

Understanding the Experience of Mothers of a Neophyte in Education during Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The research aim was to understand the difficulties experienced by mothers of a neophyte in education during Covid-19 Pandemic. The data was collected through telephonic FGD following the Covid protocol. There were 12 participants, living in Delhi. Thematic Analysis was used to obtain the final Result. Themes emerged were- Virtual Learning, Facilitator, Multitasking, Zing in Pandemic. Result showed that mothers consider their children as priority over other work demands.

Keywords: Neophyte, Online Mode, COVID-19, Mother's Experience, Zing

The education system had been affected widely due to the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide. The process of learning had changed drastically including the near-total closures of schools, early childhood education and care services, universities and colleges. In response to school closures, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2020, in order to limit the disruption of education, recommended the use of distance learning programmes, open educational applications and other platforms that Educational Institutes and teachers can use to reach learners remotely.

The closure of schools and Early childhood education and care (ECEC) impacted not only learners, teachers, and families, but had widespread economic and societal consequences too. Digital learning through internet have affected children and their mothers physically and mentally. Arora, 2021 reported that children were suffering from migraine pain, headaches and multiple physical as well as mental health difficulties. Moreover, parents of these small children faced trouble regarding the same in order to help their children with the work assigned by school.

The impact of the pandemic was more severe for children and their families especially in the rural areas, leading to interrupted learning, poor nutrition, childcare problems, and increase in the consequent economic cost of families. Affording mobile phone, tablets etc. for every child in some Indian families was itself a challenge for parents and moreover additional time to teach their children even after school classes had overburdened parenting, especially

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mothers. Lack of access to technology or good internet connectivity was another obstacle to continuous learning in few Indian families (Mukherjee, 2021)

According to a report by Smith & Shah (2021) in Times of India, working mothers dropped out of the labour force to take care of their children during school closures and online learning. In places, where virtual learning was implemented in full swing, working parents were typically left with a choice of either arranging childcare or to stop working during days when their children attended online school. However, childcare was often difficult to find or unaffordable, due to its increased demand and closures of day-care centres during the pandemic, making it not a viable option for many parents. However, where online learning was not feasible, some parents resorted to child labour or early marriage as a means to cope with the financial stress placed on them by the pandemic resulting in high rate of school drop-outs.

According to research by Carli (2020), women had more disruption in their working set-up than men as there was increase in childcare and other responsibilities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of mothers of a neophyte in education during Covid-19 pandemic. The research also aimed to understand the mother-child relationship mediated by the pandemic. In light of the purpose of the study following objectives were framed.

Objectives

- To understand the difficulties faced by mothers of a neophyte in education during Covid-19 pandemic.
- To explore the challenges mothers were facing due to the transition from traditional method of teaching to online mode of teaching.
- To understand the difficulties faced by mothers in managing work life and household chores.

The main objective of the study was to understand the difficulties faced by mothers of a neophyte in education during Covid-19 pandemic. The study also explored their way of coping with pandemic as well as household management.

As Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, it was necessary to maintain social distancing. In order to curb the spread of the disease therefore the mode of education was shifted to online. The concept of work from home was the new normal in the pandemic, as a resultant the women's responsibility had increased manifolds along with disruption in their working set-up as there was increase in childcare and other responsibilities such as office works, maintaining physical health of oneself and caring for relatives etc.

Most importantly, there was dearth of research in understanding the difficulties of mothers of a neophyte in education during Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the researchers decided to explore this area further by identifying how mothers of a neophyte had been impacted by the shift in education from traditional mode to online mode during pandemic. The researchers were also curious to understand, how the mothers delved into multiple ways to understand and overcome pandemic mentally and physically.

METHODOLOGY

The method chosen for the data collection of the study was focus group discussion as it provides a wider space to put forward the multiple views of multiple individuals, all together. Also, the participants can express out their inner self within a free non-judgmental space, thereby serving positive mental health. Following the protocols of pandemic, the data collection was collected virtually.

