Equal Access to Quality Education in the Post Covid-19 Period: A Study of Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar District of Punjab

Vishavdeep Singh, Rohil

Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion & Inclusive Policy, Panjab University, Chandigarh
Corresponding author: vishav5310@gmail.com
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Abstract

The lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted the lives of the people of India in multiple ways. A major shift was seen with the resurgence of thrust toward virtual means of education through Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The instability caused due to the pandemic had affected the children's learning environment and the quality of teaching in a major way. Although the online education system proved to be a boon as a spontaneous reaction to such an unavoidable situation, it also proved to be a bane due to its multifaceted problems and challenges such as Digital illiteracy, lack of resources, and training, urban-rural disparities etc. United Nations started Millennium Development Goals in the year 2000, which included 8 goals with 21 targets for the year 2015. In 2016, these goals were replaced by Sustainable Development Goals, a total of 17 goals as a part of this were adopted by all the UN member countries, which are supposed to be accomplished by 2030. The fourth goal of SDGs focuses on Quality Education with an aim to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Various incidents have shown that urban-rural disparities and class disparities in the field of education hamper equitable access to Quality education. This study will emphasize on analyzing the major problems and challenges related to quality education with special reference to post Covid-19 period.

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic, Online Education, Quality Education, Sustainable Development Goals, Problems, Challenges,*

Introduction

The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet - (Aristotle)

From the given line of Aristotle, we can understand the role of education in everyone's life. Aristotle was in favor of providing Education. Education is not only for getting a job but the main motive of education is making the children aware of the basic qualities, ethics & morality, especially socialization. Education helps in getting values which indeed plays a very important role in everyone's life. Quality education ensures inclusive and equitable education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all without any discrimination. When education is not available to all, then it means that the state denies equality of opportunity to all. There is a great role of education in improving the minds of people, making people more vigilant, curbing crimes, and more importantly eradicating superstitions.

United Nations, which is working as a world government, to promote social progress and living standards, started in 2000, Millennium Development Goals which included 8 goals with 21 targets for the year 2015. In 2016, these goals were replaced by Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by all the UN member countries, which are supposed to be accomplished by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals as an initiative of the United Nations includes 17 global goals with 169 targets that aim to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. India is one of the founding members of the United Nations and is committed to the fulfillment of its goals.

There was a time when only food, shelter, and housing were the necessities without which one cannot survive. But with the passage of time and the advancement of technology, the scope of necessities has been enlarged with the inclusion of Education as a necessity. During the ancient period, only the upper castes were allowed to pursue education because of the discrimination created by the fourfold division of society by Manu Smriti. In the British era, it was education that acted as a source of exclusion as education was available to few people, which further denied the people from getting jobs, earning their livelihood, and even getting their right to vote as it was available to few people.

After India got independence, we have seen drastic changes concerning education in the constitution of India which included various provisions to remove discrimination, as we can see the right to equality under the fundamental rights. Earlier, Education was a state subject in the federal arrangement, but such a system lacks uniformity because of which the Government of India, through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act 1976 added Education to the Concurrent List of Schedule VII. But education got a major boost from the government including the Right to Education (Article 21A) in Fundamental Rights through the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002. It was even made a fundamental duty for the parents for providing opportunities for education to their children between the age of six to fourteen. For the fulfilment of the aim of Article 21A, the Government of India passed the Right to Education Act, 2009 which ensures free and compulsory education for children from ages six to fourteen. This act had various provisions, including the appointment of trained teachers, no discrimination and harassment, etc. But as per the Right to Education Forum's Stocktaking Report 2014, Less than 10 percent of schools

comply with all the norms and standards of the RTE Act, 2009. The 2017 and 2018 Global Education Monitoring Reports pointed out that India has struggled to ensure access to basic elementary education for all children. Although, through the initiatives like Sarva Shikha Abhiyan and RTE Act 2009, the government is providing free elementary education to all but due to the absence of basic infrastructure and quality teaching standards, even the poor are forced to get their children enrolled in private schools. As education in private schools is too expensive, some people are unable to give their children basic education because of this we see increasing dropout rates.

