

An Epidemiological Neuropsychiatric and Mental Health Study in School Children and Related Educational Myths During Covid-19

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Abstract

Objective: Paper deals with mental health of Children during covid -19 lockdown where the study has been shared-a voluntary organization working in Delhi, on the mental health issues of the school children. The field work has been done with school children on mental health issues and narratives in pandemic. It finally concludes as discussed, in discussion on the myths of our education system, digital divide in gender in DGs and EWS and camp model approach.

Keywords: Covid-19; Mental Health; School Children and Educational system; DG (Disadvantageous group); ESW (economically weaker sections).

Introduction

The pandemic had a significant impact on children's mental health. The children have been through a challenging time living through the risks and restrictions posed by the pandemic. Further, children also have witnessed suffering and uncertainties that none would see. Being away from family, friends, classrooms, and outdoor activities caused isolation and anxiety, living with

emotional tragedy, and many children 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

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people felt that people experiencing mental health issues should reach out to others or health workers. 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 the authors are sharing 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 during and after covid-19 outbreak and lockdown throughout country. Many people have lost the jobs. Daily wages workers have continued to face stress in day-to-day life. People are constraint to work from home. This was 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 the children's anxieties because of the uncertainty and stress in the lives. The occupational or emotional challenges parents face is interfering with the usual ability to address the children's needs and worries. When will the school reopen? When can the children go out and play? When can the children visit their favorite 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. As mental health is a state of cognitive, behavioral, 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 the 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, children were advised to stay at home which leads 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 issue, but 70% of the 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 a 5th class student (Student 1), and 7th class student (Student 2), all living in Delhi, where Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM), is a voluntary organization, particularly working in RK Puram in Delhi.

Student 1 was constraint to leave the studies due to Pandemic and began begging to buy a mobile to study on the Traffic signals in RK Puram. At that time Government had declared all schools closed and teachers would teach online to school children. SPYM says most of the kids used to stay under the flyover or on the street all day and it is authors efforts these are now under the shelter home. Often the mothers used to visit the children in the shelter and now most of the children 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 the 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 the 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 spark 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, the author emphasized on the mental health of

the school children in pandemic, illuminates the 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

The authors experiences with school children who participated in a study while, working as Content Writer for Mushy Allie team, an organization working on mental health issues based in Delhi, during internship in May-June 2020. Closely working with the children and the parents seeking help for the mental health issues were detected, while staying in the home and shared the experiences about the 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, the authors thought is it possible to do such a field work now in such pandemic situation or in emergencies when people are told to maintain social distance, remains in isolation or do least interaction? Perhaps the authors re-planned this field work by telephonic discussion with the children, seeking mental health supports from the organization, Mushy Allie, New Delhi. The children who are ready to participate in this work of Mushy Allie team, the authors received a number of the children and the contact details of who

were seeking help and ready to share the 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 the society. Further it also enumerates the various educational experts have expressed the concern about existing and possible alternative policies of teaching discussed in conclusion. So, these questions were evaluated.

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 the Mental Health Narratives given by the children.

The authors have selected following telephonic case conversation studies and the names of the children as used are not mentioned due to confidentiality.

Case 1

One, 15 years boy.

The author called up the child in evening, 20/Sept/2020, the child sounded little low but still the author continued by introducing and about “Mushy Allie” organization by which the author gets the number. After few minutes of talking, the author asked the children about the usual life in school and home before lockdown, the children

replied that the child don't like going to school because the classmates make fun of the child and during travelling in bus for going to school. The child usually doesn't get to sit on the window seat".

Further, the authors asked the child in detail, why are the classmates making fun, any reason in particular? The child replied that the classmates make fun because the child use to carry pink color school bag. So, the classmates tease the child calling a girl and behave like girls, the child tried to fight with one of the boys in the bus, but the friend joined with one of the boys and both overpowered the child."

Further, the child mentioned due to these teasing remarks the child doesn't have many friends in classroom and in the school bus. The child is alone and feels lonely in school. Then the authors asked the child about the relationship within family: the relationship of child with parents and family is fine and the child tried telling the parents about the problems but the parents take it lightly and keep on saying it is normal, kids use to make fun no matter what is the color of the bag, and ask the child to be strong, not to be shy and afraid or else the classmates will tease the child more."

This is on 15; evening 20/09/2020.

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

Case 2

4th boy, 16 years,

The author called up in noon, 21/sept/2020. The child sounds energetic and excited to know about the author, so the author introduced and tried to convince the child to participant in the research study. The child agrees on the terms and then the author asked the child to talk about the life before and after lockdown.

The child replied "before lockdown life is very good, the child has lot of friends in school and society, so the child 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 the child meet with the friends, so some of the friends decided to play online game to cope up with stress and now it's routine to play online streaming games together. But parents of the child are very worried about the child, the parents don't understand the child, the parents want child to focus on study all the time as the child is in 10th standard. So, parents don't want child to play video games with the friends. This leads to an argument and sometimes the child outburst later follows anger."

On 16; noon,21/09/2020.

Case 3

Another girl, 17, schoolgirl.

The authors called the girl in evening and introduce to the girl with the reference of Mushy Allie. The author enquired about the girl's life before and after Covid-19 lockdown and relationship of the girl with the parents and teachers in school. The girl replied that relationship with the parents is very good, keep interacting with each other and provide

emotional support during this tough time of Covid outbreak, but in school the girl's life is somehow complicated because one of the close friends looks better than the girl and other girl gets lot of attention from other students, other girl usually overshadowed this girl which leads the girl to develop jealousy and abnormal behavior around the other girl. It's better to have online classes at least the girl can ignore other one and all the insecurity about the looks and opinion of other students in the school.

