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## Widening opportunity gap between students due to Covid-19

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### ABSTRACT

*The covid 19 shutdown has created far-reaching changes in the education system. There occurred a sudden shift to the online mode of instruction in the blink of an eye. The study intends to find out evidence of any kind of disparity in the distribution of academic opportunity between lower-income students and their better-off peers. It is conducted by using a qualitative research approach. Economic turbulence caused by the covid-19 situation has led to many economic issues in an average family and it has a direct effect on students' personal and academic life. The quality of e-learning services and facilities provided to the students are also assessed as a part of the study.*

**Keywords:** Opportunity Gap, E-Learning Facilities, Covid-19

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The education system in India is facing many challenging issues. Distributive equity of education facilities both in quantity and quality is an existing issue in India. It is noteworthy that estimates of income inequality place India amongst the countries with the highest inequality internationally. India has made substantial gains in health and education over the past few decades, but the picture is not uniformly positive. Disparities persist across social groups, states, and rural-urban areas, reflecting inequalities in the opportunity to access basic services. (Chancel, 2017) The roots of distributive equity can be traced to the widening economic inequality in the Indian economy. Covid 19 has affected the Indian education system multi-dimensionally. The current turmoil created by the pandemic is unique and in most ways it lot more severe than any recent experience. Covid 19 has created serious after-effects on the education system which is already lamed with many socio-economic problems. Unemployment financial crisis and health issues due to the covid crisis has affected students' personal and academic life. Academic and co-curricular activities conducted mainly in school suddenly got shifted to online- a new platform. It has advantages and disadvantages of its own. The study intends to understand the disparities in the distribution of academic facilities and opportunities between higher-income and lower-income students.

It is in these challenging situations of economic insecurity due to economic slowdown caused by covid19 that students (and teachers) were suddenly transitioning to remote learning, aggravating economic disparity in education opportunity: the "digital divide." The "digital divide" means that some children do not have access to the devices or internet services needed to operate online—and there is a double digital divide that arises from the fact that low-income children are more prone to this issue. (Weiss, 2020)

### 2. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the economic issues of students due to covid 19
2. To examine the level of disparities in accessing academic facilities among poor and non-poor students
3. To understand the quality of e-learning facilities provided to students.

### 3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Covid 19 has affected the education system in many ways. It has led to updates and alterations in the teaching-learning process. The changes that happened in the education system due to the pandemic are surprising and sudden. The pandemic has changed the mode

of instruction from offline to online almost overnight. Lack of preparedness and planning in such a massive and sudden change has created a lot of concerning issues in the academic field.

It has aggravated the already existing disparities in opportunities among students based on economic background. The opportunity gap in accessing online facilities of learning will not be a surprising outcome because economic inequality exists in India in its gravest form. The economic insecurities caused by the current economic downturn has affected students personal and academic life. The study tries to understand the economic issues of students and the distributive inequalities in accessing online learning facilities among students. The study also attempts to examine the quality of e-learning facilities provided to students

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A descriptive study is conducted to analyze the socio-economic issues created by the pandemic and its effects on students. The study is entirely based on primary data. The data was collected from 3 schools situated in Kozhikode, Kerala. Students and teachers were interviewed. A qualitative research approach is made to understand the available academic opportunities to students. Open-ended questions, focus group discussions, and observations were used to collect the data.

#### **5. LIMITATIONS**

The study was conducted during the covid 19 pandemics and hence has its limitations in data collection. Disparities in opportunities are limited mainly to economic issues, although there are underlying social and cultural aspects causing the disparities. Exacerbating gaps of opportunities can also be traced to gender discrimination apart from sticking only to economic reasons. The quality of the study could have been increased by acknowledging and including students as a heterogeneous group and examining the various aspects related to it.

#### **6. PERSISTING ISSUES IN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Education is the most important component out of various components of social infrastructure. The well-educated and properly trained manpower can accelerate the pace of economic development. Despite our best efforts, our educational development remains at a low level.

