

Post-COVID Trauma among rural school students: Restructuring their consciousness through legal awareness programs in Telangana, India

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Abstract: The abrupt shift to hybrid and virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the traditional behavioral dynamics of students. Students' proactive reliance on smartphones for remote instruction reduced peer interactions and increased screen distractions, including mobile gaming. Upon the reopening of physical classrooms, educators encountered substantial pedagogical hurdles, marked by reduced student interest and low classroom engagement. To address this educational challenge, this study adopts a quasi-experimental action research approach grounded in the theory of restorative justice. This theoretical framework is based upon the principles of healing institutional harm, individual student voice, and collaborative learning. The research design was based on the systematic implementation of on-the-ground field-based intervention programs in a sample size of six high schools located in Shankarpally Mandal. An unannounced, blind-intervention deployment strategy was employed to guarantee baseline behavioral authenticity. The intervention curriculum consisted of a series of highly structured, interactive, and thought-provoking educational workshops designed specifically to restore cognitive focus and promote academic curiosity. The data collected after the intervention and empirical observations indicate a statistically significant change in students' attitudes. Participants said they had a new appreciation for the value of formal education for its own sake and a real new interest in classroom learning. Ultimately, this action research offers a scalable pedagogical model to combat post-crisis academic disengagement in rural school districts.

Keywords: Legal Awareness, School, smartphones, education, motivation.

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak brought historic education disruptions around the world. Between March 2020 and July 2022, schools were fully closed and has impacted over 1.2 billion students and youths worldwide¹. More than 320 million students in India have been affected by various restrictions and the nationwide lockdown. According to a UNESCO report, approximately 140 million Primary and 130 million Secondary students in India have been affected the most. As a preventive measure, the WHO advised maintaining social distancing, which led to lockdowns in many countries to contain the virus's spread. This resulted in the closure of educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities. Classes were suspended, and all examinations, including entrance tests, were postponed indefinitely. The lockdown disrupted every student's schedule. Despite being unprecedented, the pandemic has pushed the education sector towards a new digital model, offering opportunities beyond traditional classroom teaching².

The swift transition to digital learning, prompted by the COVID-19 situation, has left students unprepared. In India, as well as in many other countries, the traditional curriculum was not initially equipped for online education. Students in rural areas, who play a vital role in the education system, face the risk of losing interest in learning due to various challenges. Despite efforts to introduce students to cutting-edge digital learning technology, many still lack access due to the country's existing digital

¹ Alejo, A., Naguib, K., & Yao, H. (2023). Education in a Post-COVID World: Towards a RAPID Transformation. *UNICEF*.

² Jena, P. K. (2020). Impact of pandemic COVID-19 on education in India. *International journal of current research (IJCR)*, 12.

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divide. As a result, the abrupt shift to online teaching has led to students becoming passive learners. Many parents may not have enough time or the required educational qualifications to help their children with assignments previously handled by their teachers. As a result, children have become reliant on smartphones to better understand their subjects. However, online learning also has its disadvantages. In addition to concerns about the quality of education provided, scholars have highlighted the hidden adverse effects of online learning, such as internet addiction and related mental health problems.^{3,4,5}

Studies have also revealed that the intensity and time of electronic device usage increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and was positively correlated with various mental health problems.⁶ The trend of stress response in male vs. female students varied significantly, with males more prone to severe stress than females⁷. Especially in stressful environments, children staying away from the supervision of the epidemic, disrupting the family dynamics, causes children to remain uncontrolled and more open to abusive factors.⁸ Rinn's (2024)⁹ study also revealed that the post-Covid-19 situation in schools showed that significant differences among students in learning loss and psychological impacts in USA. The study conducted by Xu et al. (2021)¹⁰ revealed that a large proportion of senior high school students and female students experienced severe psychological stress in China.