Sample

There were 12 participants, age ranging from 30-40, living with their partners. The inclusion criteria were female (mothers) whose child (neophyte) had entered into class-1 during the pandemic. All the participants were the residents of Delhi living with their partner and family. The technologically conversant participants were included.

Procedure

The participants were contacted telephonically and their consent to participate in the study was taken beforehand. The meeting time for the focused group discussion was fixed a week before the actual meeting. The meeting began with the rapport formation. The rules and regulations regarding the conduction along with the demonstrations were explained to them before the beginning of the F.G.D. After clarifying the doubts pertaining to the conduction, the F.G.D began. Some of the questions asked in FGD included, mother's understanding of online mode of teaching, difference between online mode of teaching and traditional schooling, challenges posed by online mode of teaching for class-1 students (neophyte).

The discussion also taped on their management of different roles as a woman. Towards the end, suggestions for mothers who have not been able to deal with the difficulties arising because of online teaching imposed as a resultant of pandemic were sought from the participants.

The focus group discussion was moderated and recorded by the researchers and later converted into transcription. The method of thematic analysis was used to categorise the verbatims followed by codes, sub- codes and themes.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to understand the experience of mothers whose child (neophyte) had entered class 1 during COVID-19 pandemic. A Focus Group Discussion was conducted with 12 participants, age ranging from 30-40, living with their family residing in Delhi. The discussion revolved around how the mothers had managed pandemic and initial education of their children who entered into class 1.

As the global pandemic came with new challenges for everyone in different ways, the mothers of the families were adversely affected, emotionally and physically. They were adjusting with the new normal in many ways. The online education system, itself was a challenge for mothers. It became difficult for the mothers whose child had just entered into class 1 during pandemic as it was new to the child as well as mothers. Moreover, maintaining personal and professional life all together from home, along with child's education made it more challenging for working mothers. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to understand the difficulties faced by mothers whose child had entered into class 1 during the pandemic.

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The study also explored their way of coping with new normal in the pandemic. The researchers were also curious to understand, how the participants delved into multiple ways to understand and overcome pandemic, mentally and physically.

Some of the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of this study includes *Virtual Learning, Facilitator, Multitasking, Zing in Pandemic*.

Virtual Learning: Virtual learning had been a boon to many students as it provides opportunity to access to coursework from anywhere at any time. Access to past recorded work, weekly assignment etc. was easy. It was very *different from traditional school system* but coping to it was challenge in itself. This was evident in the verbatim “*virtual schooling is not like normal school, difference is there but coping is challenge right now*”.

The situation was more challenging for a child who had entered into class-1 during the pandemic as they were neophyte in the educational school setup. Similarly, online education was new for mothers too. They were facing difficulties in teaching their children with screen learning. It required adequate knowledge of technology. The reflection of this was reported in the verbatim, “*Using technology is difficult, taking class is more difficult on screen*” . Technological dependency on media sources had increased multiple times reducing the dependency on books. It had also further led to physical and physiological repercussions like eyesight difficulties, migraine pain etc. along with difficulties in managing school work of the child/children along with other demands. which was evident from the following verbatim, “*bacchey ko eyes ka problem hone laga hai, bechare kitney focus rahey ek screen par, upar sey network issues*” (*Children have started developing eyesight problems. For how long can they focus on the screen. Apart from this, there are network issues too.*) . Moreover, children can't sit in front of screen for long time thereby it became the responsibility of mothers to manage and note whatever was taught in the class. At times there were network issues too, which further added the burden on mothers.

Facilitator: Mother's way of visualizing online learning differed from each other. Most were worried about socialization of the child because of the importance of peer learning in this age, which was more or less impossible through screen learning.