Further the girl mentioned that the girl keeps on trying to look better and follow calorie deficient diet so that the girl can look better than another girl.

In last the girl said that now it is too much, and the girl is very frustrated because of the looks and keep on getting insecure about the appearance."

On 17; evening 23/09/2020.

Case 4

Another boy, 18 years.

The author called Shubham on the morning of 25/sept/2020. The author told the boy about the research and organization from which author got contact details of the boy. The boy agreed to participate in the research study, so the author begin with asking about the boy's relationship with the parents and the life in school before and after covid? The boy mentioned that the boy is on good terms with the parents, and has good social life in school, teachers are also helpful. The school introduced the online education because of covid-19 emergency, which is very new to all,

but the boy is trying to adapt it as soon as possible. Sometime the boy feels being an average student in studies, the boy will not be able to clear next year IIT entrance exam. The parents want boy to become an engineer and from starting the boy has been told that the boy must become engineer, so the boy choose mathematics with science in 11th standard, but the boy wanted to choose biology as the boy was interested towards it. But the parents force the boy to choose mathematics and now the boy is just trying hard still end up being an average student".

Further, the boy mentioned "This forceful decision and fear of future leads the boy to depression especially in present situation where exam dates are still not disclosed for 12th CBSE because of covid-19 emergency."

On, 18; morning 25/09/2020.

Case 5

One girl, 16 years

The authors called the girl on the morning of 27/sept/2020. In beginning the author gave the introduction and about the research work the author is doing. The girl was excited to participate in the study and asked the author to begin with the questions. Firstly, the author asked about the social life in school, for which the girl replied, "It was good, and the girl has lot of friends in school but it's all before the covid-19 pandemic now the girl needs to attend online classes from home itself."

Then the authors asked the girl about the relationship with the parents. The girl replied

that the relationship was good before covid-19 lockdown but now many times the girl gets into arguments with the parents specially mother.

Out of curiosity the author asked further why it is so. The girl mentioned that the girl becomes very lazy during lockdown and there is no motivation for studying and doing household works. Most of the time, the girl prefers staying at the room and avoid interacting with the parents and any of the friends. Sometimes it leads to anger issues and extreme sadness.

On,16; m 27/9/2020

Case 6

Another boy, 15 years, 30/sept/2020,

The author had an introduction with the boy, a 15-year-old student, to participant in the interview. In starting the boy was shy but after 5 min of the conversation, the boy became comfortable and ready to answer the questions. The authors asked the boy about the relationship with the parents. The boy replied that the boy lives with the mother and dad lives out of country and the boy has a good bond with mother.”

Then the author asked the boy about the school life. Does the boy like attending online classes or missing going to school? For which the boy answers “The boy doesn’t use to go to school that much because boy doesn’t have many friends in school so attending classes online is much comfortable.”

The boy was not very talkative and after a short conversation, the author stops asking

questions because the author feels that boy is not comfortable in answering the questions and according to the research ethics the author prefers to stop this interview on a good note (On, 15; 30/09/2020).

This has been observed that Parents and caregivers know the child as the best. If the parents notice a sudden significant difference in the child's behavior for more than a week, the parents 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 the mental health issues. There are 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 the own pressing economic strains.

Myths of education system

Dass [6] discussed about some myths and double standards of the educational system. First, Government must deliver the education if it is to serve to the poor and society. Dass [6] added 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, the country is at 73rd position out of 74 countries for the programme international student's 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 the myth of private school is only for the elites. In near future, the people will require 1.30 crore private schools more because now most of the parents attract towards them [6]. In Delhi people are in waiting with children for the 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 75 percent 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 system. Therefore, the parents all began to invest among the 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 to 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. The people 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-centered pedagogies were also at play. The 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 Vidyalaya (KVs) for these facilities should be provided for these groups of children so the digital gaps can be bridged. It is the right under the *Right to Education Act* (RTEAct-2009) which is the responsibility of the State to implement its provisions. Many voluntary organizations, 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 and directed to the State to reimburse the expenditure incurred on these. For example, Delhi Public School (DPS) has already spent 30.06 Crore 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 18 Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SMSA) from reading Room to Reading on line [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. The rule makers suggest improving children learning skills. Children already experienced a loss in their learning capabilities during pandemic. How can it be improved? Either this can be done by increasing teaching efforts or extra learning classes [15].

The experience of Pratham's teaching at right level programme, with a small group teaching coupled with appropriate instructions specifically designed to the level of basic learning. Such teachings by receiving again and again boosted the knowledge and skills. It will help teachers also to upgrade basic reading and mathematical skills in short period of time. 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 the effective skills to teach children which they found very effective. In case of UP, the staff of Pratham with the help of volunteers, did so in an intensive short camp for the class 3rd and 5th standard children. This has been found effective for the children. This "*Camp model approach*" to control the school children during Covid-19 situation, may be useful [15]. Pratham emphasized the 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 the people may sum up, the mental health of the school children in pandemic and associated educational myths

in brief. That pandemic situation has taught all, the whole humanity of the world, how to face this crisis and how best people can save

and properly utilize State resources for the children and the future.

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