Digital Learning in Government Schools in Rajasthan

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Background

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, with its high incidence of fatalities, has affected large populations globally. The impact of the pandemic on social, economic and political spheres has been extensive. In India, the countrywide closing of schools and colleges has affected the large majority of students across geographies and has had a significant impact on students, more so those in vulnerable and underprivileged contexts. In response to the crisis, State Ministries of Education have put in place strategies to address issues arising out of the disruption of schooling. There has been a push to provide digitally-based distance learning opportunities: use of text/video/audio content through SMS, *WhatsApp*, radio and TV programmes to reach out to the students.

The Government of Rajasthan introduced the *Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement* (SMILE), an e-learning platform via *WhatsApp* in April 2020. The stated objective of the initiative was to provide online courses and classes to all students enrolled in government schools of the state.

This article analyses the experiences of students and teachers of online teaching-learning through SMILE. It is based on qualitative interactions with them across government schools in different districts in Rajasthan. The argument is that, given the current disruption in schooling, any strategy to continue educational engagement with students should be guided by a concern for equity and inclusion and create an environment in which learning can continue.

The context

Geographically, Rajasthan is the largest state in India. It is one of the eight states under the Empowered Action Group (EAG) with low socio-economic indicators. Despite considerable investment from the government in the education sector, ground realities make it evident that several longstanding and systemic issues pertaining to quality education, equity and gender continue to influence education outcomes in the State.

In response to the current crisis and extended lockdown period, the Government of Rajasthan postponed the Board examinations and decided to promote all children to the next grade, except those in grades X and XII. To ensure continuity of learning for students during the pandemic, three policy initiatives to deliver online education were introduced between April and June 2020: first, *Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement (SMILE)*, an e-learning platform through *WhatsApp*; second, *Hawa Mahal and Shiksha Vani*, both radio-based learning initiatives and; third, *Shiksha Darshan*, a television-based programme in collaboration with UNICEF and Ekcovation, a social learning platform.

Field experiences with SMILE

Qualitative interactions with sixty teachers and students from fifty government schools were held across ten districts in Rajasthan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the discussions were carried out online and via phone in both urban and rural areas.

The SMILE programme was introduced by officials of *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* (SamSA) through a video conference with district officials. The directives were to implement the SMILE programme as per the guidelines in the box below:

The Rajasthan State Institute of Educational Research and Training (RSCERT) is the nodal agency for SMILE. The e-content for various classes comes from the following: NCERT website - *e-Pathshala*, the DIKSHA programme and other open sources. Subject teachers are also uploading additional content in PDF format in a *WhatsApp* group.

Children's engagement

The first step to taking advantage of online resources is establishing a link to the programme. Field experience and responses indicate that access to online resources and modes continue to be a challenge in most districts of Rajasthan.

Student interactions reveal that older students and those in transitional stages are worried about their future. They had not been able to attend coaching classes or access a library. Some of the students

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Guidelines for Implementation of SMILE

- The e-content will be uploaded at the state level on School Education Department *WhatsApp* group; it will be sent further to the Chief District Education Officer (CDEO) Group, from there to the Chief Block Education Officer Group (CBEO) and then Panchayat Elementary Education Officer PEEO) Group or Free Textbook Book (FTB) Nodal officer in urban areas.

- All PEEOs will be the group administrators of the *WhatsApp* group. They will create two *WhatsApp* groups - one of the teachers and another of parents.

- Online teaching will be started with the help of videos.

- The content will be uploaded at 8 a.m.in the CDEO group and then made available to the block level CBEO group.

- The competency schedule for the subsequent day will be shared the previous evening.

- Only the PEEO can upload messages in the group. He/she has to ensure that only academic content is shared in the *WhatsApp* groups.

- The CBEO will upload details of *WhatsApp* group in the tracker sheet.

- The CBEO has the responsibility of updating the Google sheet.

- Teachers can also submit their own content at the state level.

- The RSCERT is the nodal agency for preparing the content; all DIETs are expected to support the preparation and reviewing the e-content.

- Districts with less than 40% entries should improve their performance.

- The goal of the department is to reach all the children enrolled in government schools through this initiative.

(Extracts of Minutes of Video Conference Meeting held by SPD (SamSa) with districts officials, April 2020)

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were unhappy that, due to movement restrictions, they could not meet their friends, consult them for studies and go out to play. Students recounted that the class teacher had contacted their parents (mostly fathers) and enquired whether they were willing to link their children to SMILE. The teachers would explain the process and, on consent from parents, add the phone number to a *WhatsApp* group. Students in rural schools in some districts complained that the teachers had not shared the information regarding online classes on time. They pointed out that they were keen to study and get linked to SMILE, but in the absence of a smartphone, internet package and bandwidth, it was difficult to take advantage of the programme. The lessons were usually viewed whenever a phone was available.

