Care and the COVID-19 Challenge: The Missing Link in the Fulfilment of Educational Needs of Children and Young Persons Living in Alternative Care

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Abstract

In a developing country like India, inaccessibility of education to vulnerable children and youth has been quite prevalent, and often unheard and un-prioritized. The basic education often falls short of quality education required for an independent living and due to pandemic, the right to education has been further compromised and learning has been reduced substantially. The paper highlights the existing gaps in the rights to education of children in vulnerable groups, challenges faced by them with respect to mental health issues, emotional distress, and trauma which consequently impacted their academic performance. It highlights the importance of addressing and gearing the overall child protection system along with the education system of India thereby providing recommendations and highlighting the importance of training and sensitizing teachers and carer staff in schools in handling of such children, widening the understanding of childhood trauma, and developing a clear policy to provide guidance about safeguarding children at large, in particular children coming from institutions.

Keywords: *education, child care institutions, child protection, child rights, child wellbeing*

Introduction

Amongst the various measures to combat the pandemic, with no historical model, has been the closure of schools worldwide, leading to the right to education being hugely compromised and learning being reduced substantially as a result affecting several million children across the globe. We can barely summarize the loss in terms of human capital and development, but we have to accept the current evolving measures for obvious reasons. While school closures are being used as a mitigation tool to help curb the spread of the pandemic, it has also widened the h gap which already exists in the system that fails to address the basic educational rights of vulnerable children within families as well as of children living in child-care institutions and without parental care. Distant learning programmes and online training quickly evolved to make up for the loss, but unfortunately, these are available only to a small section of children across the world. "At least 463 million students around the globe remain cut off from education, mainly due to a lack of remote learning policies or lack of equipment needed for learning at home during this pandemic" (UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures).

Amidst a lot of misgivings around school closures, along with a plethora of quick changes being adopted by several actors to ensure that learning is not completely lost; the educational rights of marginalised children as well as children living in child-care institutions yet remain overlooked. And children living in informal settlements like alternative care spaces and refugee camps suffer the most as they have limited infrastructure, limited number of devices, lack of staff, lack of knowledge about handling the electronic gadgets and hardly any access to internet (Breu & Stephan, 2020). India's education system's preparedness to deal with such unprecedented pandemic was already low, and hence, the gulf of learning inequalities has become wider during this pandemic.

Children in alternative care and COVID-19

For millions of children, vulnerable within families, and those without parental care and living in alternative care settings, majorly residential care, compromising their basic and fundamental right to education has been a common reality, often unheard and un-prioritized, even before the pandemic. Even before the crisis, there were several challenges in implementing the right to education, pandemic has only exacerbated the situation.

The Constitution of India, various legislative and policy measures such as the Juvenile Justice laws, coupled with international prescriptions like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which India ratified in 1992, together, strongly mandate the clear obligation on governments to protect and promote the rights of children and ensure right to family and education for all children. Due to the lack of evolved family strengthening measures, parenting trainings, and community initiatives, children from poverty-stricken backgrounds are falling from the safety net of families, and protection measures are implemented of an alternative care system, where children without parental care could get their rights to life, development, growth and education served. Child Care Institutions, in the want of other family based and community-based mechanisms, like foster care and kinship care, thus find prominence, in the Indian care system, despite the clear mandate of children should not be separated from the families

Children, separated from their families, due to myriad reasons, being sent to residential care, have already faced several challenges such as experiencing early trauma, betrayal of trust and loss of family attachment as well as disrupted education. Once in the child care institutions, also, due to various reasons, many of them do not find stability and constant transfers from one institution to another, disrupting education, making formal education quite incomprehensible to them. In fact, a study done in 2008, found that frequent mobility amongst children in residential care is one of the highest contributing factors that may lead to poorer education and learning outcomes (Trout et al., 2008). Accordingly, another study that further explored the perspectives of youth formerly in institutional care revealed that these children as adults often felt that it could have been beneficial if they were presented with an opportunity beforehand to properly prepare with a structured transition, in the event of changing schools (Clemens et al., 2017).

Other contributing factors may also prevail as they come to an institution at a stage where they have lost early years of learning and getting them admitted to schools in their age-appropriate classes poses a challenge for the caregivers, as to how to accelerate their learnings to make up for the lost years; additional problems are posed as

they do not have legal identity documents and schools often refuse to admit them under the economically weaker section quota or give them provincial admission when they lack identity evidence. Several studies have indicated that the need for a safe and stable school environment is the most important component to consider in order to facilitate learning among the children and youth in care (Schroeter et al., 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018).

Often the baggage of trauma that children come with to an institution is not addressed for a variety of reasons, like having lack of material and human resources available to the child care institution, and they find it difficult to focus on their studies; and resultantly, they often lose interest in academics and many become drop outs. A research study that aimed to assess the educational successes among the children and youth in care, reported that more than half of the children in care were being negatively impacted by mental health issues, emotional distress, and trauma which were also consequently associated with their academic performances (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). Further research also reiterates that in the long run, poor academic performance often leads to negative long-term outcomes, such as unemployment or low wages, making it difficult for young people to earn a decent livelihood (Torrico, 2010). In a study conducted by Udayan Care in 2019, it was found that 40% of the care leavers could not complete their schooling and 24 care leavers across the five states of India had not studied beyond primary education. It also found that children and youth in care faced issues of accessibility along with the quality of education which was accessible to them and this education was further impacted during the transition to aftercare as 34% of the care leavers had to discontinue education (Beyond 18, 2019).

