



Challenges to Remote Instruction During the Pandemic: A Qualitative Study with Primary Grade Teachers in India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profound implications for education of young children worldwide and especially for children in developing economies like India. This article presents a qualitative study that explored the challenges that private school teachers in low budget, mid-ranged, and high fee charging private schools faced in two cities in India. All the private schools in this study also followed the government mandate to reserve 25% of seats for children from low-income families. During the school closure, remote instruction was employed in schools where participating teachers taught. Teachers faced challenges related to parental involvement and children's participation in remote instruction. Parental involvement challenges included parental lack of access to technological devices and no or minimal access to internet for their children to participate in remote instruction activities. Parental lack of support due to their low technological literacy and literacy in general, lack of fluency in the English Language, as well as lack of time also contributed to their children's low participation in remote instruction. Teachers faced challenges in implementing remote instruction with children from different socio-economic backgrounds; however, the challenges were greater with families from low-income backgrounds. The study's findings suggest that governments around the world need to ensure children's access to digital tools and internet services which are essential elements in children's participation in remote instruction. For children in families where parents are unable to support their children's education at home, other support services may be instituted to take the pressure off of parents. Future studies may explore the 'learning loss' that may have resulted from the long school closure during the pandemic.

Keywords Primary grade education · Teachers · Private schools · COVID-19 · Parental involvement · Remote instruction · India

The world has suffered from epidemics and pandemics in the twenty-first century (WHO, 2014). However, the scope and mortality rate of COVID-19 is unparalleled to any of the health outbreaks witnessed in this century. Based on the nature of the spread of the virus, it was necessary for

countries to implement a series of control and prevention measures including school closures. To prevent disruption in children's education, educational institutions around the world, if logistically possible, transitioned to virtual learning options. However, school administrators, teachers, and parents hardly had any time for preparing for this transition (Erlam et al., 2021). As a result, the process, and outcomes of remote instruction during the pandemic have been widely contested around the world (Malik & Tyagi, 2020). Overseeing the teaching and learning process as well as serving as mediators between the home and school, teachers are critical informants who can share their experiences and insights gained during the remote instruction process. Gaining insights from teachers' experiences during the pandemic is also necessary to guide policy and programming for implementing effective instructional practices in future crises (Liefshitz, 2020). Justifying teacher voice in the context of the pandemic, Garbe et al. (2020) rightly state,

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Teachers are the closest witnesses of the challenges the pandemic has brought for their students, for themselves, and for their jobs, and their expertise and judgment are critically important to solving these challenges as the pandemic continues and in its aftermath (para.1).

Keeping in view the importance of gathering teacher perspectives on a reform or change, a qualitative study was conducted to gather perspectives of primary grade teachers teaching in private schools in two cities in India on challenges that they faced from the family front that prevented successful participation of children in the school's remote instruction efforts.

Elementary Education System and Private Schooling in India

To provide readers a context for the study, it will be appropriate to discuss India's primary education system, public and private, and the factors that influence Indian parents' preference for private education for their children. India's primary education system is divided into two levels: Lower primary (grades 1–5) and upper primary (grades 6–8). According to Sahni (2015), with 1.4 million primary schools and 7.7 million primary school teachers, currently, about 98% of children in the country have access to a primary school within 1 km of their home. India's school education system operates under different management systems: government schools, government-aided schools, and private schools. Private schools, although owned and managed by private management groups, are required to follow the rules and regulations set by the government. The 2009 Right to Education Act of the Indian government (Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, 2021) has laid down norms and standards for private schools that relate to infrastructure, teacher qualifications, pupil-teacher ratio, and curricular standards. According to some estimates, 250 million children in India attend a primary school, half of these children or about 120 million children attend privately managed schools (India Today, 2020). A host of factors such as teacher absenteeism in government schools (UNESCO, 2017), low-quality teaching (Rana et al., 2003), and inadequate physical conditions (The Probe Team, 1999) have contributed to a massive expansion of private schools in both rural and urban India in the last three decades. Private schools' critical role in education, especially reaching goals set by the United Nations such as universal primary education, quality education, gender parity, has been well recognized by researchers (Kingdon, 2020).