The COVID-19 pandemic-related shutdown had significantly impacted Indian citizens' daily lives. With the resurrection of the push towards virtual methods of education through Information and Communication Technology (ICT), a significant shift was observed. The pandemic's unpredictability has a significant impact on both the setting in which children learn and the caliber of instruction. The online education system was a spontaneous response to such an inescapable predicament, but due to its numerous issues and difficulties, it also turned out to be a curse. Analyzing the role of the public and private sectors in delivering high-quality education to the populace becomes crucial. Numerous cases have demonstrated how class and urban-rural differences in education prevent all students from having equal access to high-quality education. The focus of this study will be on identifying and analyzing the main issues and difficulties pertaining to high-quality education.

Understanding Quality Education

Education International (EI), an organization headquartered in Belgium, defines quality education as an inclusive form of learning that encompasses the holistic development of every student, disregarding factors like gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or geographical location. This type of education not only equips students for academic assessments but also readies them for life beyond examinations. The United Nations incorporated 'Quality Education' into their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2012, marking its global significance. Contemporary education relies significantly on Information and Communication Technology (ICT), facilitating access to formal or advanced education. Beyond merely vocational training, quality education shapes an individual comprehensively, fostering their character and values. For children, it

aspires to provide a complete upbringing that integrates moral and ethical education into the curriculum, promoting a wholesome lifestyle. The transformative impact of technology on education is widely acknowledged; it has not only revolutionized the learning environment but has also prompted educators to adopt interactive teaching methods, deviating from the traditional lecture-based approach. The United Nations has identified various pressing global issues that require immediate attention, underscoring the demand for capable leaders and professionals well-versed in their respective domains. To cultivate such leadership qualities and the ability to inspire students, a more sophisticated pedagogical approach is indispensable. In the digital era, knowledge knows no boundaries, as information can be sourced from any corner of the world. While delivering quality education demands substantial dedication to shaping students' characters, the emergence of new technologies has made essential resources accessible to students with just a simple click. While students can avail a lot of facilities like guidance, counseling, and accessing the online free libraries, sitting far from the institution. (What is Quality Education?, 2023)

COVID Response towards Quality Education

When Covid-19 swept the globe in 2020, one of the most significant aspects that was negatively impacted was education. Over 91% of kids around the world had their schools temporarily closed, according to the majority of countries. When the pandemic hit, India had about 265 million children enrolled in schools, including primary and higher levels, with most of them relying on public systems.

Schools have been attempting to substitute in-person instruction with online learning because the majority of primary school pupils have not attended lessons in more than a year as a result of the Lockdown. Schools and teachers have been experimenting with a variety of methods to connect with their students, including Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp groups, group tutoring, television, and radio. Loudspeaker tutorials for those without internet access and one teacher even building a platform on a tree to gain stronger signals to transmit the lessons are some creative approaches to try to reach the students.

In this era of transformative education, the old norms have given way to a dynamic blend of technology, adaptability, and inventiveness. Schools have not merely substituted in-person instruction with

online learning; they have woven a tapestry of connectivity that embraces all avenues to impart knowledge. It's a testament to the resilience of educators and the unquenchable thirst for learning exhibited by students, who, despite the odds, have not only adapted but flourished in these novel learning environments. As schools continue to explore new horizons, the lessons learned during this time will undoubtedly leave an indelible mark on the future of education.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the biggest disruption to education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion students in more than 200 countries (Pokhrel & Chetri, 2021). Due to a shortage of staff in various government schools, many teachers are forced to do multiple functions further affecting education. As per the ASER Report of 2022, the disparity in learning losses between 2018 and 2022 was notably pronounced in states known for higher reading proficiency, including Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Punjab. Moreover, there has been a noteworthy surge between 2018 and 2022 in the percentage of schools equipped with computers that are actively utilized by students. Punjab experienced a remarkable jump from 3.8% to 22.2%, while Gujarat saw an increase from 24% to 40.9%. These statistics indicate the progress and changes in educational infrastructure and resources in these respective states during the specified period.

