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The Future of E-learning: A Need for Emergency Curriculum for the Primary School Children

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of e-learning in primary schools using a doctrinal method of study. The paper highlights that most students agree that e-learning helps them to have access to unlimited sources of information; better synthesis between subjects; promotes critical analysis; and encourages innovative techniques of learning. However, it also attempts to highlight a critical look towards the new technologically enriched pedagogy for the primary school learners which is heavily impacted by the ongoing pandemic, and a viable solution for the same through the adoption of an emergency curriculum. The ideas expressed in this paper gain their structure and momentum from the concept of 'condensed curriculum' advocated by AEWG. The main thesis is that sudden imposition of the E-learning techniques is bundled with numerous problems for the primary class learners than its positive implications.

I. INTRODUCTION

"If your plan is for one year, plant rice. If your plan is for ten years, plant trees. If your plan is for one hundred years, educate children."

- Kuan Chung (7th Century Bc)

The Director-General of the World Health Organisation in March 2020 declared Covid-19 as a pandemic after assessment of the rapid spread and severity of the deadly virus across the globe. The pandemic has pushed business activities, sports activities, and learning activities to switch to online platforms. The closure of schools has led to a potential learning threat to primary school children. The fact that there are significant differences among children in terms of the amount of learning loss and the level of school disengagement and potential dropout.

Amidst this crisis, the instant research paper attempts to explore the important challenges of the e-learning process among primary school children. The paper will be divided into two parts:

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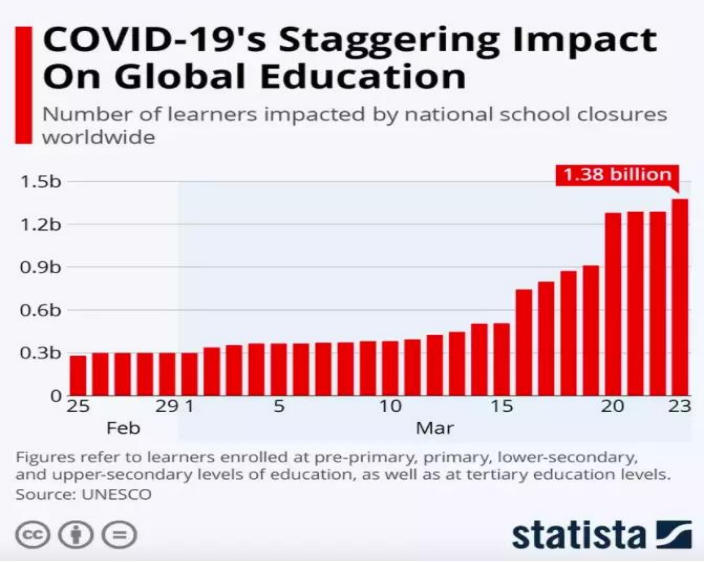
Part I deals with important questions like i) how the education sector is responding towards e-learning in the recent pandemic? ii) Whether online learning is as effective as a classroom one? iii) What would education look like once schools reopen post COVID-19? iv) Has the pandemic given a major drift to adopt some changing education imperatives? **Part II** talks about the possible solution to overcome the issues and challenges concerning e-learning and in this context, there is a need for an emergency curriculum in primary school education. For that purpose, the concept of the emergency curriculum will be explored along with its needs and implications.

(A) Literature Review

As we know, schooling has emerged as the preferred means to advance the right to education. Due to the programs and policies adopted by the government of India, we have also managed to achieve the idea of universalization of education. But in emergencies like this pandemic of COVID-19, the entire agenda fails since the schooling experiences of children belonging to the government primary schools and the private schools differ. On the one hand, children belonging to affluent families have access to all the technologically advanced tools to be able to proceed with their curriculum whereas, children belonging to the weaker sections were away from books as well as the educational atmosphere in search of government orders to resume essential services after the lockdown.

Digital transformation in the context of primary education institutions can be regarded as the summation of all digital processes required to accomplish transformation that gives primary education institutions the opportunities to positively apply digital technologies optimally. In a recent report by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Kerala records the lowest dropout rate in the primary schools (2019-2020) of 0.11%. Replying to the statistics the Education Minister of Kerala said that Kerala was able to achieve this milestone due to modernisation of the educational system along with making schools high-tech. This process of digital transformation consists of adequate strategic preparation, trust establishment, thinking in processes, amalgamation and reinforcement of all parties involved, separate, collaborative and organizational knowledge. In the two survey studies conducted, it corresponds that between the end of March of 2020 and the end of April of 2020, many countries around the world had gone from not having a strategy of educational continuity, to having put in place strategies of educational continuity using alternative means of delivery - TV, Radio, Internet, etc. (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020a, b).

