

Covid Pandemic: Mental Health study in School Children and related Educational Myths

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Abstract

Paper deals with mental health of Children during lockdown where we are sharing our study-first author's work, a voluntary organization working in Delhi, on the mental health issues of the school children and field work with school children on mental health narratives in pandemic. It finally concludes in discussion on the myths of our education system, digital divide in gender, DGs and EWS and camp model approach.

Keywords: Covid-19; Mental Health; School Children and Educational system

Introduction

The pandemic had a significant impact on children's mental health. They have been through a challenging time living through the risks and restrictions posed by the pandemic. Further they also have witnessed suffering and uncertainties that none should see. Being away from family, friends, classrooms, and outdoor activities caused isolation and anxiety, living with emotional tragedy, and many are at a higher risk of neglect and abuse (1). In our country, India, 41 per cent of young people between 15-24 years of age said that it is good to get support for mental health problems, compared to an average of 83 per cent for 21 countries. In fact, India was the only one of 21 countries where only a minority of young people felt that people experiencing mental health issues should reach out to others. In other country, most young people, 56 to 95 per cent, expressed that reaching out was the best way to deal with mental health issues. These are previewed in *The State of the World's Children 2021*, also found that around 14 per cent of 15 to 24-year-olds in India, or 1 in 7, reported often feeling depressed or having little interest in doing things. The proportion ranged from almost one in three in Cameroon, one in seven in India and Bangladesh, to as low as one in ten in Ethiopia and Japan [1]. In this paper we are sharing our study-first author's work with Mushy Allie, a voluntary organization working in Delhi, on the mental health issues of the school children, field work with school children on mental health narratives in pandemic. It finally concludes in discussion on the myths of our education system, digital divide in gender, DGs and EWS and camp model approach.

Children's Mental Health in Pandemic

Mental health is important as physical health and these two aspects are dependent on each other. If the person is not stable mentally then his physical health will get affected and if physical health of the person is affected then it increases the chances of developing mental health issues. There must be a balance between these two aspects of health to attend holistic health and well-being. Children are very prone to mental health issues and their symptoms rarely observable because of the continuous physical development and behavioral changes. Hence, it is required to talk about mental health with open mind set and create awareness among young people [2].

There is an increase of mental health burden among school going children after covid-19 outbreak and lockdown throughout our country. Many people have lost their jobs besides daily wage workers have continued to face stress in day to day life. People are constraint to work from home this is inviting further issues of sedentary lifestyle. These factors have also contributed an increase in mental health issues among the people. WHO and its partner organizations have been issuing the guidelines for health workers, care takers of children and old age people for better support and care the mental health of the population [3, 4].

It has become difficult for parents to calm their children's anxieties because of the uncertainty and stress in their own lives. The occupational or emotional challenges parents face is interfering with their usual ability to address their children's needs and worries.

When will the school reopen? When can they go out and play? When can they visit their favourite places? These are some common questions that children may be worrying about [5, 6]. Mental health is very important in present pandemic because people don't talk about mental health rather than physiological health or biological health. What is mental health and why it is important? This question is important and must be well defined to destroy the taboo related to mental Health. Hence, mental health is a state of cognitive, behavioural, physiological and social well-being [7].

According to WHO, mental health has 27%-30% burden on health worldwide and one in four people in the world is affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives. About 450 million people currently suffer from such conditions, placing mental disorders among the leading causes of ill-health and disability worldwide. Disease burden of mental health is continuously increasing due to sedentary lifestyle, stress, insecurities and constant pressure for survival [4].

School going children were constraint to study and attend online classes. Further they were advised to stay at home which leads them into social isolation, due to which children are very prone to develop mental health issue such as depression, anxiety, boredom, suicidal thoughts and anger issues. It has been observed that 1 in 10 children aged 5 to 16 suffer from a mental health issues, but, 70% of these young people have not had the appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age. Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown may harm physiological health and mental health of the children. The impact on every child can be different based on vulnerability factor such as age, family support, overall health status, special care child, fear of getting infected [8].

Children from the lower socio-economic income groups began to beg or borrow the mobile for the online classes in Delhi during pandemic 2020. School dropped out Children like Pankaj, 12; Jasin, a 5th class student, and Zareena, 7th class student, all living in Delhi where *Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses* (SPYM), is a voluntary organisation, particularly working in R K Puram in Delhi. Pankaj was constraint to leave the studies due to Pandemic and began begging to buy a mobile to study on the Traffic signals in R K Puram. Then Government had declared all schools as closed and teachers should teach online to school children. SPYM says most of these kids used to stay under the flyover or on the street all the day and it is our efforts these are now under the shelter home. Often their mothers used to visit them in the shelter and now most of them are back to normal schools [9].