Keeping in mind the importance of training, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann sent off two groups of 72 government school principals to the esteemed Principals Academy in Singapore in a substantial effort to raise the standard of teaching in public schools. The project intends to provide these principals with current information and skill in the subject of education. The school principals in Singapore would be exposed to cutting-edge teaching techniques used abroad throughout their training. When they get back, they'll discuss these methods with their students and coworkers to give them an inside look at how people study abroad. The students of Punjab would be able to compete on a global scale thanks to this exchange. The ultimate goal is to offer top-notch education in Punjab so that kids may compete with those from convent schools. (Punjab CM sends 72 principals to Singapore for training, 2023).

Research Methodology

The study is based on Quality Education and its access to the citizens. The study is not only descriptive but also analytical in nature. In order to conduct the study,

Primary, and Secondary data are collected from various sources. Researchers have chosen a stratified random sampling method for collecting primary data. A sample of 60 citizens (30 parents and 30 Students) has been collected from S.A.S Nagar district. The data has been collected from the questionnaire method. The data has been collected from those respondents who started sending their children to schools immediately after COVID-19 when the government allowed classroom teachings. Not all the students came in the first phase due to fears of being affected by the disease. So, the sample has such limitations. To make the sample representative, the researchers selected the urban and rural schools of Mohali and Kharar cities of the S.A.S Nagar district. The secondary sources include newspapers, internet sources, books, articles, etc.

Data Analysis

Table: 1.1 PARENTS

Age			Gender		Area	
30-40	40-50	50-60	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
13	14	03	15	15	14	16

When the respondents were asked about their age, it was found that 46.33% of the respondents were from 30-40 years of age, 46.67% of the respondents were from 40-50 years of age and only 10% of respondents were from 50-60 years of age.

In the study, 50% of the respondents were malewhile50% of the respondents were female. In the study, 46.67% of the respondents were living in rural areas and 53.33% of the respondents were living in urban areas.

Table- 1.2

Occupations	No. of Respondents	Monthly income	No. of Respondents	Qualification	No. of Respondents
Private Employee	11	Below 10K	02	Metric	05
Government Employee	06	10-20K	04	Higher Secondary	05
Own Business	08	20-30K	07	Graduate	12
Housewife	05	30-40K	07	Post Graduate	05
		40-50K	07	MPhil/Ph.D.	03
		Above 50K	03		

The study found that 36.67% of the respondents were private employees, 20% of the respondents were Government employees, 26.67% of the respondents were businessmen, and 16.66% of the respondents were housewives.

When the respondents were asked about their monthly income 23.33% of the respondents said that their monthly income is between 20k to30 k, 30k to 40k, and 40k to 50k, and only 10% of the respondent's monthly income is above 50k.

When the respondents were asked about their qualifications, it was found that 16.67% of the respondents are metric, 16.67% of the respondents are higher secondary, 40% of the respondents are Graduate, 16.66% of the respondents are postgraduate and only 10% are MPhil/ Ph.D.

In which school your child is enrolled- When the respondents were asked about the school in which their child is enrolled,

33.33% of the respondents said that their children are studying in government schools while 66.67% of the respondent's children are studying in private schools.

Table- 1.3

Level of Awareness/ Satisfaction	Fully Aware/ Satisfied	Partially Aware/ satisfied	Not Aware/ Satisfied
Are you satisfied with the role of teachers in providing adequate education to children?	05	15	10
Are you aware of the Right to Education Act?	09	05	16
Are you satisfied with School's infrastructure?	12	11	07
Are you satisfied with the current education system?	11	15	04

Teachers have a crucial and diverse role in education, influencing students' learning outcomes and experiences. Beyond simply imparting knowledge, they also act as mentors, facilitators, guides, and role models. In this context, 16.67% of the respondents were fully satisfied with the role of teachers in providing adequate education to the children, 50% of the respondents were partially satisfied and 33.33% were not satisfied with this.

Awareness about the Right to Education Act is cardinal. Parents were asked about their knowledge regarding this act, as a result, 30% of the respondents were fully aware of the Right to Education Act, 16.67% of the respondents were partially aware and 53.33% of respondents were not aware.

The infrastructure of Schools is one of the great determining factors when we talk about quality education. Similarly, the parents were asked about their satisfaction with regard to School's infrastructure, 40%

of the respondents were found to be fully satisfied with the school's infrastructure, 36.67% of the respondents were partially satisfied, and 23.33% of respondents were not satisfied.