Table 1: Impact of Pandemic on Global Education



According to the above table, globally there are around 1.38 billion students who were affected due to the closure of schools by the end of March 2020. And around 320 million students were affected in India due to the same. The National Sample Survey of 2017-2018 reported that only 23.8% of Indian households had any type of internet access. Furthermore, there is a gender disparity in internet access. Only 16% of women have mobile internet access compared to 36% of their male counterparts. In addition to the gender gap, there is a class divide in place with the impoverished students of India having the least access to the internet.

(B) Methodology

Data and information presented in the current study are collected from various reports prepared by national and international agencies on COVID-19. The entire technique used is the secondary data collection method in instant research. Some journals and e-content relating to the impact of COVID-19 on the educational system has also been referred to.

II. PART-I

The Government of India has extended the lockdown period from time to time adopting different strategies to fight the pandemic, but educational institutions remain open continuously so that the academic activities of schools and colleges do not hamper during the lockdown period. The lockdown accelerated the use of digital technology. This has given chance to develop new and improved professional skills/knowledge through online learning more efficiently and productively. The Ministry of Human Resource Development now known as the Ministry of Education made several arrangements including online portals and educational channels through direct-to-home TV, Radios for students, social media, etc. Deeksha portal, e-

Pathshala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources are some of the examples of the digital initiatives of MoE for secondary as well as higher education during COVID-19.

While the tsunami of COVID-19 made a shift towards the digitalization of essential services, among everything else it was the education sector which has suffered a lot due to the outbreak of the pandemic. All the educational activity was hampered including the suspension and postponement of classes and exams, The Admission process got delayed. The unemployment rate is expected to increase since most of the recruitment got postponed and even in the higher education sector there was no placement for the students. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. estimates on unemployment states that the unemployment rate in May 2020 was 21.73% and it came down to 7.97% in early April 2021. However, in May 2021 it again rose to 14.7% as there was a loss of almost 10 million jobs in India due to the lockdown imposition and labor migrating from states to states.

There was also a problem with the unprepared teachers/students for online education. Not necessarily all teachers/students were ready for this sudden transition from face-to-face learning to online learning. Most of the teachers are merely conducting lectures on video platforms which may not be real online learning without any dedicated online learning platform. It has also increased the responsibility of parents to educate their wards. Some educated parents can guide but some may not have the adequate level of education needed to teach their children in the house. The pandemic also led to the loss of nutrition due to school closure. There were serious implications on the daily nutrition of students as the mid-day meal schemes have temporarily been shut.

Due to the reduced global employment opportunity, many Indians might have returned home after losing their jobs overseas. Hence, the fresh students who are likely to enter the job market may face difficulty in getting suitable employment.

As many students have limited or no internet access and many students may not be able to afford a computer laptop or supporting mobile phones in their homes, online teaching-learning may create a digital divide among students. The lockdown has hit the poor students very hard as in India most of them are unable to explore online learning. There shall be creative strategies to ensure that all children must have sustainable access to learning during pandemic situations like these. The Indian policies may accommodate various individuals from diverse backgrounds including remote regions, marginalized, and minority groups for effective delivery.

The **second question** to be examined is whether online learning is as effective as a classroom

one. The meaning of traditional classrooms has changed over the period, especially with technology penetrating. From projectors to smart screens and everything in between, technology has changed classroom learning. The public's appreciation for online learning has also increased, with 46% of surveyed recent graduates having taken an online course from various universities around the globe. The most promising features of online learning may be as follows:

a. it offers convenience and flexibility.

b. ensures high-quality student-tutor interactions.

c. more students may enrol at once.

d. more cost-effective.

e. retention rates are higher since students are allowed to learn and practice at their own pace; their course material is also available for a lifetime.

f. variety of programs and courses.

g. career advancement.

h. improvement in teaching techniques.

Yet the question remains whether online classes may replace traditional classroom learning. Exposing children to screens from a young age is not right as it may hamper their overall development. Although, online classes have not increased the screen time for the students yet children are anyways hooked to screens whether it is in the form of television, mobile, or computer. Children were already addicted to the screens even before the COVID-19 pandemic began; however, since the commencement of online learning, they have been using the screen from 8 to 9 hours daily. Looking at the screen for long periods can be harmful and it doesn't seem to be a healthy way of learning. The light emitted from the screen can strain children's eyes and could lead to vision problems throughout their lives. Watching a screen is also a passive activity that can make children lethargic and affect their thinking skills.