It is important to discuss the fee structure of private schools in India. Contrary to popular perceptions about the

high cost of private education, the cost of private schools in India varies and meets the financial capacity of all different income groups. Tuition fees in private schools in India range from as little as \$5.00 per month in budget private schools located in low income rural and urban communities to \$2500.00 or more in wealthy communities. To add, India's 2009 Right to Education Act requires that all private schools reserve at least 25% of their seats for children of 'economically weaker sections and disadvantaged' groups, the fees will be reimbursed by the state government. During the pandemic, private schools in India fulfilled the state's remote instruction requirement; however, faced many challenges during the process.

Challenges to Remote Instruction

When uncertainties over the coronavirus situation continued, after a period of school closure in spring 2020, schools around the world started switching to the remote instruction mode to prevent disruption in children's learning process. Experts maintain that successful remote instruction requires access to digital technology, online resources, appropriate software, as well as fast speed internet access (Van Nuland et al., 2020). However, as per researchers and observers, online instruction during the pandemic was not successful due to various challenges including lack of one-to-one access to a digital tool in the household, lack of access to internet services, parental work schedules or sibling school schedules, and general disruptions in home life because of the pandemic (Kajeet, 2020). Researchers have reported low attendance in online classes (DeWitt, 2020) and have concluded that the transition to remote teaching and learning had not been smooth for teachers, parents, and children, especially in early primary grades (Timmons et al., 2021) for many reasons including the issue of educational inequity.

Remote Learning and Educational Inequity During the Pandemic

Educational observers and researchers around the world have shared that the pandemic did not affect all children equally (Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021). From their study, Timmons et al. (2021) reported that "remote learning exacerbated inequitable access to resources and supports and may have widened learning gaps" (p. 892). Based on its COVID-19 education rapid response tracker survey, UNICEF (2020a) reported that: (a) 77% of countries included television in their national response to COVID-19 school closures; (b) more than half of the countries tracked used radio as part of the national response to school closure; and (c) household access to television was inequitably distributed in

sub-Saharan Africa and South Asian countries. From interviews with students, parents, and teachers in 60 countries, the Human Rights Watch (2021) concluded that during the school closures many children did not receive the opportunity, tools, or access needed to continue their education. Some children in rural areas who had a smartphone traveled long distances to access the internet. The gaps in opportunities, tools, and access were not limited to developing countries only (Collis & Vegas, 2020). The survey by the Brookings Institute (Vegas et al., 2021) in India also reported that “students in private schools and those from households with high socioeconomic status (SES) have more access to digital devices and are more engaged in regular educational activities than their peers in government schools and from low-SES households” (para. 6). Across the world, researchers reported disparities in home learning environments among families with different socioeconomic statuses in terms of availability of children’s literature and parental involvement in homework help. The findings of UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS6) highlighted that household wealth was a major predictor of parental involvement at home during the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020b). For example, while most children in Georgia lived in households with access to child-oriented books, more than ninety percent of children from poverty backgrounds in some countries such as Punjab (Pakistan), Iraq, Madagascar, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe, lived in households without any children’s book (UNICEF, 2020b). In many countries, because of children’s lack of access to online instruction, schools distributed homework packets by hand to families and/or sent assignments via online messaging services via phone. However, the debate over the quality of remote instruction during the pandemic continues around the world.

Quality of Remote Instruction

Researchers around the world have documented how remote instruction has impacted the quality of education at all levels, especially in terms of learning loss among children. When school-based services closed for approximately 167 million children at the start of the pandemic, an estimated 19.01 billion instructional days were lost, with the largest losses occurring in middle-income countries (McCoy et al., 2021). In their estimate of learning losses in Pakistan due to pandemic-related school closures, Geven and Hasan (2020) highlighted that the ‘learning poverty’ (the share of children who do not learn to read and understand a simple text by age 10), could very well go up to 79% from the current estimate of 75%. Among the factors that contributed to poor learning outcomes during the pandemic, the ineffective use of online teaching strategies by teachers was one of the consistent findings of educational research. Researchers

have reported that the virtual pedagogical strategies used by teachers during the pandemic were not interesting and diverse enough to attract student attention or elicit students’ emotional connection to the lesson. For example, Timmons et al. (2021) found that teachers did not use differentiated instruction to address the needs of individual learners and did not implement inquiry learning pedagogical approaches commonly used in primary grade classrooms. Researchers in India reported that children did not feel connected in online classes, felt distracted, and did not feel comfortable communicating with their teachers through online platforms (Malik & Tyagi, 2020).

