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Online Learning Throughout the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a trying time for the entire world, not only for healthcare workers but for educational professionals as well. Since early 2020, millions of children have been stuck inside their homes, unable to receive the in-person learning they have been accustomed to for so long. Those few schools who have been able to return to in-person classes must still approach the situation with extreme caution; each case of COVID-19 within the school can threaten to cause an outbreak if the student is not appropriately isolated and tested. During online classes, the level of difficulty has often been much higher because of the at-home environment which requires much more self-study and discipline. Exam results have been lower as well since students have struggled with managing their study habits. The fact that students have not been able to meet with friends and family members from different households has not helped the situation either. Due to this isolation, mental health has been at an all-time low, with the lack of social interaction causing illnesses such as depression. In addition to this, the largest issue with online learning has been the lack of resources. Children in many areas have not been able to access the Internet consistently and for long periods of time. Schools were often plagued by low online attendance because students were unable to sign-in to their online classes or complete their schoolwork. Large socio-economic divides in a multitude of countries prevents those from joining classes who are unable to afford electronic devices, as well as having the knowledge to operate them correctly.

Such a problem has been prevalent in India for the past year, with students of lower-income groups being unable to partake in the offering of online education. There has been a significant rise in the availability of electronic devices because of organizations and schools who have been donating to those students and families in need. Even after this, unfortunately, low internet access and unreliable electrical connections have left millions of students without classes and an access to proper schooling, impacting both their mental and social health. There has been nearly an enormous rise in mental health issues, with a study by the Indian Journal of Psychiatry which reports that 71.4% have had a negative impact on their mental health during this time. Both students and teachers emphasize, however, that no matter how stable their Internet connection may be, there is simply no getting around the fact that online learning is not as effective as that in actual school buildings. Students are unable to see the gestures and eye contact made by teachers, and often lose focus because of the lack of direct involvement. Teachers are constantly forced to deal with minimal interaction due to the confusion and misunderstandings about what is expected from the students online. There have been many cases reported where a student may join a class, but takes advantage of the fact that they can isolate themselves by turning off their camera and microphone. While online education and work may be the road of the future, there is still a significant gap between the potential in India and the current situation.

One of the organizations that has maintained a strong passion towards their cause has been Prabhat Foundation. As soon as it was announced that all classes were being moved online, the team at Prabhat immediately began implementing meeting and scheduling applications to train the parents of the students. This allowed them to get their alternative learning program back to being up-and-running in a minimal amount of time. However, there have been changes to Prabhat's model since the beginning of the pandemic. The most important change is that it is now much out of the educators' control how the students practice and study with their own time. Children are placed in front of the device and led through activities to help them continue practicing their literacy and mathematical knowledge, as well as their overall life skills. For the

students with physical impairments, physiotherapists guide the parents through different exercises and stretches that will allow the child to continue on the path to recovery. The primary challenges during this time have been the fact that it is difficult to focus for long periods of time in online classes, in addition to the unfortunate reality that a large number of people are unable to afford the proper equipment to join sessions. Another major challenge has been to teach the parents how to guide their children through physical therapy and educational activities. There have, however, been valuable lessons to take away from this experience of online learning. The boundaries of education are being overcome as people can study internationally while in their own home. This has made university education more accessible for a multitude of more people, allowing those students to elevate their quality of life. We can see that online education is a tool that is gaining more traction, yet it is undeniable that a student will learn substantially better when placed physically in the same room as a teacher and classmates. Since the environment of being in a school forces the brain to focus only on schoolwork, there are much less distractions and more attention given to the task at hand.

Though online learning is still considered inferior to in-person education, it is still a valuable skill that each person should learn to be better equipped for what the future may hold. As we rely more and more on technology, many schools, workplaces, and universities are moving their entire operations online, effectively stopping the in-person aspect of their community. This shows that more places may follow suit, meaning that society must be technologically literate enough to be able to adapt if such an eventuality becomes a reality. While being well-versed with electronic devices and the Internet used to be considered a niche skill, it is slowly becoming a necessary factor when potential employees are being hired. To conclude, while Prabhat and many other organizations have been performing effectively online, in-person education is widely considered to be more beneficial for both the students and the teacher. That being said, it always depends on the student which type of learning will be better for them. In-person classes promote more focus and interaction, while online lessons allow different topics to be recorded and have videos put up for reference later. In addition, online education allows the cultivation of technological literacy, a required skill in this advancing society. It is up to the student how well they can take advantage of the resources available to them.