In addition to the impact on their health, online learning from home can also be very isolating and lonely for the children. They don't have their peers around them and are sort of learning by themselves. The teacher's role also becomes limited since children do not get the kind of supervision they would in a classroom.

Also, many children, especially those attending government schools, are being deprived of education during the pandemic as they do not have access to online facilities. They are missing out on their lessons. Though some families may have access to digital technology there might

not be enough devices for the personal use of all the family members.

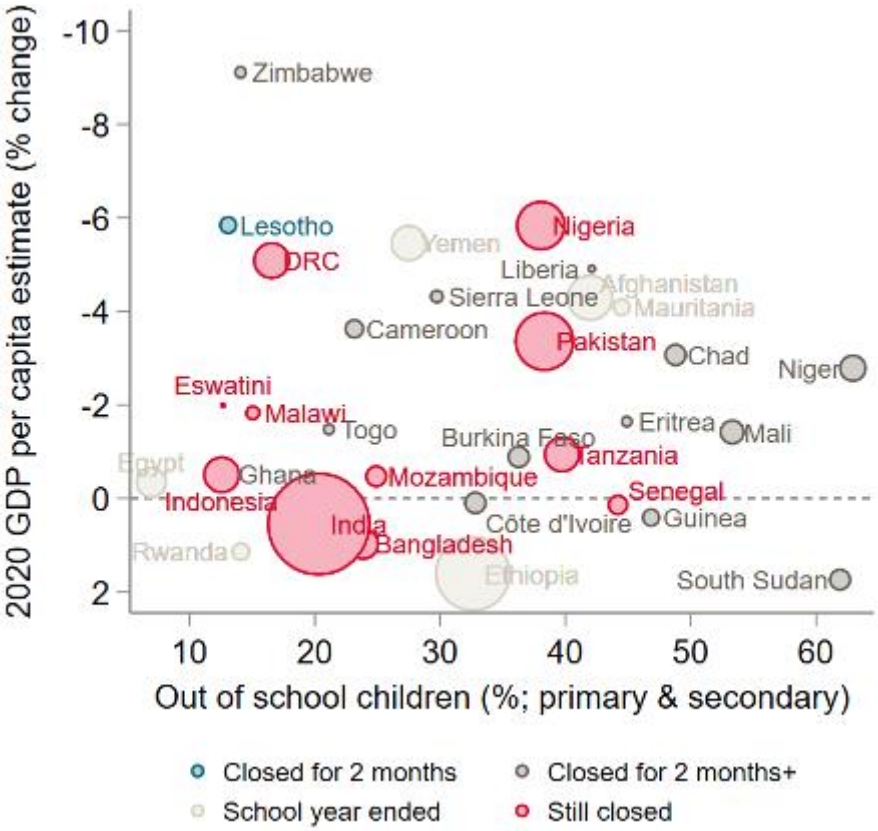
The present pandemic provides a new baseline for India to build on its distance learning offerings to supplement regular instruction, engage difficult-to-reach children and families, and be better prepared for future crisis and school closure.

The **third question** as to how education would look like once the unlocking process begins? Firstly, most of the students have become lethargic in their daily activities, the reason being continuous lockdown at home for almost one and a half years. Once they will join their schools after the pandemic, not only they will face the challenges in attending classes without sitting at ease unlike at home. Also, they have adapted to new eating and sleeping habits in this course of time which is quite unhealthy for tender age children. Another important activity (sports) that keeps them healthy and active is missing from their daily routine. Apart from the physical discomfort, the children would also face some mental issues i.e., their psychological flexibility would weaken.

Secondly, there would be a huge learning loss particularly for those children who could not have access to any smart devices to continue their learning i.e., children belonging to the Government primary schools whose parents are either a daily wage worker or unemployed. For such purposes the planned curriculum shall be simplified by the policy makers to accelerate learning. Sierra Leone's experience with simplifying and accelerating a planned curriculum to cover two academic years in one following the Ebola pandemic suggests that accelerated learning can help get students back on track.

Thirdly, it is an important point to make here in this regard that despite an increase in the universal enrolment ratio for the past two decades, 268 million children were already out of school when the pandemic struck and when schools reopen, millions more may not be able to make it back. Children whose households have suffered economic shocks and girls who are at risk of early marriages are more prone to such risk. A report by Save the Children suggested that over 9 million children are at risk of dropping out of school. Such is the case with even the children of the private schools as the parents would be in a dilemma to decide whether they shall send their children to schools or not. Here, it is important for the school administration to maintain a healthy and safe environment for the children. To make school environments safe, additional health and hygiene measures should be implemented, and school based psychological and nutritional support should be extended to students to strengthen their overall health and well-being in the wake of the pandemic.

