

Education in times of COVID-19 pandemic: Academic stress and its psychosocial impact on children and adolescents in India

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The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been declared by the World Health Organisation as an international public health emergency. Owing to its high infectivity, countries all over the world implemented nationwide lockdowns with the hope of flattening the epidemic curve. Around the world, this has led to the closure of schools in over 150 countries affecting the education of nearly 1 billion children (Sahu, 2020). India faced total lockdown from 24th March 2020 to May 2020 and even though a phased re-opening of public services has since then been attempted, most educational institutions including schools and colleges remain closed without a clear view regarding their re-opening. This has created an unprecedented crisis in the education sector for students as well as educators regarding continuation of educational services, conducting assessments and catering to the needs of special education and vocational rehabilitation. This paper discusses the various psychosocial issues that have emerged leading to academic stress amongst children and adolescent students and its potential to lead to short and long-term psychological morbidity.

Challenges of home-schooling for parents

Since the closure of schools, parents find themselves primarily responsible for the teaching of their children. They are forced to take over the task of home-schooling to maintain continuity of education. This becomes an added burden, while they are already tackling issues such as work-from-home, temporary unemployment leading to financial crisis, management of household chores. Many parents would not have adequate time or the necessary educational qualifications to assist their children with assignments that were previously taken care of by their teachers. This is likely to lead to frustration and burnout amongst caregivers and disruption in the academic activities of the children, leading to stress in both parents and children. Gender disparity regarding allocation of household duties in such periods of confinement also needs to be focussed upon, as women are often expected to devote more time to home-schooling children and doing household chores affecting their academic career (Machado et al., 2019). Both teachers and students

are unprepared in terms of technology handling or accessibility issues for online learning where most of the academic activities happen via Zoom or google meet without any dedicated online learning platform (Jena, 2020)

Digital learning: an unfamiliar terrain

While the majority of schools and colleges have transitioned to online delivery of classes and evaluation to avoid the disruption of educational services, the digital platform still remains uncharted territory for majority of people in a low-middle income country such as India. The internet penetration in India is making steady inroads into urban as well as rural areas, and approximately 73.3% of the country's population is said to be connected by mobile phones (Sood et al., 2019), but the utilisation of digital resources especially in mainstream education had remained virtually unexplored as of now. Secondly dissemination of learning through a digital portal would require access to a laptop/computer for the students, which given the disparity amongst the socio-economic strata, remains unattainable for students belonging to low-income groups. According to National Sample Survey, 2017–18, 24% of households have an internet facility and only 8% of all households with members aged between five and 24 have both a computer and an internet connection (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2017–2018). This disparity of access becomes a harbinger of academic stress in students who would find themselves unable to avail online classes or submit their assignments, thus falling behind their

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peers in their curriculum. This has led to reports of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and in severe cases suicidal attempts in children and adolescents triggered by academic stress and apprehensions regarding future (Fegert et al., 2020). Recently a 15-year old girl died by suicide after being unable to access online classes from her village (Naha, 2020). In a similar incident, a 50-year old farmer, died by suicide after being unable to buy a smartphone for her daughter's online classes (Deb Barman, 2020). Such incidents highlight the severity of the psychological ramifications of inability to access basic education because of socio-economic and geographic barriers. In the absence of adequate social welfare and policy measures at governmental and institutional levels, this could lead to a severe mental health crisis amongst the young, further weakening their academic prospects leading to a vicious cycle of mental disorders, academic underachievement and poor socio-occupational functioning. On the other hand, for those who have access to digital learning media, problematic use of technology, increased gaming, spending more time on social media are also issues of concern that may emerge requiring intervention.

Greater challenges for students with special needs

Children with disabilities (CWD) find themselves at a more disadvantaged situation with the suspension of their educational and vocational activities in the wake of this pandemic. Children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism and intellectual disability require regular occupational, speech and behaviour therapy. Most centres for special education in India are not geared to provide their services through digital platforms or home-based interventions. Recently the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disability (under the Ministry of Social Justice and Welfare) released Comprehensive Disability Inclusive Guidelines for protection and safety of persons with disabilities during COVID 19 but it remains silent regarding the educational provisions for CWDs. In the absence of socially inclusive education policies for CWD, the trajectory of their clinical and functional outcome would also deviate towards an adverse course, which in the long run would add to the mental health and economic burden in society.

The psychological effect of academic stress

Students in secondary and tertiary education settings are known to face a varied range of ongoing normative stressors associated with their ongoing academic demands (reference). However, in the current scenario created by the social restrictions imposed by the pandemic, have led to escalation to severe levels of academic stress in students. There is enough evidence to demonstrate that severe and long-standing academic-related stress has an adverse

effect on academic performance, mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Academic-related stress is significantly associated with reduced student academic motivation (Liu, 2015) and academic disengagement (Liu & Lu, 2011).

This in turn makes them vulnerable to dropping out, future unemployment, and increased incidence of psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety and substance use disorders (Pascoe et al., 2020). Long-standing stress exposure in children and adolescents may also lead to the development of physical health problems such as metabolic syndrome, obesity and reduced insulin sensitivity as well as reduction of life expectancy (Pervanidou & Chrousos, 2012). Recent graduates in India are fearing withdrawal of job offers from corporates because of the current situation. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's estimates on unemployment shot up to 23% in early April and the urban unemployment rate to 30.9% (Choudhary, 2020).

Need for policy measures

The COVID-19 pandemic has grown from being a public health crisis to an overarching humanitarian crisis demanding strong social welfare measures to mitigate its adverse consequences. The education sector in India is one important area that has been severely affected by the lockdown and restrictions that are required to slow down the disease transmission (Sharma, 2020). Although, the Department of School Literacy and Education is involved in improving access to education through various online platforms and initiatives like National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER), Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA), e-Pathshala and a National Online Education platform called SWAYAM (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2017–2018) but the accessibility and acceptability of such initiatives need to be focussed upon (Jena, 2020).

The authors suggest legislation and policy measures in the following areas to make education inclusive and universally accessible to all students

- Build professional competency in teachers of regular and special schools in delivering online teaching
- Special focus on students from marginalised sections and CWD
- Improve penetration of electronic media and internet connectivity across geographical locations and various socio-economic strata
- Upscaling of technological infrastructure

Author note

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Author contributions

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