

Our Lives in Pandemic: Online Teaching – Learning

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Abstract

“As the pandemic continues, we all are stuck in our homes and trying to adjust to this new situation. For me a huge change has been learning online. I know studying is important but there should be more to online learning than just staring at a screen and listening to lectures for hours at a time. We all are trying our best to adjust but I am not a big fan of watching teachers present PPT’s. It is difficult to communicate online, I understand that, but even then, we are trying to optimise our learning. Luckily, unlike most of my classmates, I am able to understand all the topics we are learning in class”.

It is a student’s reaction to online classes, conducted by her school. How do children perceive online learning? The paper tries to analyse how this pandemic has changed lives of children for better or worse. This paper provides a brief overview of online education in India during this pandemic of COVID 19. It also focuses on the lives of children in Class VI of a specific school where online education is said to be ‘successful’.

Key Words: Online Learning, Screen Time, Elementary School Children, Daily Routines in Pandemic

Introduction

December 31, 2019, China declared a strange viral phenomenon COVID 19 in its Wuhan district. This viral infection continues to transmit from person to person and within two months it reached several countries of the world. On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organisation declared COVID 19 as a pandemic and India declared a nationwide lockdown for 21 days on March 24, 2020. At that time, nobody had imagined that how this would impact every one, every country, and the entire world. Today, after 9 months, it has affected all countries of the world, not a single part of any region is unaffected. When the lockdown was implemented, almost everyone thought that we would be able to break the chain of infection within three weeks and situations would be back to normal. Everything had been closed – including markets, schools, offices, trains, airlines. But lockdown continued – lockdown 1 followed by 2 then 3 and so on. During this time education came to a halt. Incidentally, schools and other educational institutions in India had summer break from the period of May – July. Many people thought that situation would be normal within the summer break and many others were prepared for the crisis.

The onset of Covid 19 continued. Educational institutes prepared their teachers for alternate mode of teaching-learning. Face to face teaching shifted to online teaching. This transition was neither easy for teachers nor for children and their parents. As per the statistics of an agency Kantar (reported in India Times, May 9, 2020) only 38% of children below the age of 15 years had access to internet. Thus, now there also existed a ‘digital divide’ in our society. There was no question of online teaching for children without internet access

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or a digital device. The underprivileged were the hardest hit or most affected during this pandemic times. The Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD, 2020) released Pragyata: Guidelines for Digital Education, in which it was suggested that television &/ or FM radio would be used for broadcasting videos and audios for children who did not have access to internet or a device. An effort was being made by the State Governments to reach out to all children enrolled in schools.

The small private schools, (also labelled as budget schools) which run on fees paid by students, were on the midst of a 'Covid-enforced shutdown' as these were not able to pay salaries of teachers, rent of the school space and cost of shifting to an online infrastructure. These schools and students enrolled in these were in a bad state. High courts of many states including that of Haryana and Delhi had directed schools to take only tuition fees from children. Children, in these schools, come from working class or middle-class families and are not able to pay school fees due to their deteriorating financial situation.

There are few private schools, which were able to foresee the situation and learn from international experience, and started working on ways of online education since March. They trained their teachers in these new ways of teaching. These schools engaged IT professionals and developed a Learning Management System (LMS) of their school. Learning Management System, also called Moodle, is a kind of a dashboard where students and teachers have access to teaching – learning resources, teachers can put up assignments or educational games, students can upload homework/ any task assigned to them. Students can leave messages for teachers and peers too. If many people are online at the same time, then they can chat with one another. Teachers can read students' submission on the Moodle and give feedback to students. Students view their feedback and if there is a need, they may edit submission too. Everything is done online. In this paper an attempt has been made to find out how online education is affecting students and teachers in these schools.

