THE EFFECTS OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF KERALA SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract:

COVID-19 has brought about changes to the education system that impact teachers in multiple ways. The article discusses the views of affected teachers under the three-gap framework: access, usage, and pedagogical skills gap. Between 29 April 2020, and 29 May 2020, an online survey was administered to 100 school teachers in Kerala. The data show that the inequalities between private schools and government schools are sharpened by the move to online education. This is compounded by the fact that students from economically weaker sections of society have become hard to reach, and teachers do not know how to support hard to-reach students who are also severely affected by the pandemic. The data also show that teachers have not been trained in online pedagogies. Ed-Tech companies have been stepping in, presenting themselves as a panacea to the problem with further consequences to teachers' profession, standing, and livelihoods. However, Ed-Tech. solutions are not relevant for hard-to-reach students or teachers in schools that serve hard-to-reach communities. The article first presents the voices of teachers affected by the pandemic and then critically examines the role of Ed-Tech companies, which pertain to fill the online pedagogical gap

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, home office, mental well-being, physical well-being, work from home, digital gap, teachers, inequalities, government schools, private schools, Ed-Tech

INTRODUCTION

This article engages with the effects of COVID-19 on education provision in India, in particular with the digital gap experienced by teachers when they moved their classes online due to the pandemic in March/April 2020. Digital gap exists at learners' level as well as teachers' level, not only in India but across the globe. The extent of this gap varies from region to region depending upon the infrastructure, the socio-economic background of stakeholders, and many other local factors like the particular culture of a community.

From March to June 2020, much of the public debate focused on the digital gap in the context of students, meaning that the difficulties faced by teachers on the ground were not given due emphasis. This article aims to give voice to teachers' experiences. Whilst the data are Kerala -specific and representative of the respondents who agreed to take part, it is evident that the issues discussed here are also faced by teachers elsewhere in India and abroad. Therefore, the conclusions drawn in this article might have broader applicability. The results of this study indicate that socio-economic inequalities in the physical world have become more pronounced in the digital/virtual world, even in Kerala. Beyond the stark differences between government and private schools, the study shows that many teachers are technologically savvy. Still, due to the lack of specialised training, they are mostly unfamiliar with particular issues of online pedagogy and struggle to teach online.

EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC

Since the coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020 started to disrupt people's normal lifestyle, the virtual world has come to the rescue. Across the globe, shopping, entertainment, work, and education moved online. The spread of COVID-19 has had profound effects on education globally. As schools and universities closed, many turned to technology to try to continue the teaching and learning process. Among many institutions, schools have also shifted their base to virtual platforms to conduct classes online. Consequently, catering to the needs of all stages of education from pre-primary to university level, online education has emerged as an alternative to ordinary/regular faceto-face classes. Accordingly, various stakeholders such as government and private organisations have been trying their best to assist each other by sprucing up their existing online platforms, web applications, apps,

etc. and providing training to teachers to use these apps and platforms. Moreover, efforts are being made both by the government and nongovernment organisations including Ed-Tech companies to support the school system to make a smooth transition to the virtual world. Up-skilling and motivating teachers, organising counselling sessions for stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and students are just some of the measures taken by the Indian administration in the past few months. Making a continuous effort to provide customised teaching–learning material suitable for online classes has been another way of facilitating the schooling of children.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To understand impacts of social, behavioral and physical factors on well-being of School teachers during COVID-19 work from home (WFH).
- Discuss the negative aspects of full-time work from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the potential benefits for employees and employers.
- Discuss the effects of WFH on physical and mental well-being and the risk and protective factors associated with WFH-related declines in well-being.

RESEARCH METHODS

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a structured questionnaire was developed to assess the extent of the digital gap and its various forms in India, in general, and in Kerala, in particular. All questions follow either nominal or ordinal scale. The measure of central tendency, primarily simple average, has been used for the analysis of aggregated data as well as for cross-analysis based on types of school. To begin with, the potential respondents were approached using personal contacts with teachers across Kerala. Later on, the snowballing method of data collection was used wherein the participants were asked to circulate the questionnaire among their acquaintances. This was done to widen the reach of the survey and thereby reduce the element of biases in the study. We were aware that the survey would be constrained or limited in its reachability as only teachers possessing or having access to digital device(s) such as smartphone, laptop, tablet would be the potential respondents; an indication of prevailing digital gap among teachers.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Average (SD) and Frequency (%) Across Responses to Each Individual Variable Within Lifestyle and Home Environment, Occupational Environment, and Home Office Environment.

