

**“Working with children during
COVID 19 pandemic – A case study of
field work intervention”**

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Abstract

The world is undergoing an unprecedented pandemic era of COVID 19. India is the third worst affected country in the world. The pandemic has adversely affected all the sections of the society, especially the children. The intellectual, social, emotional, psychological, physical and cultural development of children is seriously affected. Access to online education is not equally available for all the children, especially the children in the remote rural and tribal areas. The available online education system does not adequately address all the issues and challenges faced by the children. COVID 19 pandemic has delayed the implementation of the ambitious National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. There is provision for the appointment of counsellors and social workers in the schools in the NEP. NEP could not be implemented in 2020 due to the pandemic. Pre-schooling or the pre-primary education of the children is the worst affected sector during the pandemic. There are practical and technical issues regarding the online conducting of the pre-schooling. Mental health issues of the children are not adequately addressed through online platforms. Social workers can work with children to address all these issues. The field work intervention designed by BPHES' CSR Institute of Social Work and Research, Ahmednagar during the COVID 19 pandemic has taken into

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consideration of the situation of the children during the pandemic. The social work intervention with children during the pandemic by means of field work training is illustrated in this paper with the help of a case study.

Key words: COVID 19 pandemic, pandemic impact upon children, status of education during the pandemic, working with children during the pandemic, social work intervention with children through field work training

Introduction

COVID 19 pandemic started in China at the close of 2019 spread across the world rapidly. The entire year 2020 is considered as COVID 19 pandemic year. It affected every sector of human life throughout the world, such as, education, health care, livelihood, and economy. India is third worst affected country in the world. During the pandemic, there was a digital push in every sector. Education and employment sectors switched over to online platforms. Work from home and learn from home have become the global agenda without intended outcome. The pandemic has adversely affected the children especially their education. The digital divide between the urban and the rural areas created unequal access to online education. The remote villages in the country suffered from poor connectivity and network issues affecting the online education system. National Education Policy of 2020 has promised integration of pre-primary education in the existing school system. However, COVID 19 pandemic has delayed the implementation of the National Education Policy. Pre-schooling on online platforms would not achieve the expected outcome. Children learn the first steps of socialisation outside their own homes, during the pre-schooling period through interactions with the peers and the teachers. Children have been out of school for over an year now. They have several issues and challenges due to the pandemic. Social workers can address these issues.

Methodology

This paper is primarily based on a case study of the social work response of a professional social work Institute in the context of COVID 19 pandemic. Being a faculty member of the Institute, the author gained first-hand experience. *Educere-BCM Journal of Social Work (EBSW)*, 17 (1), June 2021

ence in supervising various social work interventions in response to the issues faced by children due to COVID19 pandemic. Some relevant literature concerning the children’s issues and challenges during the COVID 19 pandemic are presented in this paper to highlight the context of the case study.

COVID 19 pandemic and its impact upon children in India

Incidence of COVID 19 pandemic in India and the world:

COVID 19 pandemic appeared in China spread quickly across 219 countries and territories of the world. Global incidence of Coronavirus cases recorded on 31st March 2021 is 128,789,638 with a total death of 2,815,045 (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). Table 1 shows the list of the countries having more than 2 million cases. It can be seen from the table that there are 14 countries in the world having more than 2 million cases till 31 March 2021. All these worst affected countries together account for the 71.08 percent of the global incidence and 72.14 percent of the global deaths due to COVID 19 pandemic. These worst affected countries together support one third of the global population.

Table 1

Countries with more than 2 million COVID 19 cases as on 31 March 2021

SN	Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Incidence per 1 million	Deaths per 1 million	Total population	HDI Rank	SDG Rank
1	USA	31,097,154	564,138	93,540	1,697	332,447,357	17	31
2	Brazil	12,664,058	317,936	59,265	1,488	213,683,484	84	53
3	India	12,148,487	162,502	8,739	117	1,390,086,508	131	117
4	France	4,585,385	95,337	70,133	1,458	65,381,170	26	4
5	Russia	4,536,820	98,442	31,078	674	145,981,136	52	57
6	UK	4,341,736	126,670	63,707	1,859	68,151,503	13	13
7	Italy	3,561,012	108,879	58,962	1,803	60,395,466	29	30