Case Study

This school, located in the North Delhi, invested in un-learning and re-learning by teachers. Teachers un-learned the conventional ways of teaching and re-learned how to plan differently for a video mode of classes. Teachers are used to teaching with an eye contact with learners for ascertaining who is learning/ paying attention. This new style does not allow teachers to find out who is following the lesson and who is not. Most teachers and students face band- width issues of internet, so cameras are off for most of the times. Otherwise also, students visible in small boxes on screen, it is difficult to pay attention to individuals as in face to face classes.

The daily online schedule of the school is as follows:

Morning:

7:30 am to 8: 15 am: Fitness Sessions – Sports, Yoga, Aerobics (On alternate days)

9:00 am onwards - 4 subject classes with 10 to 15 minutes break in between two classes

Evening:

One Fine Arts class (music/ dance/ drawing/ theatre) (on alternate days)

The class size for teaching periods is 35 students with one teacher. It is heartening to see the kind of interest, time and energy is put in by each teacher for his/her daily planning. Teachers use power point presentations,

video or any other tool for keeping students engaged and motivated during the class. Teachers use technological tools like Pear deck, white board, mentimeter, kahoot, quizziz, crossword, hotpotatoes and many other devices. When students login to Pear deck or White board in class, then teacher is able to see every student's work, as if she is checking their notebook. It is important to note here that teachers participated in online workshops for learning and using these tools in classrooms. Many service providers like 'Zoom' or 'teamie' also give an option of distributing students in break up rooms where students participate in small group discussions. Teachers move in from one break up to another for giving feedback to students. Assessments are also planned through google forms with different formats of questions like - multiple choice type, fill in the blanks, true / false, short answer types or long answer type using open book test type of formats. In this case, everything is happening online from physical activities to studies and other co-curricular activities. Classes are not limited to teaching but there are small group interactions, presentations by students, assessment and feedback.

A google form for students has been created with 11 Questions related to their lives in pandemic, addressing the issues of daily routine, diet, physical exercises and screen time. The language of questions has been kept easy. Questions were simple and linked to their routine. The following are questions asked from Class VI children:

1. What are you liking the most in this lock down?
2. What time do you get up in the morning?
3. For how many hours do you sleep?
4. What do you generally eat for breakfast? At what time you have your breakfast?
5. What do you eat for lunch? At what time you have your lunch?
6. What do you eat for dinner? At what time you have your dinner?
7. Which of the following do you have during the day?

Fruits / Biscuits/ chocolates/ chips or wafers/ fizzy drinks/ packed juices/ home-made snacks/ dry fruits/ any other

8. Do you do any kind of physical exercise? If yes, specify which one and for how long.
9. Other than online classes, activities and homework, in which of the following tasks do you keep yourself occupied the most?
 - Movies and Cartoons on Television
 - Video Games
 - Exploring different tools for creating posters/ GIFs/ Cartoons/ coding
 - YouTube videos on phones and tablets
 - Reading online story books
 - Engaging with educational software like Mind Spark, Byju's
 - Net surfing
 - Chatting or video calling with family and friends
 - Any other
10. How much time do you spend on screen in a day?

Data Collection

The data was collected online through the use of google forms in the month of August 2020. The questionnaire was created on google form and its link was shared with students of Class VI through Whatsapp groups and/ or email. 58 students studying in different sections of Class VI responded. This represents sample of the research. Students clicked the link, filled the necessary information and responded to the questions. Wherever, there was a need, students were contacted telephonically for further clarification. The information has been collected and analysed.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed question wise.

What are you liking the most in this lock down?

Most children (76%) responded that they are liking the time spent with family. A few students replied that when they were going to schools and parents to their office, then life was too busy and hectic for everyone. They hardly got to spend time with each other. Now they watch television together even do household chores and help their parents. 7% of students said that they are liking as there is no travel to school. Some of these children spent an hour on an average everyday for travelling to school. A few (10%) are also trying and enjoying new hobbies like Cooking/ Baking/ Dancing. A few students replied that they love playing with their friends, siblings and pets. As data was collected after 5 months since lockdown was announced due to pandemic, many students responded that they are missing actual school, meeting their friends and talking to one another.

