Online Teaching in a Pandemic World: A Comparison of two Private Schools in Odisha

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to understand the online teaching process that became the new normal due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is based on a comparison of online mode of teaching in two private schools in Bhubaneswar, Odisha over a six-month period. These schools were selected through snowball sampling and classes were observed online to understand how teachers disseminate knowledge to students in the online medium. Stark differences were observed in the way online classes were held in the two schools in terms of the availability of electronic gadgets and internet connectivity. Highlighting the conflict theory in sociology of education, this article argues that online mode of teaching has only deepened the inequality that schools generally reproduce.

Keywords: Pedagogy, online classrooms, inequality, accessibility.

Introduction

Education undoubtedly is one of the most important forces in any society. It is a symbol of societal progress and acts as a marker of how developed a society is. There have been numerous policies by stakeholders at the global, national, and local levels to make education accessible and improve its quality. It is important to analyze how the processes of teaching-learning affect students to ensure quality education reaches all irrespective of

their socio-economic backgrounds. To understand the same, understanding the physical space of schools is critical. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, classrooms as physical spaces vanished for some time due to the social distancing norms aimed at containing the pandemic. The only other option for government and private schools was shifting to the online mode of teaching and learning.

In 2020, with the shutting down of physical classroom spaces, digital platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, etc. were used to create virtual classrooms. These virtual classrooms demanded the availability of electronic gadgets (smartphones, laptops, tablets, etc), internet data, or Wi-Fi. These resources became a prerequisite to schooling, not only for higher classes but also for kindergarten and pre-schoolers. The education system in India thus saw a massive shift in terms of pedagogy which also meant that the responsibility of teachers increased manifold. Teachers were not only responsible for providing knowledge to students but they also had to engage the students and retain their attention and interest in learning in the virtual medium.

Situating in the context of the pandemic, this study compares the schooling practices of two private schools - Dayananda Anglo Vedic, (D.A.V) affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), offering English medium of instruction, and Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandira (SSVM), affiliated to Shiksha Vikas Samiti, offering instruction in Odia. It focuses on studying how teachers have been disseminating educational content from textbooks in online classrooms. The conflict theory of education highlights the unequal role of education and how schools reproduce existing inequalities in society. The study aims to highlight how the pandemic has further escalated such inequalities through a focus on the curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation methods used in the two schools located in Bhubaneswar.

Context

Schooling practices comprise curriculum, pedagogy, and extra-curricular activities. This study focuses only on pedagogy and limits itself to online teaching. While most Odia medium schools are affiliated with the Government of Odisha, a few private Odia medium schools called Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandira (SSVM) are affiliated to the state level "Shiksha Vikas Samiti" (SVS) of the "Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh" (RSS). However, unlike other states, the SSVMs use the same textbooks as used in Odisha government schools. They use some additional books of SVS on Vedic Maths, Moral Education etc. The study covers mainly history and political science subjects in sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

Methodology

The present study is an exploratory research that has used a qualitative framework. Since this study is a part of the doctoral thesis of the researcher, it involves an ethnographic account

of the pedagogic practices of the two above-mentioned schools. Classroom observations have been used extensively as a part of the research methodology. Since schools were shut and classes conducted on virtual platforms due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the study has included observations from the virtual classrooms as well. This article focuses on the observations from the virtual classrooms over a six-month period including a study of the textbooks used in the classroom. It has been informed by in-depth interviews of teachers who teach history and political science to sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Two principals were interviewed to understand how they dealt with the restructuring of the schooling system during the pandemic. The researcher has also had access to the WhatsApp groups that were used to provide information to students on a regular basis. During the pandemic, accessibility to schools became an issue, so the researcher used snowball sampling to select the two schools for the study and gained access to the virtual platforms that were being used for online teaching. The researcher also interacted with teachers of other schools to know about the commencement and continuation of their online classes.

Findings

This section will discuss the steps taken by the Odisha government regarding online teaching and compare the online teaching practices of the two above-mentioned schools. Odisha launched 'Shiksha Sanjog Program (SSP)' in which teaching-learning materials were shared with students from different classes through WhatsApp. This program received appreciation from across the country, however, its efficacy remains unclear. Despite the initial perception of the success of SSP, the government could provide materials only to 36% of students in grades I to VIII. The Annual Status of Education Report of 2021 claimed that only 46.5 percent of Odisha's students have access to smartphones at all times. Such findings also highlight the severe educational loss due to the shift to virtual classrooms. The comparison of online teaching between the two schools helps us understand this further.

The research set out to explore how teachers were sharing information from textbooks to students in online classrooms? The DAV school located in an urban neighborhood ranks in the top five pass percentages amongst private CBSE schools in Bhubaneswar. Interviews with teachers revealed that their school started online classes in April 2020, initially through WhatsApp and later they also used Zoom, Google classroom, Tata ClassEdge, and YouTube to teach students. The teachers learned to use these platforms with the help of their Computer Science colleagues and expressed that they were technologically savvy. WhatsApp groups were formed for each section of a grade and class teachers, subject teachers, and parents were added. The groups became the platform for sharing information related to school opening, classes, timetables, examinations, notebook/homework collections, and school notices. Notes prepared by the teachers were shared with the students through these groups.

It was observed that DAV follows a structured routine. There are five classes in a day and the school runs from 9.40 am till 2 pm. The first ten minutes, even during online classes, are

reserved for prayers so the first period starts from 9.50 am. Each period lasts for 40 minutes, and each subject teacher has a particular Zoom link and password which are mentioned in the timetable. They are used by the students to log in. The teachers are required to teach by making notes or points which they generally show to students either through Microsoft PowerPoint or Word. Later these files are shared with students in their WhatsApp groups, and the students are supposed to write notes in their classwork book. The teacher makes a note of the number of participants in the online classroom and asks a particular student, who is generally referred to as the attendance monitor to take screenshots of the students present in his/her class and send her images after the class ends. Although not mandatory, teachers often ask students to switch on their videos to make sure that they are present and can engage in online classroom participation. The teacher ensures that after a particular topic/chapter is taught, related videos are shown to students, e.g. videos related to Prithviraj Chauhan, Indus Valley Civilization, or the various organs of the Central Government have been shown. These videos are generally from Tata ClassEdge or YouTube.