Research findings clearly indicate that students' learning interests and capabilities have been affected and require restoration. The fundamental premise of Restorative Justice Education (RJE) theory is that all individuals are interconnected through relationships. It emphasizes the need to reconnect people, highlight their inherent relational qualities, and promote social engagement. In the context of schools, restorative justice theory encourages connections by fostering healthy child development and providing spaces for people to express themselves and be heard throughout the school environment (Parker, 2020). School-wide restorative practices prioritize social engagement, student empowerment, and accountability, helping address disproportionate discipline and institutional racism by grounding relationships as the foundation of this work. Schools that adopt the transformative approach to restorative justice view improved relationships as a primary goal and understand that reduced problems stem from improved relationships and a greater sense of belonging within the school community. Restorative practices are implemented to harness people's inherent motivation to connect with others in a safe environment, avoid causing harm, and repair any harm that may occur (Reimer, 2018).

³ Guven Ozdemir N, Sonmez M. (2021) The relationship between nursing students' technology addiction levels and attitudes toward e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional study. *Perspect Psychiatr Care*, 57:1442–8.

⁴ Zhang, C., Hao, J., Liu, Y., Cui, J., & Yu, H. (2022). Associations between online learning, smartphone addiction problems, and psychological symptoms in Chinese college students after the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 881074.

⁵ Ratan ZA, Zaman SB, Islam SMS, Hosseinzadeh H. Smartphone overuse: a hidden crisis in COVID-19. *Health Policy Technol.* (2021) 10:21–2.

⁶ Mahapatra, A., & Sharma, P. (2021). Education in times of COVID-19 pandemic: Academic stress and its psychosocial impact on children and adolescents in India. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 67(4), 397–399.

⁷ Ray, S., Goswami, V., & Kumar, C. M. (2024). Stress-The hidden pandemic for school children and adolescents in India during COVID-19 era. *Current psychology*, 43(9), 8315–8324.

⁸ Ulukol, B. (2022). Online education and effects during Covid-19 Pandemic. *Brain-Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence And Neuroscience*, 13(1).

⁹ Rinn, T. J. (2024). “The Children Are Not Okay”: Choir Teachers’ Perceptions of Students Post Shutdowns. *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, 10570837241238355.

¹⁰ Xu, H., Zhang, H., Huang, L., Wang, X., Tang, X., Wang, Y., ... & Yin, L. (2021). Increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress in school students soon after the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. *BMC psychiatry*, 21(1), 330.

The present literature completely confirms the adverse link between smartphone addiction and academic performance, however there is a noteworthy deficiency in studies concerning post-crisis rehabilitation. Most previous studies focus either on identifying digital distractions or on tracking screen usage separately. There is little research on proactive, operational ways to solve these behavioral problems in the classroom. RJE is also often used as a response to violent behavior, bullying, or high school suspension rates that are high. Its use as a proactive tool to refresh motivation and reduce digital disengagement following the pandemic is mostly unstudied. This study will address this gap. The study is based on a proactive action research conducted in six schools in Shankarpally Mandal to understand how the RJE principles might help effectively refocus children and rekindle their real interest in education.