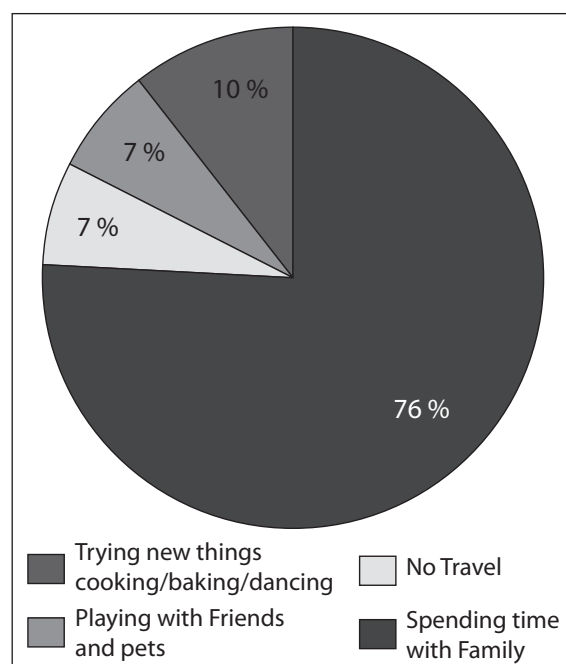


Figure 1. Likings during Lockdown

Sleep Pattern

For understanding how children's daily routine has changed, a few questions were asked about their time of getting up in morning; duration of sleep. As the online school starts at 9:00, only 10% of children are waking up before 7 am. Otherwise when they were going to school, they used to leave home for school buses or cabs by 7am. A close to 40% are getting up after 8 am. They must be attending their first class in a sleepy mode. However, most of them are sleeping for eight hours in a day. But their routines have turned topsy turvy. They are going to bed late and getting up late too.

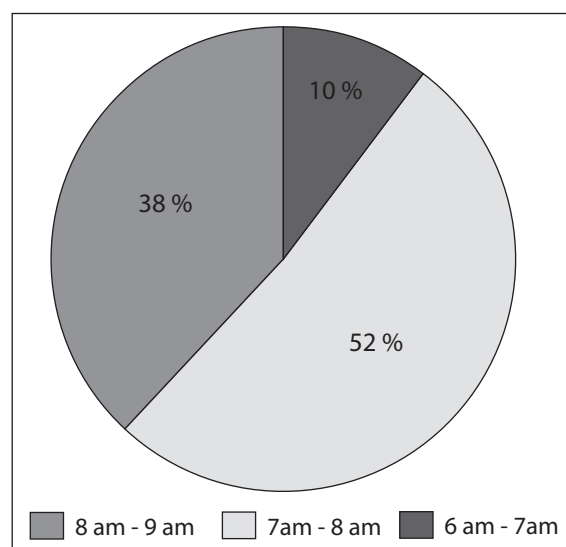


Figure 2: Sleep pattern

Food Pattern

Children were asked questions about what do they eat during the day for different meals. Most of the children were having breakfast at 10 am. The most popular breakfast was found to be oats, cereals, porridge, cornflakes.

