Exploring the Avenues for Social Work Intervention in Education in Emergencies: Reflections from A Post Pandemic Perspective

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Abstract

The Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic affected the people across the globe. Be it the number of deaths and infections, the disease posed a great threat to the people at large. Economic activities remained suspended for many months and imposed long spell of lockdowns forced people to adopt new set of living. Educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities were closed for face-to-face learning paving way to online mode of learning as an alternative.Given its magnitude and global spread, COVID19 resulted in a new set of social problems with both immediate and long-term consequences for key institutions of the society including education.

Social work as a profession tries to adopt skills and theories of human behavioral and social systems in resolving social problems. An attempt is made in this article to understand the role of social workers in different capacities in the context of corona pandemic with special focus on education. In the entire enterprise of education, this research article tries to study how teaching learning process has undergone a radical transition in a pandemic environment. The key focus of this research article is to find the need and relevance of professional social work practice to address the multiple set of problems in education posed by pandemic circumstances. It is anticipated that exploring interventions that will positively impact the lives of the stakeholders associated with education including students, teachers, parents, administrators and community at large will be significant. Social work profession being responsive to the naive and challenging social situations has to step in to play its instrumental role in addressing the pandemic/post-pandemic issues faced by educational institutions.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Social Work, Education, School closure, Intervention.*

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Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic emerged from the Wuhan city of China in 2019 and later on spread all over the world. The affected countries were caught off guards as the healthcare system faced a colossal crisis of unprecedented nature. To contain the spread of the virus the countries imposed strict lock down measures to restrict movement of people. Economic activities got paralyzed and owing to containment of the spread of the virus the educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities remained closed.

Social work professionals can perform multiple functions due to the complexity and dimensions of reality that exist in society. Their actions are focused on the solution of social problems and social change, which is a very extensive area of intervention, prevention, and assistance (Fernándezetal., 2012).

The unprecedented situation emanated by the pandemic demandedsocial workers to innovate in their intervention to reach out to the individuals and groups struggling to negotiate the challenges posed by the unusual calamity. On the one hand , social workers have to attend the professional call to attend people facing difficulty and on the other hand they ought to ensure their own safety and of their families as well. As strict lockdown measures denied people access to essential services in general, the individuals and groups relying on health care professionals and workers suffered a lot. Barriers in reaching out to the individuals in need of social work assistance posed varied challenges to social workers to carry out their professional duties.

Education and the Pandemic

Millions of students across the globe got affected by the closure of educational institutions. Not only students, teachers, parents, educational administrators, school support service providers including those who are directly or indirectly associated with educational institutions all suffered heavily.

The exigency and inevitable switchover to digital mode further exposed the inbuilt differences and deficiencies of the educational systems. The vast majority of students enrolled in public institutions were not prepared and ill equipped to the task to accommodate and adjust with online learning. Socio-economic disparities in societal groups forced majority of learners to be shelved from the mainstream of educational services. The digital divide with in the country poverty ridden communities finding it difficult to afford the cost of smart phones and internet charges, learning through digital platforms for vast population remained a distant dream. The widening gap in learning outcomes of children based on their socio-economic backgrounds became a major concern.

Globally, around 131 million schoolchildren in 11 countries missed three quarters of their in-person learning from March 2020 to September 2021. Among them, 59 per cent – or nearly 77 million – have missed almost all in-person instruction time. These 77 million students come from six countries. Among these countries, Bangladesh and the Philippines represent 62 million of the 77 million learners impacted. Around 27 per cent of countries continue to have schools fully or partially closed. Additionally,more than 870 million students at all levels are currently facing disruptions to their education. (UNESCO 2021)

School children around the world lost an estimated 1.8 trillion hours – and counting – of in-person learning, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. As a result, young learners have been cut off from their education and the other vital benefits schools provide. Girls face greater barriers to education and are more vulnerable to abuse such as domestic /gender-based violence when not in school. (ECW 2020)

Social Work Intervention in Emergencies:

Disasters of massive magnitude like COVID-19 affect people from all age groups and backgrounds. Some groups are potentially more vulnerable than the other groups. Children, Persons with Disability (PWD), patients admitted at hospitals, prisoners, migrants, refugees, elderly and people with some chronic physical or mental ailments are at greater risk to face threatening situations. People at institutional or rehabilitation centres availing care and therapies like orphanages and mental asylums find it extremely difficult to respond to emergency situations of ma made or natural calamities. Disaster preparedness and mitigations measures among such populations' poses a challenge for the professional social workers to intervene.

