a particular class decided to join a single group. The students were asked to send their assignments to their respective WhatsApp groups. Afterwards, time was decided for discussion among the teachers and students. In this group the students typed their queries that were answered by the teacher. There was no face-to-face interaction among the teachers and the students. To make concepts clearer a 'power-point presentation' with voice over was prepared and it was uploaded on YouTube. The link was shared to the WhatsApp group so that the students can watch whenever it is possible for them.

In this context what the science teacher said is also important. He said:

Here, the reading or study material is shared in two ways. If the studentsare interested then we do prepare blackboard featuring videos and give voice to it; for the student to watch and read. If the student is unable to watch it online then we pick something similar from YouTube and share the link with them. If still they find itdifficult then the only way is to suggest watching it whenever possible. They are only asked to visit the link and share their learning even if it takes two or three days. If they have watched then discussions are encouraged.

The teacher talked about challenges related to assessment:

I ask them some important questions emanating from the topic. But assessment of completion of homework is

difficult. We ask them to send pictures of completed homework, but I can't see any output. This seems to be the only way out. What else can we do!

The researchers interviewed two Social Science teachers from different schools. One of them talked about teaching through WhatsApp:

I wrote down important points from the chapter and summarised that. For example, there is a chapter about 'Environment' in Geography, for which I prepared notes about 'Components of Environment.' I have written extensively for the students and prepared a set of important questions. This is how I have sent them the chapter and asked them to complete the homework. At present I do nothave any device to assess what the student has done? I only ask them to do so."

He expressed grief, "This is a first and unanticipated. I think the students will be working even if they are not able to answer. In such times we are trying every which way possible."

The researchers observed that teachers are trying performing and reaching their students in these unprecedented circumstances as they are making creative videos germane to their disciplines, but they lack a formal training. They are trying to explain topics using blackboards aiming to make classes better and deliverable with available resources and seemingly limited expertise. As one of them says, 'We want to give their best to the students.' While the schools are closed, they are trying to make sure that everystudent of their class is associated with learning of specific subjects.

V. CHALLENGES OF EVALUATION

If the teacher is teaching then asking for homework is an expectation. Homework helps assess how much the students have learned. Evaluation has turned into a complex task due to online medium of teaching. Here, discussion is only about English, Hindi, and Mathematics. In a subject like English where accuracy of language while speaking is a skill. For evaluation the English teacher asked her students to send pictures of their assignments. The students were unfamiliar with the technical know- how. They were asked to submit handwritten assignments. Every student sent pictures from their mobile cameras. The English teacher said, "Checking them was a hassle."

She said, "Students need constant support with pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, and grammar in a discipline like English. That's the prominent reasonwhy checking over phone isn't easy." In this situation students were given small assignment for which the teacher designed work-sheets. Here, they could fill-in the blanks and getting immediate feedback from the teacher became possible. She said, We have 35 students in every class. Of all 30 are constantly working. It can also be possible because it's a

board class. There are 28-30 students in my class who are always present. I am able to share this data based on the number of assignments received. I am worried about class 9th as there are only seven active students. Preparing a lesson plan demands a lot of hard work and only 7/35 students are responding; it's disheartening for me. It means that one is able to reach only 20% of the students.

She states that assignments fulfil the purpose of teaching to an extent. In her words to device a method of assessment is difficult. Therefore, students are advised to submit their assignments on a notebook and maintain a record of homework to make assessment easy, in future.

Experiences of Hindi teacher seemed were similar:

It is important to pay attention to accuracy of spellings for young learners. Here, students share pictures of their homework and correction of spelling mistakes is a complicated task. Sometimes the whole sentence needs reframing. Teachers can correct these mistakes on paper so that students differentiate and not repeat the same mistakes in future. Assuming that they won't commit errors isn't a right approach. It's difficult to say whether we have helped them improve their writing skills.

The mathematics teacher drew out attention towards some practical issues. According to him, "Everyone should know basic mathematics and online teaching of the same isn't possible. One has to demonstrate the solutions to the students." He explained using the example of HCF. He solved a few sums and prepared a video showing all the steps involved in the process:

Often, there is no response from the students. But this time there was some response and it was completely different from what was expected. They were taught to solve HCF sums using the 'Factor Method.' The students preferred using the 'Division Method'instead, which was taught years ago. What can one do in such situations?

VI. THE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

The English teacher said, "Online classroom is definitely forming a relationship between students and teachers but it's not a natural or spontaneous one." As per one of the participating teachers this doesn't seem human. It deprives both of them from many opportunities. Teachers have accepted that they would like to teach where there is direct contact with the students. This method of teaching doesn't interest them. As per them this type of classroom doesn't allow them to connect like a physical classroom and leaves a void.

In this context the science teacher says, 'The student-teacher relationship is very important.' He said: Students find it easy to share many issues with their teachers which they can'twith their parents or siblings. For example, in class 10th the students come across the topic of reproduction

when they are still growing up. Last year, I was teaching about family planning. One of the students posed a personal question, hesitantly. I told him that he was free to ask anything. I assured him that I shall try my best to satisfy his query. There were many questions based on the nature of the class, but with the teacher they are assured of confidentiality. It shows while the students ask me questions which they may or not to their family members.