Category 1: Milk/ banana

Category 2: Oats/ Porridge/ Cereal/ Cornflakes

Category 3: Bread – Butter/ Bread – cheese/ Sandwiches/ Pan cakes

Category 4: Upma/ Idly/ Poha/ Sabu-dana

Category 5: French toast/ Omelette

Category 6: Paratha

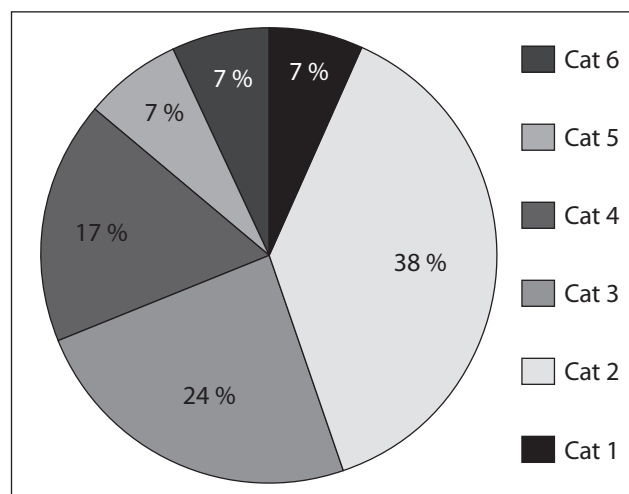


Figure 3: Food items for breakfast

If analysed carefully this kind of breakfast requires least amount of time spent on cooking. It typically indicated that it was a 'convenient breakfast'. The lunch and dinner were found to be a combination of regular north Indian food—Pulses (dal), rice, vegetable, roti, paratha, curd and salad. A lot of variety was found in snacks ranging from noodles, pasta, pizza, maggi, cakes, biscuits, chips, chocolates, fruits and dry fruits. It clearly indicated that parents are pampering children by providing them a lot of variety in snacks. They are putting in lot of time in preparing these. In this scheme of eatables, the proportion of fruits is only 17% and that of dry fruits is 14%. Another point here to flag is that each child has chosen more than one option for snacks. It also indicated a variety they were having for snacks.

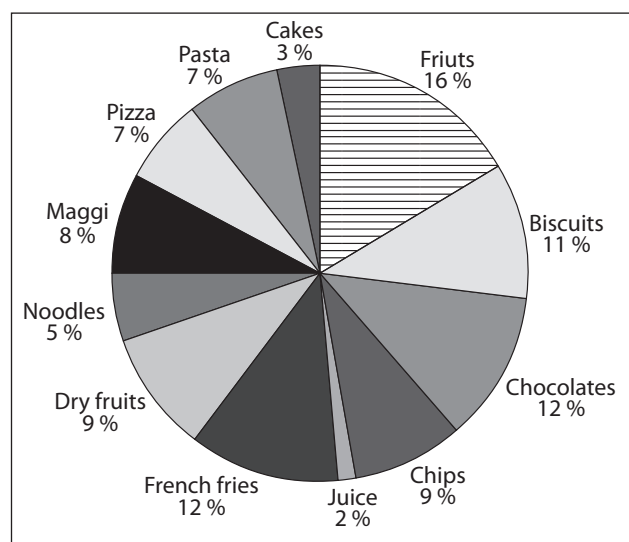


Figure 4: Snacks eaten by Children

Physical Exercises

When children were asked about whether they engage themselves in physical exercising or not, 34% responded as no engagement and other 66% participate in physical exercises. In that, yoga and dance were found to be most popular and running, skipping and badminton were least popular. The reason of yoga and dance being most popular is that these can be easily done within children's homes. The activities like cycling were done by children in their societies— park/ cycling area. But only a few children were going out of their homes for any physical activity too. Less physical activity results in disturbed sleep.

