A Qualitative Exploration of the Impact of Virtual Schooling during the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children, Teachers, and Caregivers in Darjeeling, India

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INTRODUCTION

Previous literature elucidates how child development is largely dictated by the child's closest social sphere, including family and school life (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic largely changed how caregivers and teachers interacted with children through increased in-person time at home and virtual interactions, respectively. There is a need to address how shifts in societal dynamics impact children's educational and behavioral progress, specifically in areas where teachers hold especially important positions. Conducted in Darjeeling, India, Teachers Leading the Frontlines (Tealeaf) is a task-shifting intervention that equips teachers to identify and support students with mental health needs. Tealeaf uniquely positions teachers as both mental health and education providers, expanding the roles and importance of teachers. While studies have shown the efficacy of Tealeaf, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent transition to online schooling is believed to have had significant impacts on the social dynamics among teachers, caregivers, and children more broadly, including within Tealeaf.

OBJECTIVE

This study aims to explore how virtual schooling impacted societal structures and how it added perceived stressors (if any) or was perceived to affect the various stakeholders in Darjeeling, India, such as the area's teachers, caregivers, and children.

METHODS

During the pandemic, spanning from March 2020 to April 2021, a series of semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted with principals, teachers, and parents/caregivers. A codebook was generated based on key initial themes of the study (e.g. Education-Virtual Learning, Social Strain, Education-Learning Gaps). Inductive content analysis was conducted to systematically categorize and analyze interview transcripts to identify cross-code emerging themes related to observed changes in societal stressors and the addition of stressors. This analysis provided a qualitative understanding of how online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted various stakeholders (children, parents, teachers) in Darjeeling, India.

Table 1. Key Themes and Subthemes Associated with Shifts in Societal Relations and Perceptions of Children's Education and Behavior
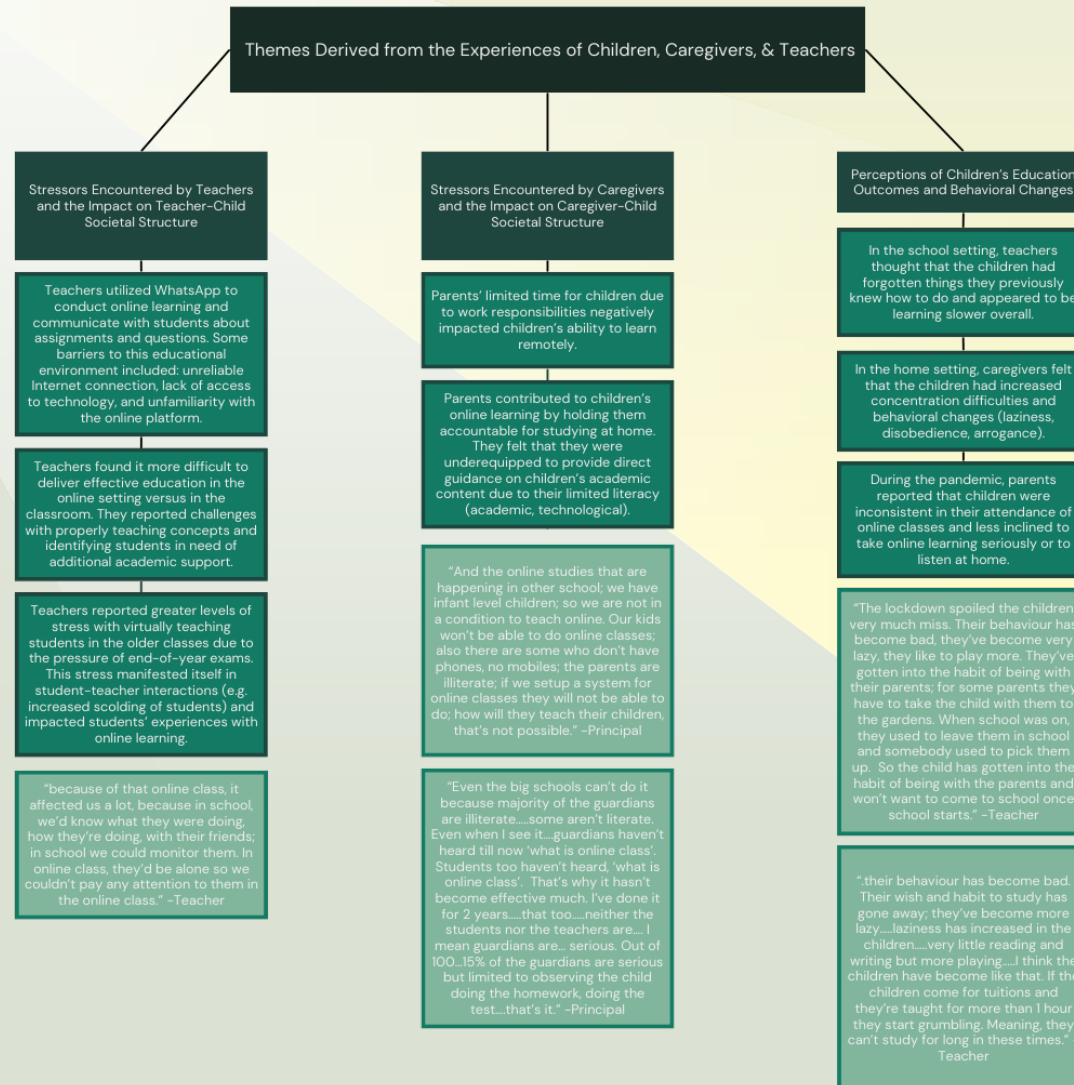
Themes Derived from the Experiences of Children, Caregivers, & Teachers