Children cannot learn on their own at this age. Students of Class 1 were unable to understand what was going on in their classes. They didn't even know how to take classes in the online mode, thereby it became challenging for mothers to maintain classwork as well as homework along with other professional and everyday household demands. This was evident in the verbatim, “*Lack of concentration and parents need to sit with the child for longer period*”. Another verbatim, “*learning to ho rahi hai but speaking nahi, English bolney main bhi problem ho hogya hai, reading-writing main bhi; no development altogether (learning is happening but no conversation therefore children are facing problems in spoken as well as reading and writing in English language. Also, there is no development altogether),*” depicts that linguistic development had been negatively impacted. The system of online mode of learning had delayed social, emotional and physical development, delayed psycho-social development, less vocabulary and linguistic development, no or less peer socialization etc. as said in the verbatim “*Delayed in overall development including social, physical and emotional development*”. According to Guleria (2021) keeping schools closed can adversely affect children.

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As the mother was the source of learning, many a times some mothers had to acquaint themselves with the information imparted in the class in order to teach their children. They were also required to learn appropriate technology to take online classes for their children. Apart from this, not all mothers were equally good at teaching or trained in teaching children of this age group. It had added extra responsibility on mothers. Children were totally dependent on mother for education and learning; hence each time mother had to sit with the child to complete their homework as well as classwork which was evident from the verbatim *“the child is unable to concentrate, unable to learn what the teacher wants to say, children cannot follow dictation online”*. The child was unable to maintain sustained attention during the online classes hence posing the problem for mothers in sustaining their attention. As sustained attention theory explains that one need to retain on task to obtain maximum knowledge. Many times, children got exhausted and didn't follow their mothers, making it more difficult for mothers in educating the child.

Multitasking: Multitasking was not new for mothers, but increased burden on them due to situations created by the pandemic. It was exhausting emotionally, mentally, and physically. The Increase in situational demand, increased level of multitasking for a mother which was evident from the verbatim, *“class to mujhey leni padti hai, bacchey ko kahan samajh aata hai (I have to take class, child is unable to understand)”*. This was in sync with a report by Kumari (2021). She had pointed towards similar issues faced by mother and children during the online classes.

Maintaining coursework and teaching of children was added responsibility to the mothers during the pandemic. Mothers were facing time management difficulties along with huge reduction in self- relaxation time which had been expressed in the verbatim *“management is the only solution, sab kuch ek sath dekhna possible kahan hai, to time divide karti hu main, apney liye kam hi time mil pata hai phir bhi” (management is the only solution, it is not possible to look after each and everything at a time, so I divide time. In spite of this, I get less time for myself)*. The pre-pandemic time schedule had been disturbed and thus children learnt unorganised ways of living which was evident from the verbatim of a mother, *“due to online classes now it has become easy for me because, I can feed the child in between, I can keep track of what is going in the class”*.

Mothers also expressed that it had become difficult for them to manage their self-professional works as well as household chores, however with family member's co-operation, the burden had reduced at least a bit which was evident from the following verbatim, *“khudka business bhi hai , joint family mai rahtey hai, na bacchey ko time de pate hai na apne aapko, padai likai to mano ab ho jaaye itney mai hi badi baat hai” (I am unable to give time either to myself nor to my child as I have my own business and live in a joint family, even if the child is able to read and write during this pandemic, it would be a big achievement)*. Similar findings were reported by Carli, 2020 in her research.

Another concern shared by mothers especially those who had more than one child, was the difficulty in maintaining the balance between studies, teaching and sharing of electronic devices all together at the same time among them. Some mothers had chosen the option of teaching children alternatively on certain days. The verbatim, in which the mother helped children with classes alternatively was expressed as, *“mere 3 bacchey hai aur mai teeno ke saath nahi baith sakti, ek ka acchey sey karwa leti hu to dusrey ka miss ho jata hai, I follow days and ek ka hi acchey sey ho pata hai” (I have three children and as classes take place simultaneously, I am unable to sit with all of them. When I sit with one, then others classes*

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get missed so I have alternatively allotted days for each child. Thus, on a particular day, only one child's classes are done in a better way).

