The Big Picture- Primary Education: Challenges and Opportunities

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In the second week of March, state governments across the country began shutting down schools and colleges temporarily as a measure to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. It's close to two months and there is no certainty when they will reopen. This is a crucial time for the education sector.

As the days pass by with no immediate solution to stop the outbreak of Covid-19, school closures are facing both short-term as well as far-reaching consequences. The structure of schooling and learning, including teaching and assessment methodologies, has been affected by these closures.

Impact of the Pandemic on Primary Education

- **Connectivity and Resources issues:** Many students from villages and from economically backward backgrounds are facing a serious issue in keeping up with online education.
  - Only a handful of private schools could adopt online teaching methods. Their low-income private and government school counterparts, on the other hand, have completely shut down for not having access to e-learning solutions.
  - The students, in addition to the missed opportunities for learning, no longer have access to healthy meals during this time and are subject to economic and social stress.
  - The pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education sector as well, which is a critical determinant of a country's economic future.
- **Unpreparedness towards digitized environment:** Many teachers and parents are facing challenges in coping with the new mode of teaching and learning.
  - Despite so much push for a digital India, sustained push for digitisation of education and training of teachers to deal with it has been lacking.
  - Technological investment in the education sector has been abysmally low.
- **Parental support issues:** Many kids face a hostile environment at home where the family members are engaged in quarreling and altercations with each other.
  This kind of surroundings adversely affects the mental health of children and also brings down their learning outcomes.

Opportunities and Challenges

- **Guided learning through technology:** This lockdown and a shift towards tech platforms can ensure a shift towards guided, cooperative learning as opposed to the rote learning of classrooms.
  - Game-based or puzzle-based learning would help in stimulating interest.
  - It needs to be supplemented by integral familial involvement at home with board games or an informal discussion.
  - Teachers can guide the parents about various creative assignments through smartphones or even simple mobile phones.
  - Increased communication between the teachers and parents is much needed in this hour.
- **Interactive learning through tech-based platforms:** Many tech-based platforms like go prep etc are working towards making education interactive and engaging.
  - These platforms through animated videos and tech-based AI programs enhance the core value of learning and critical thinking.
  - The objective is to make learning enjoyable and develop in them the desire to continue learning:

- **Initiatives by NCERT:** The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has developed an alternative academic calendar for school students to engage them meaningfully as they stay at home during the lockdown.
    - The calendar provides guidelines to teachers on the use of various technological tools and social media tools available for imparting education in fun-filled, interesting ways, which can be used by the learner to learn even while at home.
    - It also takes into account the lack of internet connectivity and thus the calendar advises teachers to further guide parents and students through SMS on mobile phones or mobile calls.
    - Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in collaboration with the NCERT has launched **e-Pathshala online portal** and mobile app through which students can decode NCERT chapters.
    - The Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan has deployed its **SWAYAM Prabha portal** which has lectures on DTH (direct-to-home) and online, to help students.

e-Pathshala

- e-Pathshala was launched in 2015 with an aim to promote self-learning among the school students.
- The portal hosts various school teachers, researchers, experts, parents, and most importantly students who can access the facility of resolving their queries.
- Students who have registered to the e-Pathshala online portal or mobile app can access educational material, including textbooks, audio, video, periodicals, and a variety of other print and non-print materials.
- There are no charges to access the e-learning source.
- It can be accessed through the desktop, laptop, or mobile.

SWAYAM Prabha

- It is an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resources Development to provide 32 High-Quality Educational Channels through DTH across the length and breadth of the country on a 24X7 basis.
- It has curriculum-based course content covering diverse disciplines.
- This is primarily aimed at making quality learning resources accessible to remote areas where internet availability is still a challenge.
- The DTH channels are using the GSAT-15 satellite for programme telecasts.

Way Forward

- **Adapt technology-based learning:** Even after the lockdown is over, there's a need to continue the spirit of interactive online learning with individualized tests and activities as it would improve the learning outcome and will help India truly realise its dream of Digital India.
    - However, this does not mean that there should be a complete replacement of teacher based pedagogy. In fact, teachers are essential to develop clarity of concepts.
    - Therefore there's a need to train teachers in such a holistic environment that they can assist the students in their problems beyond the traditional limits of a classroom
- **Odd-Even formula for schools:** In the face of the pandemic that is showing no signs of receding the schools can adopt an odd-Even formula for students to attend school on alternative days.
    - Such a condition would lead to both synchronous and asynchronous learning time for children.
    - In the synchronous time, that is on the school days, children will learn concepts and skills with the teachers.
    - While in the asynchronous time the children will revise their learning from the previous day and perform an activity or assignment based on that topic in collaboration with parents.
    - Teachers can further assist the parents in this by contacting them through phones.
- **Increase accessibility:** The pandemic has taught us a lot about adjusting to changes in new and creative ways. But taking the weaker sections along is equally necessary.
    - There's a need to explore the possibility of high and low technology solutions to digital learning, on the basis of power supply, digital skills of teachers and students, and internet connectivity.
    - Inclusion in distance learning programs, especially for students coming from low-income groups or the presence of disability, etc.
    - Provide support for digitalization to teachers as well as students by making such platforms and content available for free, and by
    - Assure the required infrastructure for online learning such as smartphones, and laptops.

Post COVID-19 there will be a greater responsibility for teachers, parents and administrators to join hands in order to help children out of the mental impact the disease and the present environment has had upon them, and also to ensure that the social distancing and hand washing and other hygiene activities continue to be practiced for much longer times.