Teachers have received both praise and backlashed simultaneously from parents, the public, and the media during the pandemic (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). Teachers have received some criticism regarding their ineffective use of virtual pedagogy; however, their willingness to enter an unfamiliar terrain without adequate preparation to prevent disruption to children’s learning showed that their sense of care for their children’s wellbeing and learning was not diminished during the pandemic (Jones & Kessler, 2020, p. 2). Yet, due to lack of group learning strategies in synchronous sessions and children’s lack of access to digital devices depersonalized the learning process for many children during COVID-19 (Jones & Kessler, 2020).

Parental Involvement in Remote Instruction

Parental involvement has been acknowledged as an important predictor of children’s academic success and researchers around the world have identified many factors that challenge parental involvement in children’s learning (Jeynes, 2011). Research has shown positive correlation between parental education/income status and student achievement (Idris et al., 2020) and according to Hansen and Gustafsson (2016), it can be explained “by the relations which go from parental education via the resources and different activities in the home to achievement...” (p. 5). Hansen and Gustafsson’s (2016) multi-country comparative study with 37 nations reported that the correlation between parent education and student achievement was higher for countries with higher income inequality because “education is more equitable in countries with less economic inequity” (p. 11). To add, the school’s language of instruction also limits the involvement of parents who do not speak that language (Vera et al., 2012). During the pandemic, researchers have reported that parents were not ready to shoulder a full-time educator role. Many factors, such as lack of access to digital tools (UNICEF, 2020c), limited experience with computing devices (Aguilar et al., 2020), work-life balance issues (Qian & Fuller, 2020), and limited pedagogical and content knowledge (Garbe et al., 2020), challenged parents’

abilities to support their children's education at home. This was especially true for parents in low-income communities with younger children because children in this stage needed extensive support from an adult to succeed within a sustained virtual learning environment (Qian & Fuller, 2020). As Aguilar et al. (2020) aptly state, "When the school comes home, pre-existing inequalities in parental wealth and human capital become front and center" (p. 21). However, experts warn that these challenges should not be perceived from a deficit perspective; that the parents are not interested in their children's education (Lasky & Karge, 2011). During the school closure, parents in India, as in other parts of the world, became the central point of contact and faced numerous challenges to meet the expectations to serve as a partner in the school's remote instruction efforts (Mahapatra & Sharma, 2020). To add, parental involvement, especially for parents from low-income communities, has not been a common practice in India (Cashman et al., 2021) although the 2009 Right to Education Act of the Indian government has placed "parents alongside the state as responsible for ensuring the child's right to education" (Maithreyi & Sriprakash, 2018, p. 353). Some level 1 factors discussed in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (2005) revised parent involvement model such as parental role construction (reverence for the school's expertise and responsibility in educating children), low self-efficacy, difficult life contexts, and lack of invitation from the school, very well explain parent involvement challenges of low-income parents in India. There have been some sporadic efforts by schools to address these issues (Shekar, 2013). Yet, from their study with low-income parents in a rural county in India, Cashman et al. (2021) reported that household wealth was an important enabling factor in parent involvement in five different tasks that they examined and recommended that "policy-makers and practitioners should be aware of the potential influence of economic constraints on the involvement levels of parents who want to be involved" (p. 14).

Methodology

The study used a qualitative design, specifically phenomenological inquiry, to collect and analyze data. The design was felt appropriate for the study because remote instruction practices resulting from social distancing guidelines during the COVID 19 pandemic is a unique phenomenon and teachers have been involved in this phenomenon directly.

Setting

The study took place in two cities in India, Mumbai, and Sambalpur, between fall 2020 and spring 2021. These cities were selected purposefully to provide a wider representation.