He talked about the personal bond between student and teacher:

If we are friendly enough with the students then they do not shy away from asking such important questions. So, I think there can't be a better relationship. I remember neither us nor our teachers were this liberal. But today's children are a way to future and it's good that they share. Hence, they ask questions.

Another teacher said, "There is a distance in online teaching method. Still we try to help the students in best possible way. Now, our class 10th has not passed out and students come across fake news from newspapers and TV which disturbs them." He emphasized, "Because students know us, hence right information about school can reach them only through us."

Citing a similar context, the English teacher underlined that staying at home with all the family members is giving rise to many problems among the students. She said, "There are two such students in my class whose fathers are unemployed; one more who doesn't have parents." Their families are facing hardships. Financial challenges are huge. Either the mothers have to work as domestic help or in small factories. But, at this point they are unable to work. They have to survive on meagre savings of past. She said, "I am fortunate enough that students of my class share these concerns with me. I tried helping them in whichever way I could, but still it is challenging. Being a teacher one has to fight such issues." Apart from the emotional aspects, the teachers are also concerned about the safety of their students. The science teacher talked about the hygiene related matter in a scientific manner. He said, "During corona crisis we can give instructions to the students about washing hands after a particular interval of time while demonstrating the right approach."

The mathematics teacher reiterated:

We talk to all the students. There is a child in my class who doesn't have parents. He is being brought up by his grandmother and is a little deviated. There is one more child whose father lives in Saudi Arabia and didn't return for 15 years and mother is no more. The father doesn't send any money. He doesn't even call during this lockdown. The child has two elder sisters. The eldest among them didn't marry to bring them up. This family isn't a financially strong. The eldest sister earns a meagre sum by doing some

tailoring. She isn't educated, but knows a little bit of Urdu. The child works as a salesman during the day.

The teachers seem to be emotionally connected with their students. One of the teachers said:

These days when you are not present in a classroom physically, sharing ofPersonal issues on the part of students tells about the image of the teacher. This is the reason of a free association between the students and the teachers. As teachers we have made every possible effort to reach out to help the students.

The crisis ridden situation due to pandemic isn't over, but we need to find out some mediums for the students where they are able to express themselves and we are able to provide them with emotional help. Students are also having suicidal thoughts; it's high time we think about such issues.

VII. CONCLUSION

During the entire conversation three key point emerged that even if online education talks about facilities, but we have to think from the position of government school students. Online classrooms give rise to inequality. Attention must be paid bridge digital and technological inequality.On the other hand learning per se is difficult during online classes. Whatever lessons or concept teachers are sharing with their students, they can't assess whether the students have understood, and it has become very difficult for them. The opportunities of evaluation which a physical classroom gives are absent here.During this new kind of dealing in work, the image of teacher needs to be redefined. If for an instance we call him 'meek dictator' (Kumar, 1991:73), even then this analysis seems incomplete. Teachers have taken independent decision to keep the teaching process smoothly running and they didn't refrain from new experiments. In absence of any bureaucratic directions; steps taken by them are praiseworthy and can be emulated.In this process the student teacher relationships are getting reshaped. The relationship between these two is much deeper, complex, and way beyond the administrative and institutional restrictions. The dyads of 'Parents and children'and 'children and adults' is beyond comprehension (Sarangpani, 2003:108-117). We may not understand it from the education-student dyad. Their relationship has become even more humane. Teachers are concerned and emotional about their students.We will conclude our discussion by pointing out that a lot of preparation is yet to be done regarding'online learning'. We can begin by focusing on the point at which UNICEF's 2016 report 'The State of the World's Children 2016: A Fair Chance for Every Child.' It draws our attention to the prevalence of inequalities for children worldwide. These disparities are prevalent largely in health and education sector. Quality education is capable of eliminating these disparities. But Education is something for which we have to strive since childhood and create equal opportunities for the most

deprived children. The disparities are gripped in gender, community, language, and region, etc.

At the same time, 'The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World' takes our attention to the point that 'Internet connectivity' can create such opportunities for some of the world's most marginalized children, thereby enabling them. It will help in fulfilling the potential and breaking the cycle of poverty generational poverty. Simultaneously digital and technological disruptions are bringing opportunities for learning and education to children, especially in remote areas and during humanitarian crises. Allowing children to access information on issues that affect their communities and can play a role in helping them understand and resolve the issues. Amidst these possibilities, we also have to keep in mind that around 29 % of the youth worldwide - about 346 million persons - are not online. The digital divide also reflects the prevailing economic gaps. It might be advantageous for children from wealthier backgrounds, but fails to provide opportunities to the poorest and most disadvantaged of children. There is also a digital gender gap globally. In 2017, 12% more men than women used the internet. Less than one third of internet users in India are women. In this context, we can only move forward by building a structural base. Not with the help of a medium which is still out of the reach of many people.

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