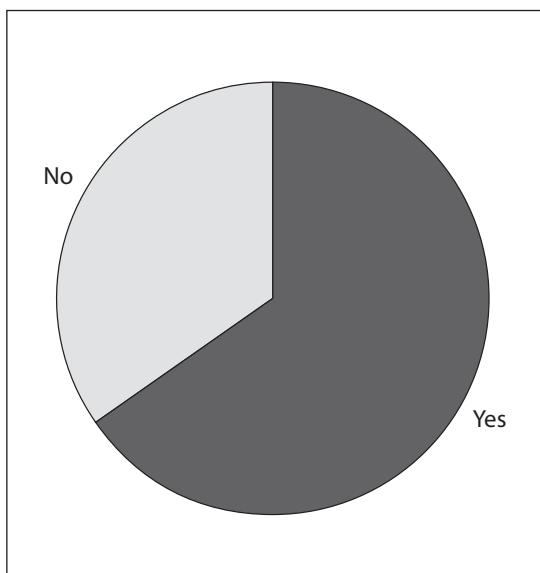


Figure (5b): Popular Physical Activity

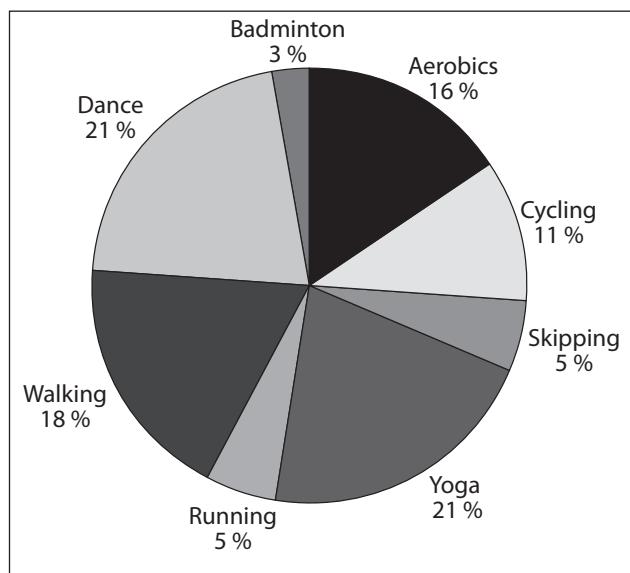


Figure 6: Participation in a Physical Activity

Time Spent on Screen

In response to the question on how much time do they spend on screen and how they spend that time, surprisingly shocking results were found. Almost 60% of our sample is spending six to eight hours daily on screen and 27% is spending even more than 8 hours per day. For such children they were spending more than one third of their day on screen. More screen time results are also resulting in consumption of more junk food. Secondly, more screen time is making them mentally tired. This results in irregular diet pattern with food which is not healthy.

When it was asked about the activities, they do on screen, it was found that from reading to entertaining, everything is done via screen. On one hand children are watching television for entertainment, surfing net, watching YouTube videos, on the other they are reading books online, learning coding, engaging with applications like 'Mindspark' for developing mathematical and logical reasoning, experimenting on different tools to make their own animations. A lot of options are available online to children. In this context one should not be asking the question about how much screen time but rather 'Is it a good screen time?'

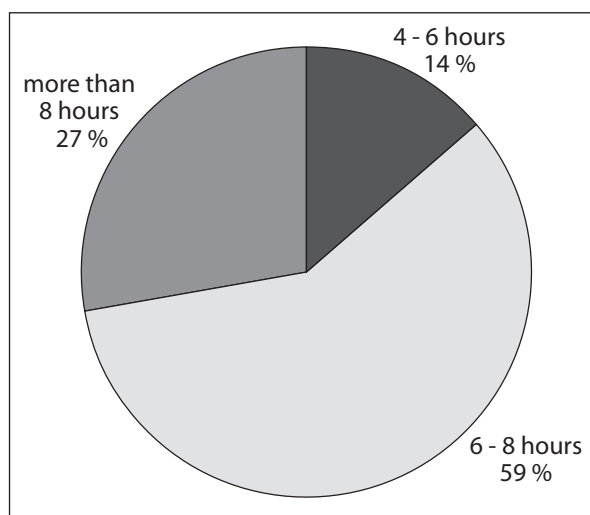


Figure 7: Time Spent on Screen

Conclusion

This research clearly showed that learning continued to happen even during these pandemic times for those who have a device and internet connection. Online teaching – learning is a doable proposition. Teachers with