Children have had limited access to support from social services due to lockdown measures in pandemic. The disruption to routines, education, recreation, as well as concern for family income and health, is leaving many young people feeling afraid, angry, and concerned for their future. According to data from UNESCO, over 286 million children up to grade 6 were out of school in India between 2020 and 2021. UNICEF's rapid assessment in 2021 found that only 60 per cent could access digital classrooms. Many would not be able to continue their education. According to an estimate around 320 million children in India had to switch to e-learning because of school closures during the pandemic, 133 million of which were enrolled in secondary school [10]. The unplanned and rapid digitalization highlighted the stark regional, social and economic disparities within India's school education system. The shift from classroom-based learning to digital education left out a large number of children: those with limited access to the infrastructure and resources required for online learning. In this paper I emphasised on the mental health of the school children in pandemic, illuminates my own field work associated educational myths and digital divide for poor students in brief that pandemic situation has taught.

Field work with School Children in Pandemic

In following section of this paper I am sharing my experience with school children who participated in a study while I was working as *Content Writer for Mushy Allie* team, an organisation working on mental health issues based in Delhi during my internship in May-June, 2020. Then I closely worked with these children and their parents seeking help for their mental health issues while staying in the home and shared their experiences about their mental health issue during covid-19 lockdown.

Methodology and Basic research questions

The fieldwork tradition of "*Participant Observation*" as one of the dominant methods to collect the primary data in the field and still today it is a dominant tool in most of the anthropological field work for primary data collection [11]. But this methodology, I thought is it possible to do such a field work now in such pandemic situation or in emergencies when we are told to maintain social distance, remains in isolation or do least interaction? Perhaps I re-planned this field work by telephonic discussion with the children, seeking mental health supports from the organisation, *Mushy Allie*, New Delhi. The children who are ready to participate in this work of *Mushy Allie* team, I received a number of the children and their contact details of who were seeking help and ready to share their experiences of mental health issue during covid-19 lockdown. This research focus on the common mental health issues of children and how we can create awareness in our society to prevent mental health issues before it reaches to irreversible stage among youths of our society. Further it also enumerates the various educational experts have expressed their concern about existing and possible alternative policies of teaching discussed in final conclusion. *Questions*: How is life in school and home before lockdown? What is the major difference now you feel when you are in home and were in school? How is your relationship with your parents in home?

School children and their Mental Health Narratives

I have selected following telephonic case conversation studies and the names of the children as used are changed due to confidentiality.

Case 1: Anupam, 15 years boy.

I called up Anupam in evening, 20/sept/2020, he sounded little low but still I continued by introducing myself and about "Mushy Allie" organization by which I get his number. After few minutes of talking, I asked him about his usually life in school and home before lockdown, he replied

"I don't like going school because my classmates make fun of me and during travelling in bus for going school. I usually don't get to sit on the window seat".

Further, I asked him in details, why are they making fun of you, any reason in particular? He replied

"They make fun of me because I use to carry pink colour school bag. So, they tease me calling me look he is girl and you are girl so behave like them, I tried to fight with one of the boys in my bus but his friend joined him and they both over powered me".

Further, he mentioned due to these teasing remarks he doesn't have many friends in classroom and in his school bus. He is alone and feels lonely in school. Then I asked him about the relationship within family: how is your relationship with your family and why you don't share your problem with them? He replied

"my relationship with my parents and family is fine and I tried telling them about my problems but my parents take it lightly and they keep on saying it is normal, kids use to make fun no matter what is the colour of your bag, be strong don't be shy and afraid or else they will tease you more".

Anupam, 15; evening 20/09/2020

Such incidents made him to avoid school and his problems multiply because of these issues he is facing fear, depression and isolation.

Case 2: Ankit, 16 years,

I called up Ankit in noon, 21/sept/2020. He sounds energetic and excited to know about me so I introduced myself and tried to convince him to participate in my research study. He agrees on the terms and then I asked him to tell me about his life *before* and *after* lockdown.

He replied

“before lockdown my life is very good, I have lot of friends in school and in my society, o I use to play with them in evening after school but now due to covid-19 lockdown all regular activities are not possible, it is very difficult to stay at home and it’s been a while since I meet with my friends, so some of my friends decided to play online game to cope up with stress and now it’s our routine to play online streaming games together. But my parents are very worried about me they don’t understand me, they want me to focus on study all the time as I am in 10th standard. So, they don’t want me to play video games with my friends. This leads to an argument and sometimes I outburstlater follows anger”.