Zing in pandemic: Zing referred to the enthusiasm shown by the mothers of neophyte during pandemic. Pandemic made it compulsory to learn basic computer skills by mothers as well as children. Online classes were a new turn in the system of education in a way to continue teaching- learning in this deadly pandemic. Thereby irrespective of multiple cons, this method was adopted for all the learners keeping in mind that less was better than nothing which was evident from the following verbatim, “*ek hi to rasta hai, no other way to cope with education*”(*This is the only way through which education can take place during pandemic*).

Another sub-theme that emerged was making compromises. During the pandemic, more or less everybody had to compromise their plans but the mothers of young children had been affected adversely. Many of the mothers had replanned their career work or kept it in hold in order to support their children's education. Prioritizing children over other work was not a new phenomenon in our society but pandemic compelled mothers to choose one over another, this was evident from the following verbatim, “*pandemic made it difficult to stick to plans, mujhey mere bacchey ko June tak school bhejna tha and by July job join karna tha but I had to forgo everything and stick to pandemic adjustment*” (*I had to send my child to school by June and join my job in July but I had to forgo everything and stick to pandemic adjustment*). A research by Andrew et.al., 2020 reported that since the beginning of lockdown, mothers as compared to fathers were more likely to have lost their job.

The sub-theme seeking help from other family members in case of difficulties in managing child's education along with other responsibilities during pandemic was the solution mothers opted for. The verbatim, “*saare family member ka saath hona jaruri hai, aur ek dusrey ke acceptance is very important,*”(*during pandemic, it is important to accept and support each other in a family*) depicts that strong bond within family members and partners was very necessary to cope with new situations. Not only mothers but a little help from other members too was required to handle education within the home setup. Hence, pandemic had helped families in increasing cohesiveness among its members, especially parents.

(Gogoi, 2021) in his article reported that the emotional well-being of parents was equally important for the up-bringing of mentally and physically healthy children. Government helplines on psychological issues should be publicised and businesses should promote family-friendly policies. It has become very important to manage positive relationship between family members and children in the initial years of a child's life as positive relationship had always been considered to be a driver of children's wellbeing throughout lives. This was a challenge for many parents as they were unable to handle their own mental wellness. In India, limited access and availability of mental health services, coupled with stigma, might have left many parents vulnerable, which in turn could affect children in the long-run.

CONCLUSION

As pandemic had limited children's exposure to outer world, thereby family environment became the only source of model behaviour for children since last year. Hence, it becomes more imperative to pay special attention to ensure the physical and mental well-being of mothers, as it is directly linked to the growth of a child.

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The pandemic brought challenges in multiple ways and dealing with it was a stressful experience for mothers as they were required to maintain balance between personal life, career and work, raising children along with their educational needs and taking care of elders in the house and other household chores. This situation had put mothers at a higher risk of experiencing distress, thereby reducing their competency to be supportive caregivers. The burnout of mothers may make children vulnerable to multiple mental health problems and their learning stage may also be affected adversely. Therefore, policy makers should take these into consideration before implementing any new laws and policies during and after pandemic as overall family growth was directly related to overall family income. It was seen that working mothers had to compromise with their career for the sake of their children's well-being. Mothers considered their children as their first priority over everything; therefore, it can be concluded that along with children, mothers also had a unique experience during the pandemic.

Limitations and directions for future research

1. The experience of mothers were only considered for this study, thereby in future research experience of father and other guardians/caretaker who have taken care of children during pandemic can be studied.
2. All the participants were from Delhi, thereby in future other states can also be included.
3. The number of participants can be enhanced by including the parents as well as caretakers of children.
4. FGD can be supplemented with survey, interview etc. for in-depth and detailed study in future.
5. Mother's level of stress faced during this period can also be studied in future research.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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