Number of Responses	Mean (SD) or Frequency	

	(%)	
Lifestyle and home environment		
Overall physical activity (eg, standing, step count), [1–5]	883	2.35 (1.37)
Physical exercise (eg, classes, walking, running, biking), [1–5]	884	2.55 (1.41)
Overall food intake, [1–5]	885	3.24 (0.90)
"Healthy" food intake, [1–5]	884	3.07 (0.94)
"Junk" food intake, [1–5]	885	3.05 (1.11)
At least 1 independent adult lives with me, Yes	969	816 (84.2%)
At least 1 dependent adult lives with me, Yes	701	65 (9.3%)
At least 1 teenager lives with me, Yes	722	136 (18.8%)
At least 1 school age child lives with me, Yes	735	158 (21.5%)
At least 1 toddler lives with me, Yes	704	110 (15.6%)
At least 1 infant lives with me, Yes	673	63 (9.4%)
At least 1 pet lives with me, Yes	812	408 (50.2%)
Distractions while working, [1–5]	883	3.35 (1.33)
Workload expectations or requirements, [1–5]	884	3.25 (1.03)
Communication with coworkers, [1–5]	883	2.66 (1.31)
Difference in workstation use compared to before working from home, hours	962	1.46 (3.00)
Adjusted work hours or routine, Yes	983	722 (73.4%)
Accommodate work schedule around others, Yes	983	368 (37.4%)

Work schedule is the same as before, Yes	983	198 (20.1%)
Other people are present in the same workspace while working, Yes	939	447 (47.6%)
Home office environment		
Satisfaction with visual environment, [1–5]	988	3.93 (0.83)
Satisfaction with thermal environment, [1–5]	983	4.00 (1.07)
Satisfaction with air quality, [1–5]	985	4.14 (0.84)
Satisfaction with noise, [1–5]	980	3.48 (1.22)
I have a dedicated room for work activities, Yes	960	317 (33.0%)
I have a dedicated space in a room with other uses, Yes	960	483 (50.3%)
I work in a variety of places, rooms, or locations around my home, Yes	960	160 (16.7%)
I have a good workstation set-up, Yes	975	281 (28.8%)
I know how to adjust my workstation, Yes	975	295 (30.3%)
I have consulted a professional to make adjustments to my workstation, Yes	975	23 (2.4%)
I know how my workstation affects my health, well-being or productivity, Yes	975	111 (11.4%)

The average ratings for our dependent variable of overall physical and mental well-being were both decreased as compared to prior to WFH, at 2.84 (SD=0.87) and 2.70 (SD=0.93) respectively. Averages and frequencies of responses across all independent variables are reported Lifestyle changes were noted as decreased overall physical activity and physical exercise, combined with increased overall food intake, despite the average amount of healthy and junk food intake remaining about the same across the sample. The vast majority of respondents (84.2%) had another independent adult living with them, while approximately half had a pet (50.2%), and up to 21.5% had at least one dependent or child in the home. As compared to pre-pandemic levels, work expectations and distractions

were increased, communication with co workers was decreased, and the time spent at the workstation increased by approximately 1.5hours. Nearly three-fourths of participants (73.4%) had adjusted their work hours and more than one-third of participants (37.4%) reported scheduling their work hours around others. Only one-third of respondents (33.0%) had a dedicated room for their work at home, while approximately half of the respondents indicated their workstation was in a space with other uses (50.3%) and that other people are present within the workspace (47.6%). The fewest respondents (16.7%) work in a variety of places around the house, such as couch, bed and dining tables. Respondents were generally satisfied with IEQ factors (all > 3.5); however, less than one-third of respondents indicated having a good workstation set-up, and only 11% of respondents knew if and how their workstation was affecting their health, well-being, or productivity. Of those individuals who indicated knowing how to adjust their workstation, only one-third (32.5%) reported that they had a good workstation set-up.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Usage Gap: Many teachers who are using online platforms are finding it hard to adapt to new ways of teaching. Taking online classes demands prior preparations, which not only includes lesson plans but also PowerPoint presentations, assessment sheets, and adapted student exercises to create interactive classes (The Hindu, 2020). Online classes are proving more problematic to middle age teachers who are finding it challenging to maintain discipline in the class and are subject to online bullying and harassment from students (Sharma, 2020b). Some teachers have resorted to sending assignments to students and, subsequently, being available to address their needs, rather than conducting classes on an online platform (pilot interview July 2020).