Ankit, 16; noon,21/09/2020

Case 3: Rushall, 17, school girl

I called Rushall in evening and introduce myself to her with the reference of *Mushy Allie*. I enquired about her life *before* and *after* Covid-19 lockdown and her relationship with her parents and teachers in school. She replied

“My relationship with my parents is very good we keep interacting with each other and provide emotional support during this tough time of Covid outbreak, but in school my life is somehow complicated because one of my close friend looks better than me and she gets lot of attention from other students, she usually overshadowed me which leads me to develop jealousy and abnormal behaviour around her. It’s better to have online classes at least I can ignore her and all my insecurity about my looks and opinion of other students in the school.

Further she mentioned

“I keep on trying to look better and I follow calorie deficient diet so that I can look better than her.

In last she said

“Now it is too much I am very frustrated because of my looks and I keep on getting insecure about my appearance”.

Rushall, 17; evening 23/09/2020

Case 4: Shubham, 18 years

I called Shubham on the morning of 25/sept/2020. I told him about my research and Mushy Allie organization from which I got his contact details. He agreed to participate in my research study so I begin with asking about his relationship with his parents and his life in school before and after covid? He mentioned

“I am on good terms with my parents and I have good social life in school, teachers are also helpful. Our school introduced the online education because of covid-19 emergency which is very new to all of us but I am trying to adapt it as soon as possible. Sometime I feel being an average student in studies, I will not able to clear next year IIT entrance exam. My parents want me to become an engineer and from starting I have been told that you must become engineer so I choose mathematics with science in 11th standard but I wanted to choose biology as I was interested towards it. But my parents force me to choose mathematics and

now I am just trying hard still end up being an average student”.

Further, he mentioned

“This forceful decision and fear of future leads him to depression especially in present situation where exam dates are still not disclosed for 12th CBSE because of covid-19 emergency”.

Shubham, 18; moring 25/09/2020

Case 5: Deepika, 16 years

I called Deepika on the morning of 27/sept/2020. In beginning I introduced myself and the research work I am doing. She was excited to participant in the study and asked me to begin with my questions. Firstly, I asked about her social life in school, for which she replied

“It was good and I have lot of friends in school but it’s all before the covid-19 pandemic now I need to attend online classes from home itself”.

Then I asked her about her relationship with her parents. She replied

“Her relationship was good before covid-19 lockdown but now many times she gets into arguments with her parents specially her mother”.

Out of curiosity I asked further why it is so. She mentioned

“I have become very lazy during lockdown and there is no motivation for studying and doing household works. Most of the time, I prefer staying at my room and avoid interacting with my parents and any of my friends. Sometimes it leads to anger issues and extreme sadness”.

Deepika, 16; m 27/9/2020

Case 6: Rupak, 15 years, 30/sept/2020,

I introduced myself to Rupak, a 15 years old student, to participant in my interview. In starting he was shy but after 5 min of our conversation, he became comfortable and ready to answer my questions. I asked him about his relationship with his parents? He replied

“I live with my mother and my dad lives out of country and I have a good bond with my mother”.

Then I asked him about his school life? Do you like attending online classes or you are missing going to school? For which he answers

“I don’t use to go to school that much because I don’t have many friends in school so attending classes online is much comfortable”.

He was not very talkative and after a short conversation, I stop asking questions because I feel he is not comfortable in answering the questions and according to the research ethics I prefer to stop this interview on a good note. Rupak, 15;30/09/2020,

This has been observed that Parents and caregivers know their child as the best. If they notice a sudden significant difference in their child’s behavior for more than a week, they must seek professional clinical help. Such behavioral symptoms change over time as the child grows. In children younger than five years: thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, and fear of the dark, regression in behavior or withdrawal from interaction. In children between 5 to 10 years old: irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends. In adolescents between 10 to 19 years old: hyperactivity or fidgeting, sleeping, and eating disturbances, agitation, increased conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration [5].

Discussion and Conclusion

It is big challenges to tackle school going children and their mental health issues: several myths about educational system, prevailing economic constraints for budget for digital facilities and its gaps. Some children can avail them and leaving behind the poor-social disadvantages groups (DGs) and children of economically weaker section (EWS) a digital divide. Here State government efforts, judicial directions cannot much of any help and private and government schools have their own pressing economic strains.