Table 2: Countries with a high share of out of school children pre-pandemic



Fourthly, Edtech would be disrupted once the school reopening process begins. Education technology was the answer to continuity of learning during the crisis. However, it cannot be disregarded that technology cannot replace teachers or reduce inequality. Tech companies and ministries quickly launched new apps and free trials as the lockdown began to keep kids learning but when the students would shift to physical classrooms the requirement for such apps and technology would reduce. And this might have some psychological impact in the mind of children since they have become so accustomed to the use of gadgets for their learning process. They might find the classroom teaching monotonous initially, they may even face difficulty in making friends or mingling with their mates, clearing concepts would not be easier since there are apps like ByJU's and Vedantu which have made the topics simplified with the help of 3D presentations. In a nutshell, digital detoxification would be time consuming for children.

Moving to the **fourth question** whether the pandemic has given a major drift to adopt some changing education imperatives? UNICEF 2020 addresses the reality that 31% (460 million) of all students globally do not have access to remote learning programs and out of this 460 million, 147 million are from South Asia. The issue is that the establishment of remote learning programs is less likely among younger age learners. And therefore, many developing nations

have not established remote learning programs to support pre-elementary, elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary students, respectively. This is particularly prevalent in the states with backward communities and rural areas. To make future preparations for remote access learning the government would have to invest particularly in terms of setting up technical infrastructure in the government schools.

Nevertheless, limited access to remote learning during the pandemic period is not the only problem, rather there are other fundamental problems like rising unemployment of graduates of advanced learning including universities and vocational colleges. The situation was already the worst before the pandemic in terms of unemployment and it is said to have worsened in this course of the scenario. Unless the children find technologically skilled teachers, it would be exceedingly difficult to set forth a remote learning environment among children. There is a dire need for fresh appointments in the education sector to facilitate learning skills.

Education technology has always been a source of innovation in enhancing education. During this pandemic, it has put forth advancements that have not only transformed the classroom learning experience but have also changed the way lessons are conducted. Artificial intelligence has played the most fascinating role in enhancing and personalizing education to automate critical activities such as grading and providing feedback on areas that need improvement. In the coming course, blended learning will become a reality. The classrooms will be supplemented by online coursework. Technology will be used effectively to reduce the time spent by teachers on tasks such as paper setting, evaluation, and grading. Interactivity and engagement in a physical classroom will have to be built into the online learning programs to keep students engaged. And, of course, this shall automatically incorporate the social distancing principles.

III. PART-II

The most sacrosanct legal document in the modern age i.e., UDHR enumerates education as one of the most basic of human rights. The acceptance that this one rule has gained amongst the other 29 rules goes on to show how we have gradually shifted from the Industrial Revolution to Knowledge Revolution. This highlights the importance and reliance of every government throughout the world on a robust education system to meet the challenging needs of an ever-growing world. In such a situation when you are faced with a sudden ravaging pandemic that has engulfed the entire world, your entire existence as a country comes to a screeching halt. You find yourself at a crossroads where you have to make decisions promptly and fast. We all went through a very sudden health crisis which later got coupled with an

education crisis which was further met by an exam crisis and the Government's response to go ahead with annual exams, competitive exams' is only an affirmation to the fact of the importance of education in parallel with health which speaks volume for itself.

In addition to that, we need to establish from the very beginning that schooling is not learning. Schooling is the act of attending classes, following coursework etc. whereas learning is the implementation of analytical skills in solving the questions which are meant to be solved by the person of that age group. Even though learning goals are getting more and more recognition by each passing day, the parameters that are still followed by many countries to measure the change in the education sector are quantitative in nature rather than being qualitative. Even the World Bank in their recent report emphasised on the same. The report further talks about how countries can improve on the learning front by advancing on three fronts one of which being - aligning actors to make the whole system work for learning.

This brings us to a particularly important discussion about the curriculum. Curriculum decides and plans the required learning for an academic session. This ensures that by the end of the session every student in the class is proficient at the required level of learning intended for that grade. But these curriculums are designed for an academic session in a normal setting. Such curriculum is futile in emergency conditions. For unplanned calamities, such as the covid-19 pandemic, we need a curriculum that is suitable for tackling that situation. Thus comes the need for an emergency or condensed curriculum.

(A) What is an emergency curriculum?

The first thing we need to do here is distinguishing between general and emergency curriculum. The general curriculum is something that is ordinarily prescribed in a normal course of education. Emergency curriculum, especially in a pandemic context, means a curriculum that is restructured to increase the educational output by combining all the variables which are involved.

(B) Why an emergency curriculum?