**Lack of funds:** The lack of sufficient funds is the main problem in the development of education. The outlay for education in Five Year Plans has been decreasing. Due to insufficient funds, most educational institutions lack infrastructure, science equipment, and libraries, etc. Due to this reason, desired results cannot be achieved.

**Expensive higher education:** University, professional and technical education has become costly in India. The fee structure of technical and professional institutes like IIM's is quite high IIM's charge Rs. 2 lakh per semester for MBA classes. It is beyond the reach of the common man. The privatization of higher education has led to the growth of profit-hungry entrepreneurs. Now a day's higher education is a much costly affair.

**Mass illiteracy:** Despite constitutional directives and economic planning we are not able to achieve cent percent literacy. -Even now 35 percent of people remain illiterate. In India, the number of illiterates is almost one-third of the total illiterates in the world. Advanced countries are 100% literate; the position in India is quite dismal.

**Wastage of resources:** Our education system is based on General Education. The dropout rate is very high at the primary and secondary levels. Most of the students in the 6-14 age groups leave the school before completing their education. It leads to wastage of financial and human resources.

**General education-oriented:** Our educational system is of General Education in nature. The development of technical and vocational education is quite unsatisfactory. So our education is unproductive. Hence the number of educated unemployed persons is increasing day by day. This has become a great concern for Govt.

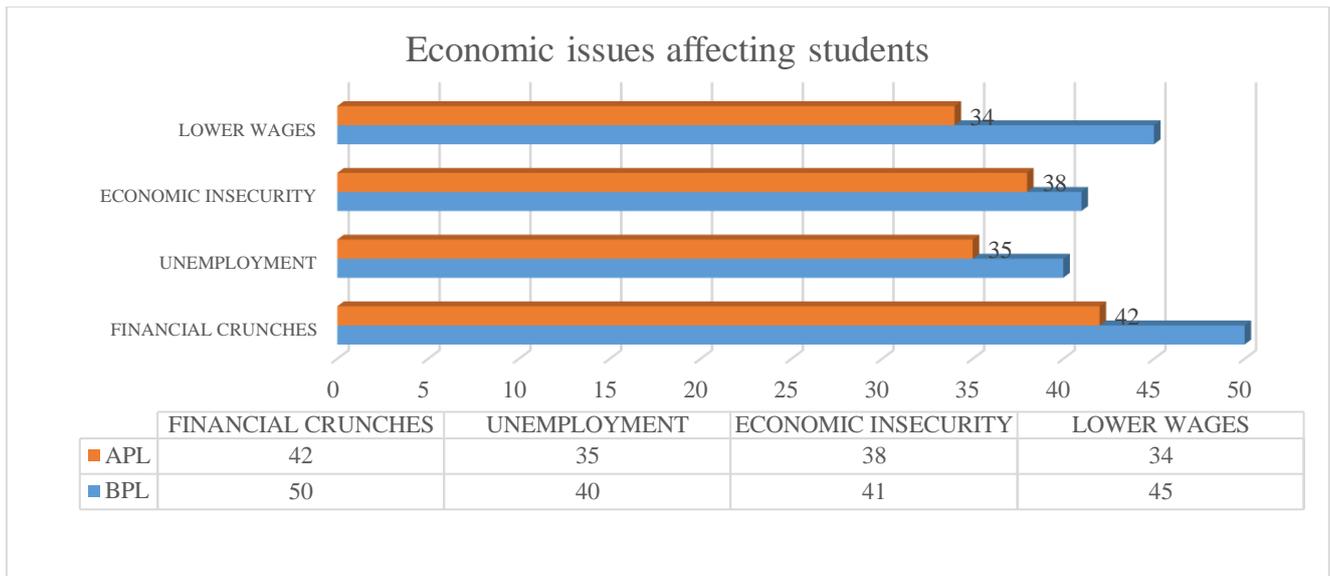
**Problems of primary education:** Our primary education is ridden with too many problems. A large number of primary schools have no buildings what to talk of basic facilities like drinking water, urinals, and electricity, furniture and study materials, etc. Large numbers of primary schools are single teacher schools and many schools are even without teachers. So the drop rate is very high and a cause of concern. Concluding, we can say that there is a quantitative expansion of education but in qualitative development, we are still lagging.