Professional social work encompasses a variety of roles towards helping people in distress. Vital public necessities when affected during disasters demand multiple ad diverse interventional strategies. Be it health care, social welfare services, legal aid, education etc. From awareness to advocacy, rescue operation to rehabilitation, sensitization to settlement, and information dissemination to identification of vulnerable groups – professional social workers are required to play their instrumental role.

Disaster and Disruptions in Education:

Education as system operates in a smooth and peaceful environment. Curricular and co-curricular activities at schools, colleges and universities are dependent on feasible conditions. Any untoward incident like a natural or man-made calamity including earthquake,

floods, epidemic, cyclone, war etc brings closure to the educational activities. When educational institutions remain closed for long time, the routine gets disturbed.

For families with scarcity of income, children completely get disconnected from studies. Parents find it difficult or impossible to meet basic needs struggle a lot. In such cases, children are at risk of becoming child labourers. It was witnessed during the recent pandemic that many school going children joined work force to support their families in crunch crisis. The loss of school space adversely affects children. Thus the number of drop out children increases in emergencies.

Traumatic experiences observed by children de-motivate the students to feel any interest in the studies. When children witness the loss of any family member ordestruction of the house, consequently it results in mild to chronic traumatic experiences. In such a state of mind, the attention not only gets diverted but long spells of sadness and anxiety sets result in drop outs. In case of forced migrations and devastation of the homes due to calamities, the make shift arrangements threaten the survival.Emigration becomes an unavoidable necessity. The issue of maladjustment among children in emergency at times promotes deviant behaviour.

School as Social Space

Apart from teaching learning activities, school offers conducive space for socialization to prosper. The bonding and network developed during the course of studies among students, staff, care givers directly and indirectly influence the overall personality of the learners. These trusting relationships address vital social and emotional needs of the children. The curriculum of the institution provides ample opportunities for learners to act and perform in individual and group activities. A sudden calamity resulting in closure of schools abruptly denies the learners to enjoy this *earned social space* and consequently social and emotional development gets hampered. The prolonged spell of closure of school adds to the emotional deficiency resulting in psycho-social problems among young children. Exploring alternative and parallel platforms that to some extent can compensate the emotional needs of children in emergencies demand social workers to thin out of box solutions. Student safety issues assume significance during emergencies. Social workers can play the role of intermediaries to augment the efforts of service providers in calamities like pandemic.

Avenues for social work intervention at educational institutions during emergencies:

- **Identify educational institution as a space for social work intervention** be it in-person or virtual mode.
- **e-Social Work**: Exploring the ways and means to reach out to population in need using appropriate ICT to improve remote interface.
- **Preparing Programmed and customised content** for target groups for dissemination of information
- **Orientation of Social Workers** to become tech savvy and assist learner support services facilitation
- **Institutional Collaboration** and coordination via digital connect
- **Vulnerability Profiling** : Identifying individuals and groups with high vulnerabilities of being disadvantaged vulnerability profiling as preparatory measure to respond to the emergencies can reduce the extent of damage or loss. Vulnerable groups like persons with disabilities (PWD) can be shifted to safer places/rehabilitation centres to reduce loss of human lives.
- **Addressing Digital Divide**: Aiding and exploring alternative modes for enhanced / remedial teaching,Community Classes, community work, resource management,
- **Networking and Collaboration** with organizations providing short term and long term support services during emergencies including government, NGO/INGO's etc.

To conclude, Covid-19 pandemic as a colossal calamity has opened new corridors of social work intervention to reach out to the populations in dire need assistance. Educational institutions like schools are instrumental in shaping the future of young generation. School social work as one of areas of social work profession needs to be revisited and reviewed in the context of pandemic. Addressing sudden and prolonged school closures, assessing the affect and aftermath of such closures on school children and exploring alternatives as a compensatory measure are some critical queries that need to be addressed.. These challenges demand widening the spectrum of scientific research undertaken by professional social workers. The lessons learnt from the corona pandemic will define and determine the trajectory of social work intervention in emergencies as a new found profession.

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