Initiative 29

Engaging with the Community to overcome challenges during Pandemic

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The School Context

Government Higher Secondary School is located in Kottayi village of Palakkad district of Kerala. It is managed by the Department of Education. It is located in a rural area. The school is Co-educational. The school is located in an extremely rural, agricultural area in Palakkad District in Kerala, and has to face many challenges in this global pandemic.

Challenges faced due to School Closure

As GHSS Kottayi is located in an extremely rural, agricultural area in Palakkad District in Kerala, has to face many challenges in this global pandemic.

Challenges in Academic Area: -

Pupils' Related
The absence of physical interaction and social connectivity: - The lack of face-to-face interaction during a lockdown, children found it challenging to sustain school interactions through the virtual platforms. Most of the students, especially those from remote areas, were not regular in online learning which kept them out of this learning stream.

Stress during Coronavirus: At the beginning of lockdown our students were feeling overwhelmed, anxious, scared, uncertain, or stressed wondering what will be the future education. They were distressed and in a confused state, about their classes and future education. Most of the students belong to economically poor families. Frequent telephone calls from students revealed that fear of the spread of this pandemic, disciplinary lockdown, and delays in getting back to school are affecting the academic performance of the students, which in turn, leads to mental stress. Students were also faced with the death of their parents/grandparents/relatives/friends due to covid19 or being unwell or hospitalized, which affected their mental and physical health as well. Some of them suffered due to the loss of their parent's jobs.

Fear of lacking years, admission process, exam procedures, employment prospectus, etc remain unclear and many worry about their future. Students' friendships also deteriorated, as the peer groups are an important source of support for the students, many lacked this support and experiencing loneliness.

Lack of physical exercise: Many students no longer have access to physical exercise in the sports grounds as they did before.

Migration to Virtual learning: School closures have been a common tool in the battle against this pandemic. Yet the cost and benefits remain insufficiently known Lack of Digital devices: Most of the students belong to socially backward and economically weaker sections. For them, accessibility of smartphones, TV with cable connection, laptops, tabs, etc to facilitate online learning was difficult. This limited curriculum equipment on the part of students creates a vital problem.

Schools and teachers have been struggling to adopt online-based solutions for instruction. Stable networks, cost of internet, quality of the network, etc. raised great challenges.

Digital Literacy and Technical issues: Lack of digital literacy and constant technical issues on virtual platforms often disrupted the learning flow.

Distractions on the part of students: Another great challenge we faced was an abundant distraction and lack of discipline among students resulted in learning disruption.

Challenges faced by Teachers

With the rapid spread of covid19, sudden shutdown of schools at very short notice, and forced transmission towards online classes, led to a change in the relationship between teachers and students. Schools in remote areas have to face many difficulties. The main challenges faced by teachers include lack of technical skills, inadequate training in virtual teaching, lack of ICT devices both for teachers and students, shortage of learning materials, and absence of students' interest, physical attention, etc.

Teachers also faced a drop in participation in the learning process, an inability to determine students' psychological and emotional needs, and an inability to direct and instruct them timely, on the virtual platform. Difficulties were also faced in moving from conventional mode to virtual learning, developing quality content for effective teaching, creating Google class room and technological challenges such as poor internet connection, log-in ID issues, downloading problems, app installation, creating digital audio-video clips, PPTs, e-notes, etc. The problem of evaluation on virtual platforms was also persistent.

From the above-mentioned issues, the absence of students' physical attention and drop in participation is crucial.

School Related issues

Infrastructure: Due to lockdown, during this pandemic period, some of the digital infrastructure like laptop, computers, internet, projectors, screens, etc., and invertors and water purifiers got depreciated and damaged. The service and maintenance costs to that IT equipment incurred a lot. Moreover, replacing some of them, and purchasing new ones also create another problem. The challenging period was when the school functioned as Domiciliary Care Centre. Covid 19 spread rapidly in the area in which the school was situated. Consequently, the school functioned as Domiciliary Care Centre (DCC) which provided isolation facilities for asymptomatic covid 19 patients. So, the school office too has been closed for months and has to make substitute arrangements for an office room with very limited facilities to function. Conducting HSE SAY/Improvement examinations 2021 is also found difficult with limited facilities.