Accessing satisfaction regarding the current education system is very important considering the objectives of this research paper. In this regard, 36.67% of the respondents were fully satisfied with the current education system, 50% of the respondents were partially satisfied, and 13.33% of the respondents were not satisfied.

Table- 1.4 How frequent Parent-Teacher meetings are arranged?

Parent-Teacher Meeting	Every 6 months	Every 3 months	Every month	Annually
Respondents	07	08	08	07

Parent-teacher meetings (PTMs) are essential to the education and growth of students. These gatherings give parents and instructors a chance to cooperate, talk, and cooperate to assist the academic and general growth of the pupils. The parents were asked about the frequency of Parent-teacher meetings, 23.33% of the respondents said that every 6 months parent-teacher meetings were being held, 26.67% of the respondents said that every 3 months, 26.67% of the respondents said that every month and 23.33% of the respondents said that annually parents-teacher meetings were being held.

Table- 2.1 STUDENTS

Age			Gender		Area	
05-10	11-15	16-20	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
02	24	04	16	14	13	17

53.33% of the respondents were male while 46.67% of the respondents were female.

6.67% of the respondents were between 05- 10 years of age, 80% of the respondents were between 11-15 years of age and 13.33% of the respondents were between 16-20 years of age.

43.33% of the respondents were from Rural areas and 56.67% of the respondents were from Urban areas.

Table- 2.2

Class			School	
1st_ 4th	5th_ 8th	9th_ 12th	Government	Private
02	22	06	07	23

6.67% of the respondents were between 1-4 classes, 73.33% of the respondents were between 5-8 classes and 20% of the respondents were between 9-12 classes.

23.33% of respondents were enrolled in government schools and 76.67% of respondents were enrolled in private schools.

Table- 2.3

Level of Awareness/ Satisfaction	Fully Satisfied	Partially satisfied	Not Satisfied
Are you satisfied with the method of teaching?	18	11	01
Are you satisfied with School's infrastructure?	16	12	02

The method of teaching plays a crucial role in shaping the learning experience and outcomes of students. Therefore, it is pertinent to analyze the satisfaction of students regarding the method of teaching. 60% of respondents were fully satisfied

with the method of teaching, 36.67% of respondents were partially satisfied and 3.33% of respondents were not satisfied.

In order to create a positive learning environment and to support students' entire educational experience, school infrastructure is essential. It includes all the actual buildings, furnishings, and supplies a school has. 53.33% of respondents were found fully satisfied with School's infrastructure, 40% of respondents were partially satisfied and 6.67% of respondents were not satisfied.

Table- 2.3

Question	Yes	No	Not Sure
Do your teachers motivate you to further your studies?	21	02	07
School's emphasis on extra curriculum activities?	18	07	05
Are you taught about the role of education in your life?	26	02	02
Easy access to digital resources and learning techniques?	25	05	-

As motivation plays a great role in the teaching-learning process, respondents were asked whether their teachers motivate them to improve their studies. 70% of respondents said that they are being motivated by the teachers, 6.67% of respondents say that they were not being motivated by the teachers and 23.33% of respondents say that they were being motivated sometimes by the teacher.

Extracurricular activities are important in a student's life since they provide a variety of advantages that go beyond the academic program. When the respondents were asked that do their school puts emphasis on extra curriculum activities, 60% said

yes, 23.33% said no, and 6.67% respondents said extra curriculum activities are held sometimes.

Teaching children about the role and importance of education is crucial for their overall development and success in life as it gives them purpose and motivation. 86.66% of respondents said that they are taught about the role of education in their life, and 6.67% of respondents said that they were not taught about the role of education in their life.

In the age of technology, especially after experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic access to digital resources and learning techniques is very essential. 83.33% of the respondents said that they get easy access to digital resources and learning techniques and only 16.67 % of the respondents think that they were not having easy access to digital resources and learning techniques.

Major findings

1. According to study, the majority 66.67% of the respondents were enrolled in private schools.

2. The study shows that 50% of the respondents were partially satisfied and only 16.67 % of the respondents were fully satisfied with the role of teachers in providing adequate education to the children.