8	Turkey	3,277,880	31,385	38,557	369	85,013,187	54	70
9	Spain	3,275,819	75,305	70,044	1,610	46,768,286	25	22
10	Germany	2,809,510	76,833	33,453	915	83,983,555	6	5
11	Colombia	2,397,731	63,255	46,752	1,233	51,285,764	83	67
12	Argentina	2,332,765	55,736	51,265	1,225	45,504,043	46	51
13	Poland	2,288,826	52,392	60,526	1,385	37,815,676	35	23
14	Mexico	2,227,842	201,826	17,145	1,553	129,939,085	74	69
	Sub total	91,545,025	2,030,636	50,226	1,242	2,756,436,220		
	World	128,789,638	2,815,045	16,523	361	7,900,000,000		

Source: Compilation from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> updated on March 31, 2021 at 00:00 GMT, HDI ranking from UNDP (2020) and SDG ranking from Sachs et al (2020)

Table 1 reveals that the global incidence rate and death rate due to COVID 19 is 16,523 and 361 respectively per one million population. These figures for the worst affected 14 countries are 50,226 and 1,242 respectively per one million population which are about 3 times higher than the global average. It can be observed that the incidence rate and the death rate due to COVID 19 are the lowest for India (8,739 and 117 respectively per million population) which are almost half of the global rates. Incidence rate in the USA is the highest 93,540 per one million population (five times higher than the global rate). Death rate due to COVID 19 is the highest for the UK at 1,859 per one million population (about 5 times greater than the global rate).

It is a curious finding from the table that the European and the American countries (North and South Americas) are the worst affected countries due to COVID 19. India, at the third place, is the only Asian country among the worst affected 14 countries of the world. There are no other Asian countries

and not a single African country among the worst affected 14 countries of the world. It may be concluded that the European and the American nations are more affected by COVID 19 pandemic than the Asian and the African countries. An observation of the human development index (HDI) rankings and the sustainable development goal (SDG) rankings reveals that the countries with better human development indices, better sustainable development indices and advanced health care facilities are among the worst affected by COVID 19. In spite of better health care facilities and better living standards, how COVID 19 affects the advanced countries more severely than the least developed countries is a fact that is hard to explain by the medical as well as social scientists.

COVID 19 impacts on children in India

UNICEF (2020) conducted two waves of study in India by name community-based monitoring (CBM) to assess the COVID 19 impact on children covering 5700 families from 300 communities across 12 districts (6 rural and 6 urban) from 7 states. The first wave of study was held in June-July 2020 and the second wave was held in August-September 2020. These studies revealed that over 290 million children were out of school during the pandemic. Only 25 percent of the children under the survey had access to digital learning revealing the reality of the digital divide. One fourth of the parents were not sure about their children going back to school after pandemic. Uncertainty was more in the urban context (27 %) than in rural context (11 %).

In order to prevent the spread of COVID 19 pandemic, India closed down its schools on 16 March 2020 (one of the first countries to close down the schools) and moved to online learning which faced widespread challenges like unavailability of smartphones and computers, unreliable internet connection and lack of technology skills (Jena, 2020; Goradia, 2020). United Nations (2020) warned that prolonged school closure could result in a higher incidence of dropouts especially the girls, those living in poverty, those with disabilities, or living in the rural regions. 23.8 million additional children and youth (from

pre-primary to tertiary) may dropout or not have access to a school in 2021 (United Nations, 2020).

COVID 19 has adversely affected the children across the world by depriving them from the habit of going to school regularly. During the pandemic, the education shifted from offline mode to online mode. Students at the higher education sector got adjusted to the new normal mode of education rather faster. Students at the primary and pre-primary levels are still struggling to get adjusted with the online education platforms. National Education Policy 2020 (<https://www.education.gov.in>) has proposed revolutionary changes in the education system of the country, especially with regard to the pre-primary and primary education pattern. The 10+2 school system is replaced by 5+3+3+4 pattern which integrated three years of pre schooling in the mainstream schooling.

The pre-schooling is very important part of the entire schooling age. It is almost impossible to hold the pre-schooling formation of the children through online platforms. At present, the pre-schooling or pre-primary education is covered by Anganwadis (Bawadis), Nursery schooling or Lower and Upper Kinder Garden schools. At this pre-school stage, the children leave their parents for the first time in their life and learn to spend time meaningfully with their peers and adults other than their parents. This stage is the most important stage for social development of the children. Pre-schooling is worst affected by COVID 19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the children spend their entire schooling time with their own parents partially spending time before the screen. Spending time before the screen hardly contribute towards the social skills of the children. The children improve their digital skills at the cost of social skills.