#### **7. COVID 19 AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES OF STUDENTS**

The pandemic has created many economic issues affecting almost everyone. It has led to the general stagnation in the economy creating unemployment and economic insecurities. People living in all realms of life are affected by the economic downturn. Students are one of the most affected categories in all aspects. The job insecurities and unemployment situations in the households have directly affected the students. Most of the parents faced financial crunches due to the dismal economy. The financial crunches caused by the pandemic have made the students mentally upset, creating a negative vibe in their learning atmosphere. The level of income has declined during the covid period for 90% of the households. Health issues caused by the covid have affected many of the households. It seems that safety nets and unemployment allowances provided by the system are not doing well in providing financial relief during the pandemic.

A sudden change from the offline mode of instruction to the online mode of instruction created anxiety among students and teachers. Students at first hand were not equipped to fit into the online mode of learning. Lack of adequate financial capacity to access e-

learning facilities was visible among students. Necessities like internet access, laptop/ smartphone/ tablet... were unaffordable to a majority of the students.



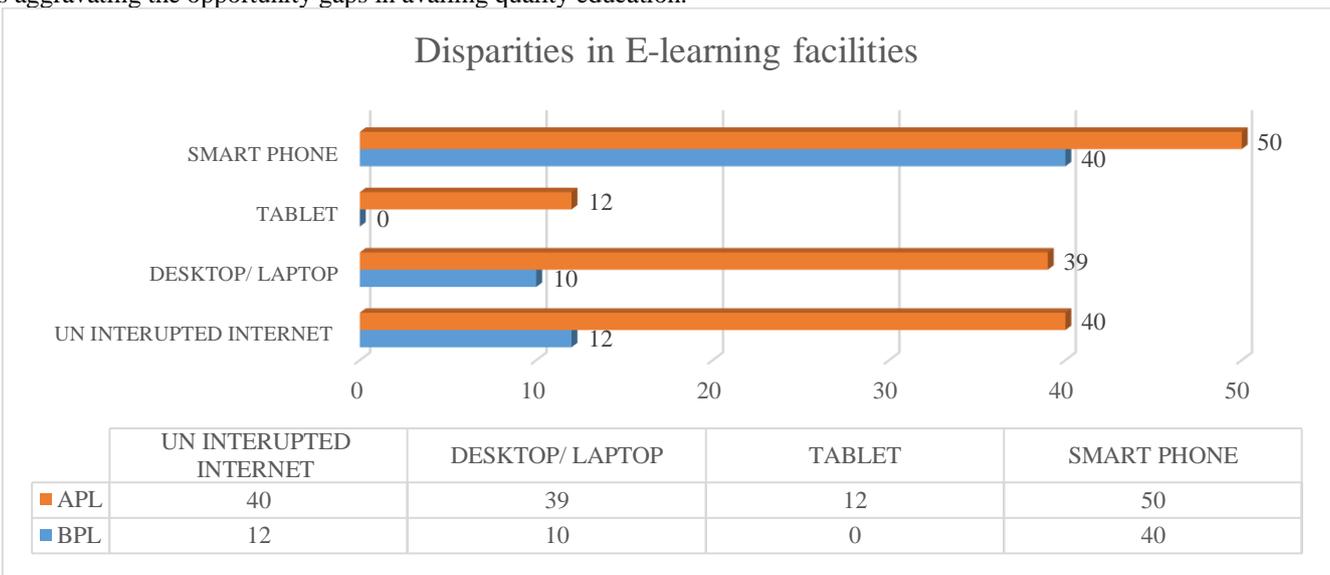
Financially better-off students and poor students are very much affected by the economic slowdown created by the covid crisis. Most of the financially backward students are affected by the financial crunches that happened in the households. Unemployment, and increasing insecurity of existing jobs, lower wages are major issues.