Teaching Online and the Difficulties: The differences in interaction point to specific difficulties when teaching online. Teachers were asked, 'How is the lockdown affecting your work as a teacher?' Teachers' responses in Figures 12 and 13 reveal a variety of challenges and issues faced while conducting online classes. A primary concern for teachers is getting monitored by parents or the head teacher. Private school teachers are more apprehensive than government teachers. This seems to be related to job security. While government teachers are privileged to know their jobs are safe, private school teachers are always under scrutiny and can be fired more easily—as discussed later. Online classes have given parents and school management undue advantage to monitor teachers' classroom practices.

The Role of Ed-Tech Companies: The role of technology in education during the pandemic starts with the government. The Ministry of Education (MoE) has been promoting its various Information Communication Technology (ICT) initiatives such as the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER),8 e-Pathshala9 for school books and resources, Diksha,10 and e-PG Pathshala11 which provide access to e-content in 80 undergraduate courses. In addition to this, SWAYAM12 online courses, and UGC MOOCs,13 are also being promoted through various government websites such as Ministry of Education, National Institute of Open Schooling, Central Board of Secondary Education, University Grants Commission etc., which can be accessed by teachers and students free of cost. MoE also launched the PM e-VIDYA platform, with 12 new DTH channels, one for each class to reach out to all strata of society. The 'Bharat Padhe Online' campaign crowdsourced ideas to improve the online education ecosystem of India, Young India Combating COVID with Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (YUKTI),14 and YUKTI 2.015 to keep the teaching–learning process going on.

Teaching, Ed-Tech, Increasing Inequalities, and the Weaker Sections of Society : Newspaper articles abound with praise for the Ed-Tech companies, discussing the 'new normal' and how students might not need to return to their classrooms. This is highly problematic, not least for poorer students who do not have access to technology. It is well known that not everyone has access to stable electricity, Internet connections, or to a separate room to study, carving out inequalities concerning accessing education and remaining engaged with the syllabus right there.

Job and Salary Issues : A report by Central Square Foundation reveals that low-fee private schools are going through a rough phase as they could not collect the fees for the past 4 months due to COVID-19. Since most of these schools depend on the revenue generated through fees, the teachers and supporting staff have not received their salaries for the past 4 months. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, where teachers of low-fee private schools have not received salaries since March/April (Gopal, 2020). Even among private schools, the worst affected are pre-nursery and primary schools, where no new admissions have taken place. The premier (elite) institutes have also slashed fees by 30– 50% despite having collected fees. The teachers are finding themselves in a quandary as, on the one hand, they are not getting salaries and on the other, they are being asked to conduct online classes, which is an extra burden in terms of financial investment (Thakur, 2020)

CONCLUSION

The article has attempted to investigate the ground realities teachers are facing while taking online classes. It has brought to the fore the multilayered and multidimensional issues encompassing the infrastructural impediments; the digital divide in terms of access, usage, and skill gaps of both government and private school teachers; and the role of Ed-Tech companies that are trying to replace the teachers rather than assisting them in their work.

Two major issues have surfaced: firstly, teachers' pedagogical skills do not cater to the online teaching environment, nor have they been trained for these kinds of situations. The picture that emerged is that even when teachers are digitally skilled, it does not mean that they have the know-how on how to teach online classes and prepare materials appropriate for online education. The sudden and unanticipated switch from face-to-face to online education hardly left them with adequate time to prepare for an alternative mode of teaching. Teachers also do not seem to have been trained in how to support those most disadvantaged, who, in turn, will be suffering most from school closures. Ed-Tech companies that seem to offer a solution are in reality only offering a solution to the more privileged sections of society. A review of the press reveals that Ed-tech networks are influencing governments through advocacy to integrate data analytics and learning analytics technology into educational policies. Technology should exist to help teachers rather than the other way round, where teachers are being substituted with technology

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12. SWAYAM is an initiative of the Government of India for the students pursuing education from class 9 to 12 and also for the aspirants seeking undergraduate- and post-graduate-level degrees; SWAYAM facilitates study material at one destination.

13. UGC MOOCs (SWAYAM) is an instrument for self-actualisation, providing opportunities for lifelong learning through massive open online courses.

14. Young India Combating COVID-19 with Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (YUKTI) was launched to identify ideas relevant to COVID-19 pandemic.

15. YUKTI 2.0 is an extension of YUKTI to create a database of technologies and innovation in Ed-Tech.

ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PROMOTING ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION IN INDIA

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"Never too young to start an empire" and then there is "Proper preparation prevents poor performance"

Abstract