The lessons come to my brother's phone. I am able to view them only when my brother returns home from work. I cannot view the lessons every day.

Given the economic condition of our family, it is not possible to purchase a phone for every family member (grade XII student, Dausa)*.*

The schedule

The content is uploaded daily at 9 am on the *WhatsApp* group. Grade-wise lessons in video/audio/PDF format are sent out. The students are expected to view the lessons and make notes. If the lesson is long it is split over two days. Since the students did not have the textbooks of the new grades, in one district, the entire Hindi and Sanskrit textbooks were uploaded. More recently, worksheets have also been added and students are given home-based tasks to complete. The students are advised to contact the subject teachers in case they are not able to understand a lesson.

We have never been taught in this manner, so it is not easy for us to understand the lessons. Learning in school from a teacher is so much easier! (A student).

In a context where students face multiple challenges to learning, ensuring that they undertake self-study and learn without guidance seems unrealistic.

Gender inequalities

Gender-equitable access to digital devices is also an important aspect in view of the gender-based roles and responsibilities within households. Teachers in girls' schools in urban areas reported that girls were making an effort and those who were able to access the lessons often called in if they were not able to understand something.

However, in rural areas, girls' access to mobile phones is curtailed as parents are not willing to hand over their mobile phones for long periods of time. Their fear is that daughters may be exposed to 'wrong' information on the internet or talk to friends.

Teacher perceptions

In both urban and rural schools, teachers were of the view that education had been affected severely during the pandemic. They feared that when schools reopen, some of the students will not be able to cope with studies. Teachers also feared increased dropout rates in schools as many children from migrant households had left with their parents for their hometowns.

Teachers reported that the objective of SMILE was to keep children connected to education and ensure learning- *'padhayee ke prati rujhan rahe'* (keeping up interest in studies). Some teachers felt that the initiative was beneficial as some continuity in studies was ensured and the lockdown period was being used constructively. Online platforms had got the children interested in learning. A few rural school teachers, though non-committal, expressed their reservations regarding the feasibility of SMILE in the long term. They felt that, in the absence of digital services and internet connectivity, online learning was only partially effective.

Teachers pointed out that in most cases, the parents' struggle for their livelihoods during COVID-19 has been acute. It is difficult for them to afford smartphones and internet for the exclusive use of children. Teachers felt that the department should have factored this in when the programme was launched.

There are more ST, SC and girls enrolled in our school. The parents do not have the resources to buy a smartphone; the internet connectivity is erratic; in many areas, there is no electricity too. (Teacher, Baran)

According to teacher estimates (both urban and rural) the percentage of students that they have been able to connect ranges from 25 percent to 50 percent of total enrolment in schools. The phone numbers of several parents were not available. The teachers were of the view that the initiative had been implemented without prior information and preparation. The district/block functionaries and teachers merely followed the orders coming from the state or district level. The lack of orientation is inhibiting because many of the teachers are not familiar with the use of digital technology for distance learning. However, more recently, some training and orientation programmes have been organised to equip teachers with skills for online teaching and learning.

Additionally, teachers have to contact five students daily and take feedback on the lessons. Two sets of Google forms – one for recording call details and the other for eliciting teacher suggestions on e-content – have to be completed and uploaded by teachers. Both of these are mechanical and time-consuming tasks. One state official remarked that the status of teacher feedback is uneven across districts.

Teachers felt that the push for digital learning in government schools has made the digital divide prominent as a large number of students in government schools are being excluded due to several reasons.

Conclusion

The experience of digital learning discussed above illustrates the sporadic reach of the SMILE programme. The gaps are accentuated in the rural areas of the state. The problematic issue is the assumption that online learning can be introduced by a government order from above to a highly heterogeneous population of students, parents and teachers, under conditions of stress and scarcity and that they should comply and adapt to a new pattern of engagement without necessary support and preparation.

If the desired outcome of the online learning initiative is to provide continuity in learning, mere provisioning and delivery of content/lessons through *WhatsApp*, cannot be equated with either academic engagement or quality learning. Student experience indicates that, given the various constraints they face, navigating online content itself is not easy.

In a state where educational challenges abound, it is imperative that there is a judicious mix of

blended strategies for meeting the learning needs of children which address the social, economic and structural barriers that the students face. The feeling of deprivation among the have-nots among the student body can also have a long-term impact on their health and education. Many of the students may be forced to drop out of the educational stream. Educational planners and managers will need to address these concerns and work towards building more inclusive, efficient and resilient education systems in the long term.

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