Over this past year, we all have realized the shortcomings of e-learning. One glaring shortcoming that we all have faced is the lack of personal interaction. Another important shortcoming that we noticed was an inability to gauge the interest and receptibility amongst the students of the lecture that was undertaken. This was mainly because of one reason - we shifted from classroom teaching to online/remote teaching in an instant, but we kept on practicing the same classroom pedagogical techniques. Sure, we tried to make it interactive and fun with videos, animations, and other methods but we were still teaching a curriculum that

was made for classroom teaching under general circumstances. There is only so much one can do to incorporate new teaching techniques and thus we need a curriculum that is specifically designed for emergency or pandemic-like situations where student's interests can be retained while also making sure of their progress.

Pandemic has exposed us to the lack of required infrastructure in society. Not everyone has access to the internet or devices necessary for attending which puts some students at an advantage whilst others at a disadvantage. This inequality can only be fixed with the help of a not so rigid curriculum that is specifically designed for emergencies.

Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) which is a group of education partners who support the Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) by INEE (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies) also advocated for something called Condensed Curriculum in their whitepaper and as per their definition "A condensed curriculum supports learners' acquisition of key knowledge and skills in a compressed time frame that may include discontinuous face-to-face instruction" Condensed Curriculum differs from Standard Curriculum in one way. Where Standard curriculum is about overall comprehensive knowledge and skills; Condensed Curriculum is all about essential knowledge and skills. The Working group goes on to suggest a few parameters for the same where they mention Mathematics, literacy, problem-solving, thinking skills as the important part of condensed curriculum and advocates eliminating other subject areas for the duration of the pandemic as a response to tackle the urgency of the unprecedented situation.

It needs to be emphasized here that this condensed learning program is developed by AEWG by specifically keeping in mind primary school education. Condensed curriculum differentiates between normal and priority outcomes as well. Priority outcomes describe essential skills and knowledge that are transferable across multiple subject areas: reading, writing, mathematics, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Priority outcomes give learners the tools they need for future, self-directed learning.

Even the Dakar framework for education for all in its third goal framework focused on ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs. What's important for our discussion here is in a country as diverse as India, how do you make sure that everyone has an equitable access to learning which becomes an even more grave concern in the face of a pandemic. Not everyone has the same access to internet bandwidth or devices. This goes against the dakar framework's goal and this is where a condensed curriculum would play an important role in giving every

student equitable access to learning.

To take care of the ones who are on the verge of being forgotten.

We cannot do justice to this topic if we don't discuss the students who have had to drop out this year and who may never return to the formal educational sector. The UN has predicted that almost 24 million students could end up dropping out of school due to the coronavirus pandemic.

All the above measures that we have discussed like condensed and emergency curriculum are meant for the students who are still enrolled in the formal education sector and are attending their virtual classes. But what will happen to the son of a migrant who had to migrate and uproot their life or a child who lost both his parents in covid and someone who had to drop out because of the economic strain the pandemic has caused? Our suggested methods of emergency curriculum will not work in such a situation. For this grave human rights travesty that is staring us right on the face now, we need more. While the first solution is for the government to put the policy measures in place to prevent it from happening because prevention is the only and first line of defence that we have against this grave humanitarian crisis. After having mitigated our losses by successful preventive policy, the author here would like to suggest specialized schools at block and district levels throughout the country that are specially made for the students who have had to drop out. Since the emergency curriculum here won't be of much use, the author would also like to suggest specialized bridged courses and curriculum. The idea behind the bridged courses is to cover the number of courses a student has lost due to them dropping out in a very narrow time frame thereby bringing the student up to the speed with necessary analytical and learning skills to resume their education as it would have progressed if they hadn't dropped out in the first place.

We need to realize that a pandemic of such magnitude has not occurred in the past 100 years and to deal with it we need to prepare ourselves on a war footing. Any policy measure we undertake will not be enough the first time because of many unknown variables that are involved. What we will need is ever-evolving policies that are flexible enough to be changed as per the needs but also rigid enough at the same time so that they can be enforced properly. The balance between flexibility and rigidity must be very delicate to bring in real change.

We have discussed condensed curriculum and special school with specialized bridged courses for dropout students but none of it will work until and unless the government realizes the gravity of the situation that we are in. This disruption is not just a small bleep in the present, but its real effect will be seen in the future when these students will be ready to enter the

workforce of the country. In the age of the knowledge revolution, the greatest asset any nation could have is the knowledgeable and skilled workforce and if any nation loses its edge and fails to tackle the situation like an emergency, the future of that nation is ought to be bleak. The need of the hour is to push out actual policy measures rather than just having discussions over them.

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