Based on the Annual Status of Education Survey (ASER) conducted by Pratham Foundation in 2018, covering 350,000 households in 596 districts, Rukmini Banerji, the CEO of Pratham has pointed out several challenges faced by the state governments across the country in the implementation of

the New Education Policy (NEP), 2020. The NEP requires the governments to bring all the children above the age of 3 back to school. Meanwhile, ASER 2018 has found that 28.8 percent of the 3 year olds, 15.5 percent of the 4 year olds and 8.1 percent of the 5 year olds were out of any schooling including pre-schooling and Anganwadi programmes (Banerji, 2021). COVID 19 pandemic has completely deprived the children from schooling for more than a year now. Reinstating the good habit of going to school, interacting with peers and the teachers without fear and experimenting with the nature would be the hard tasks with regard to pre-schooling during the post pandemic era.

Kaunan Sheriff (2020) has reported the observations of the Parliamentary Committee on Health and Family Welfare which submitted its report titled ‘The Outbreak of Pandemic COVID19 and its management’ to the Rajyasabha Chairman on 21 November 2020. The committee has studied the multifarious impacts of the pandemic and pointed out among many things that the digital divide has affected the learning of millions of students. Some of the findings of the committee includes the serious implications to the long confinement of the children at home (Kaunan, 2020). COVID 19 pandemic has affected the mental health of the children who are deprived of their regular schooling and interactions with peers and classmates.

Gupta Sonia and Jawanda Manveen Kaur (2020) have studied the impacts of COVID 19 on children and listed out several negative impacts such as, loss of quality education, inadequacy of learning, lack of competitive zone, lack of digital access and connectivity, fall in educational outputs and achievements, growing learning gap between the rich and the poor, anxiety and frustration about the uncertain future, lack of outdoor physical activities and increased vulnerability to various health disorders, behavioural disorders like social isolation, frustration, anger, anxiety, irritation, addiction to social media and the internet, cyberbullying, increased risks of child abuse, child labour, and services of the disabled children (Gupta and Jawanda, 2020). Similar findings were also reported by parenting desk of the Indian Express in November 2020 (<https://indianexpress.com>).

Marwaha Puja (2020) has enlisted the impacts of COVID 19 pandemic upon children. During the pandemic the children missed their schooling, mid-day meals, friends and playtime in the open. Having been 'trapped at home' added to their mental stress and affected their mental health. Deprivation of outdoor activities and physical activities affect their physical health. Many children missed their regular immunisation. Children are also struggling to get adjusted with the 'new normal' online education system (Marwaha, 2020). Her study indicates the need for the social work intervention with children especially in the mental health sector.

It is reported that COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of schools. Several schools especially in the rural areas were converted into COVID care centres at least during the initial phase of the pandemic surge. It has adversely affected the education of about 290 million children in the country. There were six million children already out of school during the pandemic. This number would go up due to economic insecurity in their families due to COVID-19. This might cause many children especially the girl children to leave their studies (Chaturvedi, 2020).

Deepshikha Singh (2020) has reported that COVID 19 pandemic affected the marginalized children the worst. During the pandemic exodus of the migrant workers and their families, the children were forced to travel long distances and suffered extreme exhaustion and scarcity of food, water and medical aid. Many families residing in rented houses were evicted to the streets with their children during the extended pandemic lockdown in metropolitan cities. Sex workers, mostly single parents, lost their livelihood during the pandemic lockdown and their children lived at an increased risk of malnutrition, exploitation, and abuse at the hands of the traffickers (Singh, 2020). Another study has shown that the street children and children of migrant labourers are exposed to significant challenges in food security and health (Unni, 2020).

Deepika Bahl, Shalini Bassi, and Monika Arora (2021) on behalf of Observer Research Foundation compiled the findings from many peer-reviewed studies, reports and government articles published between January 2020 and *Educere-BCM Journal of Social Work (EBJSW)*, 17 (1), June 2021

February 2021 regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the health and well-being of children (5-9 years) and adolescents (10-19) in India. The analysis highlighted the disproportionately greater vulnerability of girls in the areas of education, domestic violence, child marriage, domestic workload, and mental health (Bahlet al, 2021).

Probability of child marriages has increased during the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown due to economic reasons. It was inexpensive to arrange marriages during the lockdown. Biswajeet Banerjee (2020) has reported for The National Herald that in Madhya Pradesh, the incidence of child marriages jumped from 46 cases between November 2019 and March 2020, to 117 cases in April to June 2020, the peak of the pandemic lockdown. Similarly, in Chhattisgarh, the figure increased from 18 to 58 cases during the same pandemic period (Banerjee, 2020).