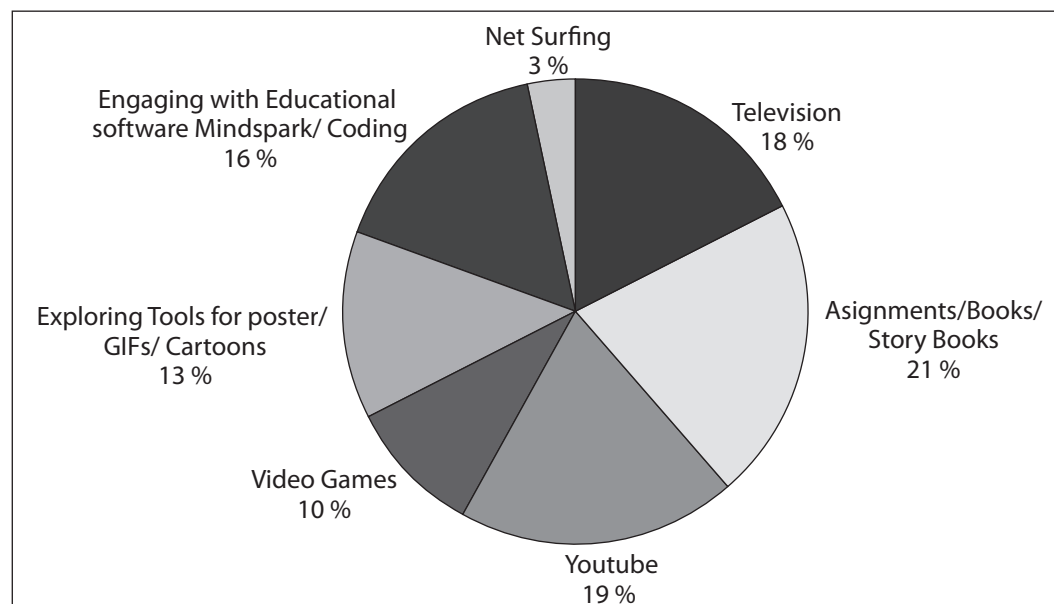


Figure 8: How Time is spent on Screen

technical support learnt and utilized ICT tools for making their classes interesting and engaging for children. Teaching, learning, group activities, co-curricular activities and assessment were well planned and executed in the school under the case study. However, from children's perspective they are tired of online school and are missing fun of togetherness as in the 'real' school. It was also found that a large number of children under study have irregular routines, disturbed sleep pattern and were found to be having a lot of junk food with missing physical activities. Moreover, the role of school as a socialisation agency where in children learn to interact with peers and other significant adults can't be taken for granted. It is necessary part of social and moral development. At this point of time, it is not taken care of. Actually, there is no way of doing it when every child is in her/ his isolated territory, far removed from others. It is necessary to have a regular routine and disciplined life like the one, when children were going to school.

There is need that the government should ensure the broad band facilities to reach across the entire nation at the earliest. Otherwise, there will be widening inequalities in different regions of the country. Children living in rural and remote areas will be left behind. These children are accessing education through broadcast medium. Here, there is only one way of communication. Their doubts and confusions are left to themselves. In certain areas, few teachers and Non-Government Organisations are trying to engage them through WhatsApp conversations or calls. It is only a time gap arrangement. There is a need to address this concern too.

The news reports across the world tend to indicate that the pandemic is here for a long time. We need to learn to live with this new normal, under which e-learning or online learning will be a part of life. During these tough times schools and educational institutions have explored the merits of online education like a large number of students can attend classes. Lectures or presentations can be recorded and shared with students before the class. Students come to class after viewing / watching video and then discuss their doubts. Students may watch that video multiple times. Following this, students can comprehend content better, built on concepts. In regular teaching, the focus was on imparting information and providing knowledge. Now in online classes, if information is shared through a video or presentation beforehand then there will be definitely

better comprehension of concepts. Teacher will be able to build on students' misconceptions. Thus, it can be said that higher level of Bloom's taxonomy like application and analysis can be addressed to online classes. We as teachers need to explore the advantages of online learning and apply to our educational settings.

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