Parents' Related Issues

The pandemic created a lot of pressure and stress on parents. Helping children with online classes and school work was their function simultaneously as school parents are finding themselves in a bind. The pressure to juggle multiple roles was stressful. Very often they are unable to devote time to parenting. They dealt with children's fears and stress. Parents found it difficult to address their child's fears and confusion related to the pandemic. They dealt with their psychological issues.

Innovative Leadership Practices for mitigating learning gaps

Due to the sudden close down of schools, online learning was adopted to bridge the gap in learning. The state government started First Bell digital learning through KITE victors' educational channel. But most of our children, especially from remote areas, found it difficult to access online learning due to lack of a stable network, electricity connections, smart phones etc. This leads to creatively helping our children. An excellent team in our school conducted an online meeting and discussed the matter and found an effective substitute arrangement named '**Horizon 2020**'. It's a WhatsApp Learning program that was launched on June first week of 2020 by faculties of our school with time and schedule as parallel to the First bell program by the department. It enabled students to attend classes with their teachers and thereby enjoy the freedom of interacting with teachers. On this platform, doubt-clearing sessions, interactive sessions and sharing views, and personal chat sessions were organized. Video clips, audio clips, notes, summaries, questions and answers, activities assignments, etc can easily be delivered through WhatsApp. The Horizon 2020 was inaugurated by the Hon'ble Minister of Kerala (minister for Scheduled caste, Scheduled Tribe, law, and Culture).

PTA, SMC, and Local bodies supported the school head and teachers. Setting up the classroom atmosphere on virtual platforms, the strong and efficient team at school arranged full-fledged online classrooms just like offline classrooms, for our students. Those classes were not only on academic sessions but arranged extracurricular activities such as arts, literary programs, seminars, debates, quiz programs, the celebration of important days program, celebrating Onam, Christmas, Bakrid, New year, etc. to make children relaxed and joyful during this pandemic.

To bridge the learning gap among students, special remedial coaching in different streams was imparted in which they study, and on mental health, to make them updated and relaxed.

The team consisting of teachers, PTA, and SMC visited students' homes at scheduled intervals and enquired about the well-being of our students. Textbooks were distributed and other learning materials to students during this visit. Home visits helped to know that most of the students are keeping away from their online classes due to a lack of motivation and apprehensive feelings. The issue was managed by giving support and making them confident. Developing strong attitudes toward learning by using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Taken initiatives to make online classes more interesting through attractive video clips, images, pictures, graphs, schedules, etc. Forming peer groups: - A class 0f 60 students were divided into 6 groups and each group would have a leader to ensure online learning and the well-being of our students.

Certain guidelines under which the school ensured offline classes were conducted physical meeting with MLA, presidents of Local self-governments, ward members, medical Officer (Primary Health Centre), Health Inspector, PTA executive members, SMC members, MPTA, Teachers, Head Mistress, etc. and discussed the matter and gained their support and cooperation to facilitate offline classes when school has reopened. School maintained healthy and hygienic school premises by cleaning and disinfecting the whole school campus, classrooms, toilets, and playgrounds to welcome our students. The school prepared a Micro plan explaining the arrangement and functions of the school during this pandemic period.

Conducted online PTA, CPTA, and MPTA meetings to discuss the precautions to be taken and to make them aware of the govt. norms and conditions to be followed at school. Conducted counselling classes on a virtual platform for students and parents. With the collaboration of PHC, PTA, BRC, and NSS volunteers we maintained a strict schedule instructing students on the way they enter the school and maintaining covid protocols.

As per our Department orders, we divided each class of 60 students into two batches and asked them to enter the school three days a week. Maintained a Health Register at school recording the symptoms, if any.

Arranged transport facilities for our students who are from remote areas with the collaboration of Teachers PTA and SMC, Ward members, students are instructed to maintain the following:

Social distancing, Masking, sanitizing, Respiratory hygiene, Vaccination, Thermal scanning, ventilation, seating arrangement (2 students on a Bench), bringing drinking water, learning materials etc. of their own., Instructed the students and teachers to stay home if they show any covid symptoms, Locality based monitoring of the spread of the pandemic, and Locality prevention strategies to protect students, teachers, visitors, and parents with the help of PTA and community.

Ensured devices for students to attend online classes, with the support of the Department, teachers, SMC, Daya Charitable trusts, Libraries, Old students' association, etc. With all safety measures taken the school functions smoothly.