**8. WIDENING OPPORTUNITY GAP AND COVID 19**

It is observed that there are disparities in available e-learning facilities between poor and non-poor students exacerbating disparity in opportunity gap is evidenced from a lack of basic facilities to avail online education by poor students. It has created a digital divide between lower-income students from their financially better-off peers.

Uninterrupted internet service is a basic necessity to conduct instructions online. Most of the poor households are burdened with incurring expenditures coupled with a lack of regular and sufficient income. The expenses to purchase a smartphone or tablet is unaffordable for most families. There exists a lack of sufficient gadgets. Already existing gadgets in a home are overused because more than one child is depending on a gadget in most of the families. Low-income families are struggling to obtain a computer or other device for each child. The share of families lacking an internet connection higher among poor families. It is also observed that there are inadequate facilities at home for learning for most of the students belonging to poor families.

A distributive gap existing between poor and non-poor students in availing academic facilities online leads to serious equity issues. It is aggravating the opportunity gaps in availing quality education.



**9. QUALITY OF ONLINE LEARNING**

Online education can open doors that were once closed for many non-traditional students, but broad access to poorly designed online courses will exacerbate achievement gaps and undermine the fundamental promise of higher education (Ortagus, 2020). The quality of online teaching and learning activities is identified by considering different aspects. The content of the academic material, presentation style, usage of updated instruction technology, usage of adequate gadgets, method of online evaluation and standardized test conducted, etc. are some of the main factors detrimental in increasing the teaching-learning quality.

It is observed that school teachers are not fully utilizing the online instructional techniques. Classes, seminars workshops, and other activities to expand the knowledge of teaching online are going on. Limited knowledge on how to use the facilities resulting from lack of sufficient training has compromised the providence of quality material to students. Most of the teachers are not well prepared and trained to teach in online mode. Teachers find it uncomfortable and difficult to manage classes effectively through online mode. Similarly, (Asogwa, 2011) found that the major challenge for optimizing e-learning is the lack of requisite skills of teachers. The teachers are not as skilled and thorough in the understanding, operation, and applications of the packages as they are supposed to use. Teachers who are using materials like google classroom, own YouTube channels, zoom meet, or google meet to conduct classes and upload notes, etc. are limited. Soft wares to conduct test papers and evaluations are not familiar among teachers and students. The quality of online learning has to improve a lot more. Continuous classes online, especially when classes become less interactive, creates a lack of motivation and enthusiasm in students. Students who are having issues with concentration and attention disorder find it very difficult to effectively utilize online learning provided. Lack of adequate basic facilities like internet connection, gadgets and solo room facility, etc... are the major challenges hindering quality learning.

## **10. SUMMARY AND FINDINGS**

The grim macro-economic situation that occurred due to the pandemic has created short-term and long-term changes in the teaching-learning process. The shift from offline to online sessions of classes has its positive and negative aspects to the education system. Lack of preparedness and rapidness is the feature of the change and it has caused several negative effects on students' academic life, eclipsing the positive effects of the online mode of education. Firstly, the economic downturn caused by covid has crushed the income budget of the average family and the financial crunches had made it difficult for a low-income family to facilitate their children with any e-learning equipment. Secondly, it is observed that there is a disparity of available e-learning facilities between low-income students and their better-off peers. This can potentially lead to the widening of the already existing opportunity and the achievement gap. Such a situation can distort the distributional equity of academic facilities. Thirdly, the quality of online education is not satisfactory from the study. Teaching and learning experience has to become more comfortable and familiar with e-learning facilities. Lack of training to use e-learning platforms is a hurdle in providing quality education. Usage of more advanced technologies to give instruction is not common among teachers.

## **11. SUGGESTIONS**

- Teachers should be given the training to use a learning management system (LMS).
- E-learning facilities should be ensured to all the students.
- The psychological needs of the students should not be neglected.
- De motivation and attention issues can easily occur to students while attending classes online. This can bring down the effectiveness of the learning process. So, standardized tests and motivation classes should be given to students from time to time.
- Covid cells should be formed in every educational institution and it should try to understand issues of students inflicted by the pandemic.

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