Mumbai is a wealthy metropolitan city on the west coast of India and Sambalpur is a remote city in the eastern state of Odisha with a more homogenous population. In 2021, among 374 districts (or counties) in the country that were categorized as "educationally backward" based on gross enrollment ratio, college population ratio, and average enrollment per college by the University Grants Commission of India, Odisha had the highest number of such counties (The New Indian Express, 2021). The state also ranked first among the 10 "least developed" states in India as per the 2013 Raghuram Rajan panel report that used a multidimensional index consisting of income, health, education, female literacy, poverty ratio, to name a few (The Economic Times, 2013). Study participants taught in private schools in these two states and the fee structure ranged between Rs.10,000.00 (about 150.00 USD) to Rs. 250,900.00 (around 3400.00 USD) per month. These schools also reserve 25% of their seats for low-income children, as per the government mandate, and use English as the medium of instruction. Although English is not spoken at home, educated parents understand and use the language in their workplace.

Sample, Sampling Procedure, and Study Instrument

Twenty female primary grade (1st–3rd grade) teachers in the age range of 25–50, employed by private schools in the cities of Mumbai and Sambalpur, participated in the study. All participants in the study had a Bachelor's in Education (B. Ed.) degree as required by their school. The study adopted a purposive sampling procedure, specifically snowball sampling, to recruit participants. Researchers contacted the teachers that they knew and through them contacted other teachers. The study received permission from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Gangadhar Meher University, a public university in Sambalpur.

Individual interviews over zoom or phone served as the primary data source for the study. The researchers conducted a thorough review of the literature from various sources to design the semi-structured interview protocol. A pilot study with two teachers was conducted and adjustments for clarity, relevancy, and redundancy were made to the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

The data analysis combined both deductive and inductive coding, as suggested by qualitative researchers (Saldana, 2009). Before the interview transcripts were ready, the researchers created a code book with some preliminary codes such as kinds of digital devices used by families; access to Apps, Internet access, and speed; English language issues; children's off-task behavior; and parental responsibilities. After completion of interview transcriptions, each

researcher employed an inductive coding procedure based on interview data and later tallied their codebook. In case of disagreements, the researchers discussed the meaning of each code in the context of the interview questions and participants' responses. New codes were added based on mutual agreement and some codes were deleted as repetitive or renamed for clarity. After completing the codebook, the data was thematically analyzed (Thomas, 2006).

Findings

The challenges that the teachers in the study faced from the family front were the barriers that the families faced in involving themselves and their children in the remote learning process during the pandemic. The findings of the study are organized under an adapted version of the “three-gap framework” created by Jain et al. (2020): the access gap, the usage gap, the skills gap.

The Access Gap

The access gap refers to the parental inability to buy digital devices and internet data and the impact it had on their children's participation in remote instruction. According to study participants, not all children attended online synchronous class sessions offered via Zoom or Microsoft Teams due to several reasons. Non-availability of devices (computer/laptop/smartphone) was the main reason for non-attendance on a regular basis for some students. Participants' responses referred to some specific issues such as: (a) lack of a smartphone in the household; (b) if parents had a smartphone, then they had to use it for their own work; (c) if the phone could be shared with children, then only one child could use it at a time; and (d) the older child had the priority for the use of the phone for remote learning purposes over his or her younger siblings. Teachers also referred to the impossibilities of buying a smartphone for many families with limited earnings. One teacher (T#7) had asked a father, a road-side vegetable vendor, about his child's absence in her online classes, and the father's response was, “Where will I bring money to buy a mobile and again data pack? We are surviving by whatever I am getting from selling vegetables.” Although parental financial difficulties appeared in teachers' responses, one teacher (T#1) shared her knowledge of parental sacrifices to buy devices to support their children's education and stated, “I know parents who have sold their gold ornaments and cow to buy mobile phones just so that their children can attend online classes during the pandemic.” Teachers also shared the financial challenges faced by parents in terms of buying internet data to support their children's online education. Even if some parents bought smartphones during COVID -19 so that their child

could attend online classes; however, paying monthly fees for sufficient internet data became a problem for families with more than one child. T#1, stated, “The price of buying a 4G smartphone costs about Rs. 10,000.00 (about \$135.00) and also purchasing sufficient internet data pack to be used for online learning is expensive for many parents.” T#14 shared that children from economically well-off families in her class had digital devices and were able to pay for necessary internet facilities, such as Wi-Fi signal connection, and had a higher level of participation than that of their peers from low-income families. T#18 shared a similar sentiment, “But the students belonging to the low or average earning family are using normal mobile data. Therefore, they are facing internet connectivity issues.” Some teachers (T#9, #13, #11) mentioned that because of the paying for data and network issues, some parents preferred teachers to send study materials via WhatsApp rather than holding zoom sessions. (T#5) summarized family challenges that negatively impacted children's participation:

Some children do not have any devices, not even a smartphone. Some are not able to recharge data packs. Some have moved to villages. Either they do not know that online classes are going on or there is no network. Some parents have lost their jobs. There is no income source. How can they buy devices or data? These are practical difficulties.

The Usage Gap

The usage gap refers to parental absence during online sessions which contributed to their children's lack of or minimal use of remote instruction sessions and the problems that teachers faced without parental presence during online sessions.

Parental Absence and Student Issues During Online Sessions

Teachers shared the need for parental presence for children's access to and success in live remote instruction sessions. However, some teachers (T#15, #13, #15, #14, #9, #11) felt the need for parental presence more in beginning online sessions and others (T#5, #7, #17) felt the need during the entire online session for all sessions. For example, some teachers (T#15, #13, #14) explained that initially parents' help was needed to log in and to mute/unmute the child during the class and gradually this support would be withdrawn once the child could independently perform the tasks. Some other teachers (T#9, #17, #2) expected parental presence during the entire online class session and for all sessions because of the academic and/or behavioral needs of young children (T#7, #17). One teacher (T#1)

shared, “Parents need to see and open the messages and tell their child to read or write about a particular chapter sent by the teacher.” Other teachers perceived the critical connection between the parental buffering role in raising students’ attention level and teachers’ ability to maintain discipline during online sessions. Raising the issue of behavioral needs, teachers stated: “Children are more disciplined when parents sit beside them” (T#3); “during the class sessions, children also call their parents (T#11); “sometimes parents also peep in to observe to see and check whether the child is logged in or not and also doing the class activities or not” (T#5). Here are two experts that explicitly highlight challenges faced by teachers when parents are absent during their live online session.

When we are asking questions, we can know whether the student is in the class or not. If that student is not responding, we are certain that the student is not there. Sometimes, a student’s ‘logging in’ means that they are virtually present in the class, but sometimes, they do not respond to questions. Either they are roaming here and there or are not attentive during the online class. And here comes the responsibility of the parents to check whether the child is attending the class sincerely or not. Just telling the child to attend his or her online class is not enough. They need to sit beside the student while the child is reading and guide them while doing homework (T#5). The children are doing jokes, having fun with their peers, and giggling a lot. So, a lot of disturbances take place during the online class. For children who are using a computer, we have actually requested parents many times to ensure that the video remains turned on and the phones are kept away. But I don’t think the parents are paying much attention to children during online class sessions (T#9).

Parental Lack of Time

Participants connected parental absence during the remote instruction sessions to their lack of time. According to teachers, parents who had a phone and had advanced technological skills could not support their child’s remote instructional needs because they had to attend to their office work from home or were working outside or had to complete house chores.

Some children are not able to attend Zoom class sessions as both their parents are working. For this reason, they are unable to sit with their children for hours. So, these parents are not interested in the Zoom class. They are telling me to send materials on WhatsApp and videos too, so that they can sit with their child in their leisure time (T#1).

The Skills Gap

The skills gap refers to parental low level of literacy, lack of English language skills, and lack of digital skills which compromised their ability to support their child’s learning during the pandemic. Teachers in the study shared how parental low literacy level and lack of technological skills contributed to their inability to successfully implement remote instruction. Parental lack of knowledge of the English language, which the schools in the study used as the medium of instruction, also appeared in participants’ responses. Referring to this issue, T#1 shared,

In online teaching, children are mostly dependent upon their parents. But parents with no or minimum formal education are not able to help their children in the remote learning setting. When the child was coming to school, the classroom teacher was helping the child to read and write and was providing other necessary support that the child needed for schoolwork. However, such supports are not available during remote instruction.