The adverse impact of COVID-19 on the already existing vulnerabilities of such children can only be imagined. Several studies have reportedly shown that this period is likely to be the most vulnerable time of their lives, given their early exposure to trauma and their life history (Mann-Feder, 2019). Lanker & Parolin stated the negative impact of non-school factors as a cause of inequalities in education and social crisis concerns emerging due to a combination of child poverty and school closures. The learning gap between children from high and low socio-

economic backgrounds has widened due to the focus on digital education. There has been a digital divide as though some children would have access to online learning facilities; a majority of children living in residential care facilities have no access to phone, or computer (Fore, 2020).

A non-COVID related issue that really needs to be addressed is that the overall child protection system as well as the education system in India is not geared towards child protection issues and preventing the vulnerabilities of children without parental care. There is large scale ignorance in teachers, who are the biggest influencers in the early years of a child's life. The biggest missing link in the education system is that the teachers are not trained to develop their understanding and sensitivity to child protection issues. Often unaware of the trauma and adverse childhood experiences that may accompany children, comments or remarks are made that can hurt the sentiments of children. This is largely due to the lack of training to teaching and carer staff in schools in sensitive handling of such children, wider understanding of childhood trauma, what constitutes their wellbeing and a clear policy to provide guidance about safeguarding children at large, in particular children coming from institutions.

'Wellbeing' of children in the broader connotation includes physical, mental health and emotional wellbeing, protection from abuse and neglect in domestic, family and social relationships, at educational institutions and recreational spaces. It also includes happiness, comfort and security as an all-encompassing requisite. Schools and teachers can play a very crucial role in the preventive phase of child protection. Children spend over 6-7 hours (nearly 50%) of their waking hours in schools. Due to their central position within the community, with parents and staff of child care institutions, schools provide opportunities for their teachers to observe children's interactions with their own families, and with care staff and peer interaction at child care institutions, at least five-six days a week. School teachers are thus in a position to observe children closely and notice the presence of neglect and other child rights violations, at different levels. School staff, for instance, do notice shabby attire, dirt and grime on a child's body, lice in their hair, able to 'see' hunger or distress on a child's face, even bruises

and scars. When they see a child significantly withdrawn, isolated or crying, displaying unhappiness or anger, unable to concentrate on academics they can easily perceive these visible emotions to causes such anger, tiredness, hunger, lack of nutrition, above all, lack of care. Teachers actually can perceive if there is something the matter even if there is no physical evidence, as these are potential pointers that a child is living with emotional neglect and maybe a victim of physical, emotional or even sexual violence. In the case of school dropouts and long absence from school, concerns about possible trafficking, early marriage, pledged for employment, runaway etc. also come to the fore.

If teachers are sensitised and made aware of the different indicators of neglect, trained in the importance of early prevention strategy and intervention for such children, and if they are given tools to work with, they can help in strengthening the family and ensuring that childhood days are empowering for each child they come in contact with. It will work in both ways, the child within the family will be better taken care of and will not succumb to child rights violations and ultimate separation from the family and landing up in alternative care settings like a child care institution. There is enough evidence to show that intervention and information of neglect, abuse and other violations against children at the early stages can go a long way in mitigating the risk of separation of children from their families. Working with the children and their immediate families to ensure that children remain close to their community roots is the essence of child protection. Preventing the separation of child from family is the first step in gatekeeping and schools and teachers can play a critical role here by aiding the prevention of children landing in institutions. Teachers and other school staff are thus in an optimal position to prevent, identify, and assist victims of child abuse and neglect because of their frequent contact with students. Taking students in difficult situations into confidence and helping them with a plan can be difficult, but students are known to be receptive despite their struggles and have the ability to empower themselves and get genuine relief once the plan is in place.

This opportunity to identify families on the verge of separation, or children coming from

institutions in an abusive situation, which the teachers could easily fathom, got restricted due to COVID-19 crisis. Lockdowns tragically have provided an opportunity to some extent for child abusers to harm/abuse children as children are rarely in a position to report any of such acts as due to the changed circumstances as they do no longer have the same access to teachers to report incidents at home. All these effects can often cause children to drop out of school in general and be more exposed to risks like child labour. Still the teachers can, while conducting online, WhatsApp classes, be more vigilant about child absenteeism or other indicators of abuse, or abandonment, and inform the authorities to take the necessary steps in time. The successful and prompt recognition of child abuse and neglect is largely dependent upon the interest of the teaching staff, schools logically and practically should thus become the first line of intervention for prevention and protection of children whose rights are violated, and these additional responsibilities need to be trained and supported. Making 'child protection' and promotion of 'child rights' a shared responsibility of the school system and the child protection system is yet to gain priority. Barriers to effective interdisciplinary practice include poor inter-departmental communication, information sharing and difficult inter-professional relationships, heavy teaching loads and focus on attainment of targets, rather than 'lack of interest' in safeguarding concerns. This gap in services on prevention provokes a need for an important legislative transition and new policy articulation. To reduce the consequences of the violations of children's right to education in every sector, priority should be given to implement ways to uphold schooling programmes which can provide an equal access along with secure case management for children who require supplementary personalized care, including those living in alternative care spaces and children with disabilities.

Promotion of investments in digital learning platforms along with access to internets should be prioritized, even after the pandemic, but more effort is needed to link education with child protection measures. We have an opportunity out of this pandemic to reimagine education and link it to child protection, so that children are served adequately in families, gain meaningful education, care and support from their teachers, and do not get separated from their families, and those in institutions, also get additional support from the teachers in developing better protection and restoration pathways for children. This would require actions and investments of both the private and the public sector together.

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