3. The study found that just 30% of respondents had a complete understanding of the Right to Education Act, while the majority of respondents (53.33%) did not.

4. The study shows that 36.67% of the respondents were fully satisfied with the current education system and only 13.33% of the respondents were not satisfied with the current education system.

5. According to the study, the majority of respondents (60%) were completely satisfied with the school's teaching technique, while 3.33% were dissatisfied.

6. The study shows that 53.33% of the respondents were fully satisfied with the infrastructure of the school and only 6.67% of the respondents were not satisfied with it.

7. The study shows that the majority 70% of the respondents said that teachers motivate them for further studies and only 6.67% of the respondents said that they were not being motivated by the teachers for further studies at all.

8. The study shows that the majority 86.66% of the respondents were taught about the role of education in their life and only 6.67% of the respondents were not being taught

about the role of education in their life.

Suggestions

- Improving teacher training in India by creating and following national standards for teacher education that provide a consistent and high-quality training experience across several regions.

- Develop teacher education programs that emphasize current teaching approaches, student-centered learning, and technology integration in the classroom to familiarize educators with digital tools and resources that can enhance teaching and learning. The curriculum should be designed to meet the needs of 21st-century education while also catering to students' different learning styles.

- Recognize and reward teachers who demonstrate exceptional dedication, innovative teaching practices, and a positive impact on student outcomes. This can boost morale and encourage teachers to continually improve.

- Create and implement policies that prioritize rural education and allocate adequate resources and funding by the government.

- Address systemic challenges such as unequal resource and finance distribution between urban and rural areas.

- The fees charged by Private Schools need rationalization and regulation.

- Need to improve the communication skills of the students which would be helpful in increasing their confidence.

- Special importance is to be given to imparting practical knowledge to the students so that they are prepared to tackle different situations in their lives.

- Special lectures and seminars should be arranged which should focus on the career of the students.

- The infrastructure of government schools is not as per the current requirements. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a policy along the lines of the Delhi Government that would focus on improving the infrastructure and teaching standards, so that Government schools can compete with Private Schools.

- There is a need for taking special safety measures for children, especially girls as parents nowadays are not sure about the safety of their children at school due to the surge in incidents.

- There should be proper implementation of awareness

campaigns regarding the rights and duties, especially the RTE Act.

- Proper implementation of the Digital India scheme by giving special teachings on digital learning to the students.

- Special attention should be given to providing values and morals-based education to the children.

A diversified strategy that considers the unique challenges and potential of the Indian educational system is required to improve teacher education. India can aim to provide its teachers with the abilities and knowledge necessary to give its students a high-quality education by utilizing these strategies.

Even while India has made strides in increasing access to education, there is still work to be done to guarantee that every child receives a quality education, according to the issues raised in the Global Education Monitoring Reports. It necessitates a multifaceted strategy that addresses socioeconomic hurdles to school access as well as policy changes, infrastructure investments in the education sector, teacher preparation programs, and community involvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, education holds undeniable significance in shaping individuals and societies, playing a multifaceted role in fostering socialization, promoting mental development, and instilling ethical values. As the famous quote suggests, the foundation of an ideal state rests upon the shoulders of its educated citizens, underlining the transformative power of education in nurturing responsible and engaged individuals. Abraham Lincoln's recognition of education's importance further reinforces its crucial role in a nation's progress. His early political statement advocating for education and his aspirations to enhance the education system exemplify the enduring impact education can have on a society's growth and prosperity. However, we must acknowledge that our education system faces various shortcomings and deficiencies such as student-teacher training with special reference to digital education and urban-rural disparities. The pace of reforms that have just started in Punjab needs to be increased with a special focus on implementation and maintenance. To ensure it fulfills its true potential, comprehensive reforms are imperative. By addressing these issues proactively, we can create a more equitable and effective education system that empowers all learners to reach their full potential. Education is not only a key to personal growth but also the bedrock of a prosperous and thriving society. By

prioritizing education and continuously striving to improve it, we pave the way for a brighter, more enlightened future for generations to come.

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