Teachers in the study shared that although parental support was crucial for children’s success in remote instruction, not all students were able to get the needed guidance due to their parents’ lack of (or minimal) technological skills. Teachers shared that even if a device was available at home, the child could not attend the online session because their parents did not know how to operate the device or the App. T#1 stated, “Parents complained and told me that they do not know the operation or use of the App.” Some teachers mentioned that because of these issues, they started sending videos, audios, and pdf files through WhatsApp. According to participants, parents were more comfortable with materials sent via WhatsApp. This was true for parents irrespective of their socio-economic status. However, the challenge was more for low-income parents. One teacher stated,

I do not think online teaching is effective for young children. When a *gupchup wala* or a *pan-wala*’s (street vendors) child is studying at our school and the parents do not know how to use electronic media, online apps, and tools, we face many problems.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to gather the family-related challenges faced by primary grade teachers during the pandemic in two cities in India. According to participants, parental lack of access or limited access to technological devices as well as a lack of funds to purchase sufficient data

for their children limited their children's successful participation in the remote instruction process. It was clear from teachers' responses that they understood the precarious conditions that families, especially low-income families, faced during the pandemic. Students' lack of access to a computer during the pandemic has been reported by researchers in both developing and developed countries (Winter et al., 2021). For example, 21% of parents in the Pew research Center (2020) poll in the U.S. shared that their children did not have access to a computer at home, 22% revealed that the home did not have a reliable internet connection, and 20% shared that their children most probably would use a cell phone to complete their schoolwork. According to a joint report by UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (UNICEF, 2020c), 1.3 billion children (2/3rd of the world's school age children) between the age ranges of 3–17 years lacked internet connection in their homes. As per the Government of India's (2019) 2017–2018 National Sample Survey Report on Education, the percentage of households with computer facilities was only 10.7 and with internet facility was only 14.9. Additionally, consistent with the study findings, parental support and guidance have been identified by other researchers as critical factors for children's success in remote learning contexts due to young children's immaturity and teachers' inability to provide individualized support during online sessions. Even before the pandemic, researchers have identified significant contributions of parental support to children's success in virtual learning environments and maintain that "In virtual learning environments, parental modeling and parental reinforcement mechanisms can be employed to promote students' self-learning responsibilities and perseverance during the learning process" (Liu et al., 2010, p. 120). Researchers acknowledge the crucial role of parents in young children's success in remote instruction; however, consistent with the findings of this study, issues such as parental lack of time and preparation to serve as a teacher for their children during the pandemic were also documented in research studies. According to researchers, remote learning had put more responsibilities on parents, especially mothers (Dong et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020), who shouldered multiple roles and responsibilities such as doing house chores, taking care of their children's academic and emotional well-being, and fulfilling work responsibilities. As Daniela et al. (2021) rightly stated, women became "homeschoolers within a few days without prior training" (p. 1). Among different aspects of parental struggles, 'balancing responsibilities' was found to be the major challenge faced by most parents (41%) in the study by Garbe et al. (2020). Participants perceived parental low literacy levels and lack of technological skills as challenges to their successful implementation of remote instruction. As discussed before, teachers in this study taught in private schools that enrolled children from low-income communities. The

majority of Indian parents from all income levels prefer private schools over free government education because of the perception that private schools, including low-cost private schools, offer higher quality education compared to government schools and that learning in English, which is the medium of instruction in private schools, conveys status and future job prospects compared to learning in the native language (Galab et al., 2013; Tooley et al., 2007). However, researchers have reported that low-income parents' minimal literacy level and lack of proficiency in the school's medium of instruction limit their role in supporting their children's learning at home as well as communicating effectively with their child's teacher (Vera et al., 2012). Parental low digital self-efficacy (Povey et al., 2016) also limits their educator role.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings showed that schools and homes are important entities within the microsystem and that their influences are bidirectional (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Unless addressed promptly, challenges faced by families will very likely thwart the school's efforts to implement new initiatives. Therefore, there is a need for strengthening collaborations between schools, families, and elders/leaders in local communities to identify family and community needs and design support activities to ensure children's success in the remote instruction process. It may also be "appropriate to undertake a whole village approach to incentivize school-community relations in resource-constrained communities" (Cashman et al., 2021, p. 14).