Prachi Verma (2020) has reported for The Economic Times the result of a survey conducted with parents of children (5-15 years) in New Delhi. Almost 54 percent parents said that their kids spend an additional average of five hours on a screen every day during the pandemic and 84 percent of parents were worried about their children's increased screen time. The increased screen time means decreased time for physical activity that would lead to the loss of muscular and cardiorespiratory fitness, weight gain, psychosocial problems, and ophthalmic issues (Verma, 2020; Bahlet al, 2021:11).

Social work interventions with children during COVID 19 pandemic – a case study

It is believed that the children are naturally immune to Corona virus and they are the least affected by COVID 19. However, the review of literature has revealed the multifarious impacts of COVID 19 pandemic upon children. The physical, psychological, social, educational, and economic impacts of the pandemic upon the children of India are illustrated in detail in the previous section. Working with children is the primary field of social work. Every social work institute gives priority to this field when the field work training is

considered. During the pandemic, the schools were closed and placement in schools for field work training was impractical. Social work institutes had to innovate ideas and strategies to work with children during the pandemic lock down. In this context, I would like to present a case study of various social work interventions with children undertaken by BPHEs' CSR Institute of Social Work and Research (ISWR), Ahmednagar, Maharashtra.

BPHEs' CSR ISWR (hereafter called the Institute) was established in 1961 as a post graduate department of Ahmednagar college which was started in 1947. The Institute is situated at Ahmednagar, 120 kms north to Pune and 280 kms east to Mumbai. This institute is offering Masters in Social Work, Masters in Mass Relations and Diploma in Disaster Management affiliated to Savitribai Phule Pune University. As a special study centre of IGNOU, the Institute is conducting 20 distance educational programmes at post graduate and undergraduate level. During the pandemic lock down, the Institute undertook various social work interventions with children as part of the field work training.

Working with children at shelter homes for the homeless at Ahmednagar:

During the national lock down commenced on 23rd March 2020, the Institute stopped the face to face classes. Classes were restarted online. During the lockdown, the hostelers were sent home and a part of the boys' hostel was converted into night shelter that accommodated stranded families especially of the migrant workers in Ahmednagar city. In collaboration with Ahmednagar Municipal corporation and a few NGOs, four additional facilities were opened by the Institute in the city to accommodate more homeless people. Student volunteers and interns were engaged to manage these shelter homes under the supervision of the faculty members of the Institute. Apart from meeting their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing, they are provided with individual and group counselling, education for the children, recreational activities (screening movies) and daily news reading services.

The children of the migrant workers sheltered at the shelter homes were

deprived of regular schooling. The students placed at the shelter homes collected educational materials from the neighbourhood and organised informal classes to the children of the homeless people of the shelter home. The children living at the shelter home were meaningfully engaged by the student social workers in regular learning activities.

A series of social interventions focussing on the children were undertaken by the 220 students of the Institute under the supervision of the faculty members in over 200 villages and a few cities across the country during the two semesters of 2020-21. Altogether 5 states were covered. During these two semesters' field work the students conducted COVID 19 sensitization programmes for the children in the neighbourhoods where the students were residing. They gave training on the use of mask, hand washing, use of sanitisers and practice of physical distancing. These training activities were given to the children in their home, in the street and in their neighbourhoods. Since the children are away from school, they were mostly at home. Once the lock down was relaxed, the parents started going for work. Still, the children remained at home and in their neighbourhood. Student social workers attended to them, created awareness among them about Corona virus and COVID19 pandemic.

Giving training in COVID appropriate behaviour was the first priority of the social work intervention with the children. These activities gave a meaningful engagement to the students and their interventions were appreciated by the parents and the civil authorities. The children were engaged in drawing and poster making activities that increased their awareness about Corona virus and COVID 19. They used crayons and colour pencils. They patiently spent time in these artistic activities which reduced their monotony of learning activities. These posters were pasted in visible locations in the community. They were also posted in the social media. Thus, the children were rewarded for their initiatives.

Giving home-based education to the children

The chief focus of the social work interventions was educational and per-

sonality guidance to the children and the adolescents. The student social workers organised home based classes to the students who are deprived of schooling. The social work intervention with the students of the higher secondary levels were particularly appreciated by the parents and the teachers. The student social workers collected books and other educational materials from the community, created reading facilities in the villages, organised career guidance sessions, and organised coaching centres for preparing the youth for competitive examinations.