Collaboration with community and parents to ensure student learning

The Covid 19 crisis forced the education system to find alternatives to face-to-face instruction. As a result, an online teaching learning programme on an unprecedented scale began. Here the joint efforts of SMC, PTA, families, and the community had played a great role in facilitating online learning. It is certain that when teachers and families join together to support student learning, the result will be higher. Through the collective leadership of different agencies, the school could function smoothly during this lockdown period.

Strong support by distributing digital devices such as smartphones, TVs, laptops, tabs, etc. to students who belong to economically weaker and socially backward, schedules caste sections was extended. SMC helped in developing strong and positive attitudes among students by conducting classes and counselling during this pandemic. Supplying masks, sanitizers, and gloves by charitable trusts, Libraries, arts and sports clubs to students.

With SMC, the school worked as a team to identify the students who are skipping away from online classes and bringing them to the stream. Kudumbasree Unit, Self Help Groups, other voluntary organizations youth clubs, Old Students Association, KSEB (Kerala Electricity board), Esaf bank, WhatsApp groups of teachers' association, old friends, friends, and relatives staying abroad, etc. helped very much by cash and in-kind to our students to support our students in this pandemic period to facilitate learning.

Strong support for differently abled children was extended. With the strong support of some economically well-off families and charitable trusts, we could distribute financial aid and smartphones to children with special needs. To facilitate online learning among extremely remote area students, the team visited students' homes and helped them. BRC (Block Resource Centre) PHC etc supported during HSE examinations and admission during lockdown by arranging transportation facilities, and spend the full days in school by helping with social distancing, observing proper wearing of masks, hand sanitizing, checking the temperature with thermal scanner, etc. These efforts of different agencies made me feel more confident and prouder to be the principal of this school. The open communication and collaboration of parents, teachers, and community members create excellent opportunities for students to develop social, emotional, and academic skills.

We, an excellent team at GHSS Kottayi, could engage families and communities in supporting our students' learning in adapting well to the school atmosphere, students attend school regularly, complete home assignments, demonstrate positive behaviours etc.

Way Forward

Covid 19 pandemic and consequent lockdown caused school closures which have clear negative impacts on child health, education and development, family income and the overall economy.

The role of PTA, SMC, MPTA, and community is very much valuable in students' learning. Parents-Teachers-Community partnerships are a shared responsibility and reciprocal process in the development of their children's learning. This helps students achieve their maximum potential. With the collaboration of SMC and the community, we planned to: -identify those children who are keeping away from the learning stream, improving communication and relationship between schools and parents, to provide a social venue or contact point for parents and teachers. They are involved in the following: Participating to formulate policies and plans for school learning, monitoring the working of school, monitoring the utilization of grants received from the government. Ensures the enrolment, attendance, and retention of all children. Ensures regularity and punctuality of teachers. Identifies and attends the special children with

special needs, Ensures the Physical requirement of infrastructure and equipment. School Management Committee (SMC), Community, and families are playing an immense, role in strengthening school learning during this pandemic, Other Information: Activities in Collaboration with SMC/PTA/Teachers/NSS leader volunteer/school Counsellor/Community/Parents/ families:

During this pandemic, with the joint efforts of PTA, SMC, Community, families, etc. our school functioned smoothly. These combined efforts were helpful in (a) Identifying children who suffer emotionally, socially and educationally a lot (b) A Team consisting of teachers, NSS volunteers, PTA, SMC, MPTA, Panchayat ward members, and counsellor conducted home visits which helped us to understand the real situations/problems children have been facing; These collaborated initiatives during this pandemic helped our students not only in academic, but socially, and economically. These collaborated efforts were helpful in (c) promoting blended learning(d) supporting the digital divide,(e) helping hand to economically weaker sections, (f) utilizing locally available resources,(g) bridging the gap between students and teachers, (h) Observing covid protocol.(i) to keep an anti-drug campus, (j) taking Fire and safety measures, (k) an environment-friendly atmosphere. Through this collective leadership and involvement, the school stood proudly and successfully.

Conference Presentation

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1_M9BlIIQc8Zs_P1tzJWfXk_aVj330Kig/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=103705547766060522301&rtpof=true&sd=true