Researchers have reported effective remote instruction strategies during the pandemic which are applicable in the context of developing countries. Because of the lack of digital tools (especially computers and smartphones) and lack of access or minimal access to internet services for many families around the world, some researchers have suggested low tech solutions, such as using basic keypad phones for remote learning. For example, the study by Angrist et al. (2020) compared the math performance of roughly 2250 primary school students in Botswana who were randomly assigned to three groups, families received remote instruction (sending math problems) through weekly SMS (short message service), through SMS plus 15–20 min phone calls, and a pure control group of children. The results showed positive gains among children in both experimental groups. Based on such positive findings, some experts have suggested that teachers should continue to use digital resources and tools to supplement traditional in-person learning after the pandemic is over (Samuelsson et al., 2020). Keeping in view, the challenges that India faced during the pandemic, the 2020 National Educational Policy, NPE, of the Ministry of Human

Resource Development, India (2020) stated, “The recent rise in epidemics and pandemics necessitates that we are ready with alternative modes of quality education whenever and wherever traditional and in-person modes of education are not possible” (p. 58). NPE’s action plan focuses on teacher training, creating online resources, supporting underserved student populations, and supporting and training teachers with online assessment tools. If countries create and implement such an action plan and evaluate its implementation fidelity, it will certainly benefit all children.

The study has highlighted the digital divides among families from different socioeconomic levels whose children attend private schools in India. Researchers, both in the global south and north, focusing on potential enablers of parent involvement have reported that household wealth is an important predictor of parent involvement (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016; Cashman et al., 2021; Yeung et al., 2002). Therefore, state and national level policies must be adopted, as well as negotiations with technology companies made, to facilitate access to digital learning for all children in the country.

The study points to the possibility of learning loss among primary grade children, especially from low-income communities. The learning loss among children in Africa (Angrist et al., 2020), Belgium (Domingue et al., 2021), Netherlands (Engzell et al., 2021), and the U.S. (Kuhfeld et al., 2020) have already been reported by researchers. To address this issue, researchers need to identify the extent of learning loss among children and design targeted intervention programs to address the loss. The state’s financial support is crucial to scale up these efforts.

Strengths and Limitations

There is a dearth of research on challenges faced by primary grade teachers in India during the pandemic. Therefore, this study will be of interest to educational researchers within and outside India. Moreover, the study also points to the fact that the challenges faced by children from low-income families who attend private schools during the pandemic may not be very different from their peers from the same socio-economic status who attend government schools. Remote learning during the pandemic has indeed widened the learning gaps among children from different socio-economic groups.

The study has some limitations. The small sample size, the purposive sampling procedure, and the inclusion of only private schools in two cities limit the generalizability of the study’s findings to other settings in India and elsewhere. The study used interviews as the only data source. Interviews are also self-reports. Therefore, without multiple data sources, especially observation of remote instruction sessions and interviews with parents and/or children, data triangulation or

the validation of results was not possible. Future studies may be conducted comparing the challenges faced by teachers in low-cost private and government schools to keep the socio-economic background of students constant. Future studies may also explore if teachers’ own personal and professional challenges compromise their successful implementation of remote instruction, if any. Additionally, researchers examining parental involvement in low-income communities may benefit from recommendations of researchers such as isolating economic and social factors while examining parental involvement in various aspects of their child’s learning (Cashman et al., 2021) and using parental economic status as a main variable rather than as a control variable used by researchers in past (Cashman et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the family-related challenges faced by primary grade teachers in two Indian cities. The findings highlighted that family factors such as lack of access to technological devices and high speed internet services at home; limited access to internet data; parental lack of time, minimal level of education, and unfamiliarity with operating digital devices limited children’s full participation in the school’s remote learning efforts. As a ‘socio natural’ disaster, COVID-19 has resulted in the interruption of established routines and added stress to the operation of educational institutions around the world (Treviño et al., 2021). Beginning in late January 2022, states in India have been slowly opening their elementary school doors for in-person instruction. So, how India and other developing nations reverse children’s learning loss and teachers’ frustrations in the post school- closure era will be a test of their innovative, transformative, and collaborative spirit.

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