Educational activities organised by the student social workers were the best appreciated social work interventions in the community. During the pandemic lock down, the students were deprived of their regular schooling. Often, the parents in the rural and tribal areas are not competent enough to help the students, especially at the high school levels. The student social workers visited the houses and engaged the children in their studies, helping them to complete their homework. In Palghar, where there is the issue of network and internet access, the students are deprived of the opportunities for online learning. Home based educational guidance provided by the student social workers was the only way to continue their education.

In the tribal block of Akole in Ahmednagar, the teachers were providing education by visiting each of the tribal families and the student social workers continued the same practice with the purpose of sustaining the students in the regular stream of education. In some places, like Shenit (Akole), Aurangabad and Copergaon, the students were given the Anganwadi premises and some classrooms of the Zila Parishad primary schools to organise non formal, informal, supplementary and remedial education for the students who were almost dropout from the school due to the pandemic lock down. With these educational initiatives, the student social workers established rapport with the anganwadi workers and the teachers of the local schools. They also received support from the village panchayats to carry on their work with the children.

Engaging the children in cocurricular and extra-curricular activities

Closing of school means the end of any opportunity for learning cocurricular and extracurricular activities like sports, crafts, drawing, music, dance, and celebration of important days. Students used to spend quite a lot of time in playing, doing physical activities, regular exercises and other activities of physical fitness while they were in the schools. Once the schools are suspended, the time spent on physical activities was reduced. The time for physical activities was replaced with screen time. Therefore, the student social workers planned and executed suitable interventions for the holistic development of the students such as activities to nurture the talents of the children in arts and sports. Since the schools were not available for conducting organised physical activities due to the pandemic lock down, the student social workers conducted these activities at the homes of the children. The images in this section show the social workers' intervention with children in engaging them in physical activities at Udalguri district, Assam.

Schools are the places where the students learn the stories about great social reformers and the national leaders. Celebration of the days of national importance is the means to convey the patriotic spirit to the students. During the COVID 19 pandemic, the schools remained closed across the country, depriving the students their opportunity to knowanout the national leaders and the reformers. Therefore,thestudent social workers tried to engage the children in the celebration of days of national importance and conduct activities like honouring the portraits of the reformers, cleaning campaign in the school premises, conducting drawing competitions, singing competitions and various sports events. The students also distributed prizes on these occasions. Mahatma Phule is a great social reformer in Maharashtra who strived for the education of all, especially the women and the marginalised communities of Maharashtra. Every school in Maharashtra celebrates the birth day of Mahatma Phule and the student social workers facilitated such a celebration in a school gathering a few students from the neighbourhood at Kopergaon, Ahmednagar.

Other social work interventions in the field of child development

Several students worked with the Childline offices across the country attending and resolving several issues of children. The Institute had started a new help line, by name, D-Stress helpline (8448440773) during the COVID 19 pandemic. Along with several general psychological issues, this helpline also attended to some of the child related issues such as homelessness and migration. Student social workers and interns were placed with this D-Stress helpline.

Most of the student social workers got associated with the anganwadisevikas and ASHA workers in their neighbourhood to reach to the children and help them. The student social workers collected books from the community and started reading rooms in their villages to inculcate reading habits among the students.

Conclusion

COVID 19 pandemic has directly and indirectly affected the children in the country adversely. The worst impact of the pandemic was the closing of the schools and deprivation of the opportunity for millions of students for their physical, intellectual, social and cultural development. They missed the opportunity to interact with the teachers and the peers. Since the teaching learning activities were shifted to online platforms, the students' screen time increased at the cost of time for physical activities. At least one third of the children across the country faced issues like poor connectivity, unavailability of smart phones or computers and inadequate access to internet. These issues forced several children to drop out from the regular schooling. Social workers have addressed several issues of the children during the COVID 19 pandemic. BPHES' CSRD Institute of Social Work is a pioneer social work institute in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra. It is the only social work institute in the district till now. The students and the faculty members of the institute undertook a series of social work interventions to overcome some of

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the challenges faced by the children across the country, especially in the state of Maharashtra. The social work interventions undertaken by the students under the supervision of the faculty members were focussed upon the holistic development of the children covering the intellectual, physical, social and cultural dimensions of their personality.

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