Myths of Our Education system

Dass [6] discussed about some myths and double standards of our educational system. First, Government must deliver the education if it is to be served to the poor and society. He adds further that it is a myth; non-government organisation measures can also contribute better education to society. Several private institutions voluntarily doing better to the education and to society, but still hypocritically believed as profit making institutions. Second, it is associated with State contribution in education in the developed country like in USA, UK, and other socialistic Scandinavian countries encouraged the private run, or publicly run or private-public funding partnership model. Despite the government initiative to invest huge amount for the development of government run schools, our country are at 73rd position out of 74 countries for the programme international students assessment test. Further 24 million children have left state government school and preferred to go to private schools. Similarly 47 percent of the parents' pay 1000 rupees a month followed by 500 rupees per month. It shows and scrape of the myth of private school is only for the elites. In near future, we will require 1.30 c private schools more because now most of the parents attract towards them [6]. In Delhi people are in waiting with children for their admission. The main reasons are: it is difficult to get a *no objection certificate or permission* for a private school; now private school are not the attractive business, as Right to Education Act (RTE Act-2009) has a constant check on these schools. Further, 25percent seats must be given to children of economical weaker section (EWS) which add a burden to other 75percent children of the school which has created a hue and cry among these parents. Most of the parents have begun to believe to quality of education during 1991 and all such parents are behind the qualitative education. Therefore they all began to invest among their children. The quality of education must be improved in the government schools with the inclusion of technology for better teaching during particularly hard times such as Covid-19. State must give more freedom to private school to contribute in educational quality and avoid lies of profit making.

Digital Divide: Gender, DGs and EWS

It is important to understand how gender has factored into this transition and what further challenges it has brought for girls' access to education. Indian education can't go online – only 8% of homes with young members have computers with net link [12]. This will enable an understanding of the policy measures needed to support girls' access to the new digital age. We question whether this shift was experienced differentially based on gender, and how the differences, if any, were experienced, and examine the risks and opportunities generated for students and other stakeholders. Systemic deficiencies such as lack of adequate teaching and non-teaching staff, and narrow, exam-centred pedagogies were also at play. Our findings are important for policymakers to enable the positive use of digital technologies, and the creation of supportive and empowering learning environments to improve digital access for girls [13].

Availability of electronically gadgets-mobile, laptops, computer, internet facility etc have created a digital divide in the minds of poor students', particularly disadvantage groups (DGs) and economically weaker sections (EWS) of the society people during the pandemic times [9, 14]. When Covid-19 was on its peak then Delhi Court Orders for the private schools and Kendriya Vidayala (KVs) for these facilities should be provided for these groups of children so the digital gaps can be bridged. It is their right under the *Right to Education Act* (RTEAct-2009) which is the responsibility of the State to implement its provisions. Many voluntary organisations, like Pardarshita, are working for education to these groups [14]. Implementation of Decision of the Delhi Court for gadgets to these children of DGs and EWS for online study facilities directed State to reimburse the expenditure incurred on these. For example Delhi Public School (DPS) has already spent 30.06 Cr on the books, gadgets, dress etc. but still government has only reimbursed the 2.02 Cr and still 27.43 Cr is awaited from the Delhi government. This is a big burden on the State for implementation of the Court Order [16]. Over Rs 5,700 crore

allocated to school education sector to 'mitigate' Covid risks (Sharma, 2020), Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SMSA) from Room to Read [13].

Alternative teaching-Adoption of Camp Model Approach

There was a need expressed to adopt a new method of teaching in school. The government is trying to reopen the Delhi schools with a reduction of syllabus as well as reducing the teaching or instructions times for the teachers as policy planners and makers suggest improving their learning skills. Children already experienced a loss in their learning capabilities. How can it be improved, either by increasing teaching efforts or extra learning classes [15]. The experience of Pratham's teaching at right level programme, a small group teaching coupled with appropriate instructions specifically designed to their level of basic learning received again. It will help teachers to upgrade basic reading and mathematical skills in short period. Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo led an evaluation of these efforts effective skills in basic reading and mathematical skills in Bihar and Haryana, where community volunteers given their effective skills to teach children which they found very effective. In case of UP, the staff of Pratham with the help of volunteers in an intensive short camp for the class 3rd and 5th standard children had been effective for the children. This "*Camp model approach*" to control the school children during Covid-19 situation may be useful [15]. She emphasised her experiences in J-PAL South Asia where specific tailored made programme to the disadvantage groups (DGs) and economically weaker sections (EWS) of a particular school [17-20].

The above all we may sum up, the mental health of the school children in pandemic and associated educational myths in brief that pandemic situation has taught all of us, the whole humanity of the world, how to face these crisis and how best we can save State resources for the children and their future.

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