Stressors Encountered by Teachers and the Impact on Teacher–Child Societal Structure

Teachers utilized WhatsApp to conduct online learning and communicate with students about assignments and questions. Some barriers to this educational environment included: unreliable Internet connection, lack of access to technology, and unfamiliarity with the online platform.

Teachers found it more difficult to deliver effective education in the online setting versus in the classroom. They reported challenges with properly teaching concepts and identifying students in need of additional academic support.

Teachers reported greater levels of stress with virtually teaching students in the older classes due to the pressure of end-of-year exams. This stress manifested itself in student-teacher interactions (e.g. increased scolding of students) and impacted students' experiences with online learning.

"because of that online class, it affected us a lot, because in school, we'd know what they were doing, how they're doing, with their friends; in school we could monitor them. In online class, they'd be alone so we couldn't pay any attention to them in the online class." –Teacher

Stressors Encountered by Caregivers and the Impact on Caregiver–Child Societal Structure

Parents' limited time for children due to work responsibilities negatively impacted children's ability to learn remotely.

Parents contributed to children's online learning by holding them accountable for studying at home. They felt that they were underequipped to provide direct guidance on children's academic content due to their limited literacy (academic, technological).

"And the online studies that are happening in other school; we have infant level children; so we are not in a condition to teach online. Our kids won't be able to do online classes; also there are some who don't have phones, no mobiles; the parents are illiterate; if we setup a system for online classes they will not be able to do; how will they teach their children, that's not possible." –Principal

"Even the big schools can't do it because majority of the guardians are illiterate......some aren't literate. Even when I see it...guardians haven't heard till now 'what is online class'. Students too haven't heard, 'what is online class'. That's why it hasn't become effective much. I've done it for 2 years....that too.....neither the students nor the teachers are.... I mean guardians are... serious. Out of 100...15% of the guardians are serious but limited to observing the child doing the homework, doing the test....that's it." –Principal

Perceptions of Children's Education Outcomes and Behavioral Changes

In the school setting, teachers thought that the children had forgotten things they previously knew how to do and appeared to be learning slower overall.

In the home setting, caregivers felt that the children had increased concentration difficulties and behavioral changes (laziness, disobedience, arrogance).

During the pandemic, parents reported that children were inconsistent in their attendance of online classes and less inclined to take online learning seriously or to listen at home.

"The lockdown spoiled the children very much miss. Their behaviour has become bad, they've become very lazy, they like to play more. They've gotten into the habit of being with their parents; for some parents they have to take the child with them to the gardens. When school was on, they used to leave them in school and somebody used to pick them up. So the child has gotten into the habit of being with the parents and won't want to come to school once school starts." –Teacher

"...their behaviour has become bad. Their wish and habit to study has gone away; they've become more lazy.....laziness has increased in the children.....very little reading and writing but more playing.....I think the children have become like that. If the children come for tuitions and they're taught for more than 1 hour they start grumbling. Meaning, they can't study for long in these times." –Teacher

Figure 1. Map of India Specifically Noting Darjeeling, India

DISCUSSION

The inductive analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a common overarching theme of virtual schooling during COVID-19 impacting the Darjeeling community through its detrimental impact on relationships among these various stakeholders. There was an overall consensus that the shift to online learning during the pandemic specifically strained the children's relationship with their primary adult contacts: parents and teachers. Both caregivers and school staff expressed that these changing social dynamics manifested in problematic behavior changes and decreased educational outcomes in the children, as well as increased stressors for themselves regarding how to support the children in this new environment.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings emphasize that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shift to online schooling, changing societal structures centered on both the teacher-child and caregiver-child relationships. Online learning exacerbated stressors regarding the lack of resources provided to teachers and caregivers' illiteracy and long work hours. These changes to societal structures and addition of stressors on both teachers and caregivers was associated with the perceived diminishing educational outcomes and behavioral issues in children in Darjeeling, India. Recognizing how online schooling impacts relationships within a specific cultural context is vital in understanding how to adapt future interventions to improve children's educational and behavioral progress, whether for everyday use or as other public health crises arise.

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