The students, sometimes have to share their homework through Google Classrooms, however, most often, the class teacher fixes a specific date when parents are supposed to submit the classwork and homework notebooks to the school. The parents, then collect those notebooks after the teacher has assessed these. It is important to note that even though schools are shut, teachers are required to be in school, bring their own laptops, and conduct online teaching. The internet connectivity provided by the school often does not work properly, and teachers have to use their phone's data instead. There are also online exams. These generally are multiple choice questions; the google link is shared to students and they have to write answers within a particular period (before the link expires), keeping their video cameras on. From this description, it is clear that students and teachers seem to have "successfully" adapted to the new normal of online teaching. Teachers ask, revise and scold students even during online classes and even though students speak about how they miss physical classrooms, educational content is transmitted more or less regularly through online teaching. The course is completed in time and teachers also engage in revision classes before exams.

However, one sees a glaringly different picture at Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandira (SSVM). This school is also located in an urban setting, merely five kilometers from DAV, but students here tend to be from economically disadvantaged sections. DAV's monthly fees are around INR 5000 and SSVM's roughly around INR 940. Based on teacher interviews, it is evident here too that WhatsApp remains an important digital platform for online teaching. Here, WhatsApp groups are made on the basis of grades, so students belonging to different sections (generally there are four sections in each grade) are part of one group. These groups are operated by one "admin" who sends information related to timetables, exams and notes, and other information to the students. In SSVM too, online classes started in April 2020 and teachers were taught how to use digital platforms by the "Shiksha Vikas Samiti" (SVS). However, in SSVM there is no fixed timetable. Generally, the admin of the group sends the timetable the night before, where class timings are not mentioned. It is only on the same day that the admin shares the Google Meet link and asks students to join. There are three classes in a day, which occur for half an hour, with no fixed timing. Sometimes

classes start at 8.40 am in the morning and sometimes they start at 9.20 am or even later at 10.30 am. In online classes, there are more than 70 or 80 students since students of all sections attend the classes at the same time. The teachers never switch on their video, nor do they ask students to. The teacher teaches a topic by reading from the prescribed textbook; there is no use of software like Microsoft Word or PowerPoint. Sometimes, when a teacher begins revision by asking students questions from the text, more than half of the students exit the classroom. Sometimes, teachers do not take classes through Google Meet but rather share the notes of the topic that was to be taught through WhatsApp, and these are images of their handwritten notes.

Like in DAV, here too, parents are asked to submit their wards' notebooks and collect it after they have been assessed by the teacher. Teachers have to come to the school to conduct online classes. However, all teachers do not have personal laptops and generally use one which the school provides. Exams are conducted through WhatsApp. The admin sends an image of the question paper to the students and they are required to write the answers on paper which the parents have to submit to the school. A teacher confessed that everyone in the school knows that the students copy during examinations, but he asserted that copying is much better than educational loss. He talks about how only elite schools have been able to cope up with online teaching, while government and private schools like SSVM bear the burden of witnessing educational loss. This is not only true for rural areas but also for cities like Bhubaneswar. One teacher explained that the reason they have only 30 minute online classes is that many parents cannot afford expensive data packs or Wi-Fi connectivity at home. This is also why all notes are shared by teachers through WhatsApp in image format.

The differences in following a timetable, number of classes per day, duration of a class, use of various pedagogic tools, conduct of examinations, etc. is evident. DAV appears to have fully adapted itself to the pandemic situation while SSVM strives to provide online teaching to all its students. Such a difference is due to the vastly different settings (socio-economic conditions of parents and teachers, medium of instruction, affiliated educational board, school's history and ideology and other factors) that the two schools are in, which affects the schooling process and thus the educational experience of students. This further reiterates the unequal character of the schooling system.

 This in turn questions the meritocratic claims of education. The functionalist theory of education argues that by focusing on the ideas of capability, hard work and effort; education helps students to attain success in their life. Such an idea is asserted by Talcott Parsons (1968) who believes that schools, by focusing on value of achievement and value of equality of opportunity helps students to prepare for their future roles in a society and move beyond their ascribed status. Such a view has been criticized by others, who highlight the conflict theory of education. The structural inequalities in society often make it impossible for students belonging to certain backgrounds to have access to appropriate and proper pedagogic tools. For instance, 2020 saw a high rise in student suicides. This was so, because many students, felt hopeless due to their lack of access to the new teaching system. The above study highlights how schools tend to be sites of politics. As Althusser (1971) argues, schools, in the modern era, have become a way in which the capitalist society reproduces

itself and its inherent structural inequalities by becoming the "Ideological State Apparatus". There is a plethora of social science research that highlight the unequal character of schooling and schooling practices (Apple 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Kumar 1991, Bowles & Gintis 1976; Pathak 2002; etc). This article brings out such unequal character of schooling by focusing on the pedagogic aspect of two schools situated in two divergent settings. This study tries to establish the argument put forth by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) that students belonging to a certain class, and possessing cultural capital tend to perform better in schools. In this study, DAV's students, from socio-economically forward groups tend to possess various gadgets that help them attend online classes. This aids them in their future, while students from socio-economically backward classes bear the consequences of the digital divide that was already inherent before the Covid-19 pandemic. This digital divide has further accentuated the educational loss during the pandemic, especially for the students from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds ◆

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