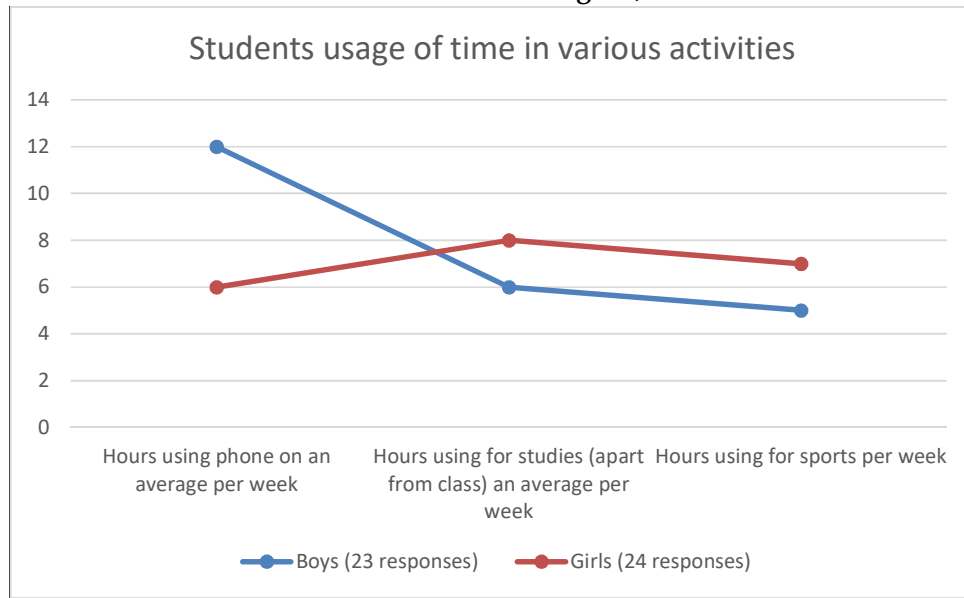
Methodology

This study used a quasi-experimental action research methodology. Action research is a cyclical process of identifying a problem, designing an intervention, implementing the plan and evaluating the results. The study was conducted in six Primary and Secondary schools in Shankarpally Mandal, Telangana, India. This remote area was chosen because kids were in a major transition from limited technology access to mandatory smartphone reliance during the pandemic, which drastically changed their post-pandemic learning patterns. For the empirical exercise, the following high schools were selected, and the target group is 8th to 10th grade:

s. no.	Name of the school	School total strength (from 8 th to 10 th)		Nature of the school
		Boys	Girls	
1	Zilla Parishad High School, Kondakal	57	32	Co-education
2	Zilla Parishad High School, Kothapally	26	12	Co-education
3	Zilla Parishad High School, Mahalingapuram	41	13	Co-education
4	Zilla Parishad High School, Parveda	24	8	Co-education
5	Zilla Parishad High School (Girls), Shankarpally	-	98	Girls
6	Kendriya Vidyalaya, Yeddumailayaram	86	79	Co-education
Total		234	242	

The initial survey was constructed with 10 % of the students in each school in Google form to understand the hours spent on mobile, studies, and sports. The responses gathered were reflected below:

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Early observations and informal talks with educators revealed a stark gender divide in student behavior post-COVID-19 epidemic. Female students showed more academic resilience and participated more in structured learning and sports. Male students were far more prone to smartphone distraction. This proactive monitoring showed that during the outbreak, we tended to use our phones for fun, which made us drowsy in class and unable to complete our assignments and tests when we returned to school. The intervention was aimed at senior students of grades 8-10 in six selected schools in Shankarpally Mandal based on specific behavioral data..

To address this issue, a two-tier input mechanism was developed to maintain ethical rules and at the same time retain baseline student responses.

Administrative Clearance: The Head of each school granted permission to undertake a two-hour intervention with a certain framework and to gather observations.

Student-Level Blind Delivery: The school administration was notified of the timeline, but the specifics of the new curriculum were kept from the students. This strategy, unannounced, also ensured pupils behaved normally and attended school, enabling researchers to see real classroom interactions. The two-hour program was divided into two distinct, high-impact phases targeted at maximizing student engagement and getting attention spans back on track:

Phase 1: Awareness and Motivational Lecture (1 Hour): The program delivered a targeted lesson on current teenage issues. It highlighted digital safety and the significance of education to reduce behaviour of smartphone usage. The lecture had important modules on Child Rights, Drug Abuse prevention, Girl Child health, Menstrual hygiene and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act to cater to holistic social needs of 8th to 10th grades.

Phase 2: Interactive Application and Games (1 Hour) To overcome the tendency to listen passively, the second hour was devoted to active student participation. Researchers used a range of innovative techniques including instructional drama, student poster presentations, competitive quizzes, interactive storytelling, team-building activities, mime performances and presentations of real-world case studies.

Analysis

The baseline findings of this study are consistent with the existing educational research on gender-based responses to screen addiction. Boys were far more susceptible to pandemic-era smartphone escapism habits. Mobile gaming gives immediate, high-dose dopamine rewards, so textbook lectures don't grab the attention of these students and withdrawal symptoms include sleeping in class and avoiding homework. The intervention applied Restorative Justice in Education (RJE) principles to avoid typical lecturing. The program did not scold the boys for their poor academic performance. Instead, it used high-energy tools such as drama, mime, and competitive games to get the boys' brains working and re-establish their focus in a healthy, collaborative manner.

Speech: The speech was a motivational one about the fight for educational facilities for all and the contribution of various scholars to the development of the nation through education. The speech stressed how education enables the person to achieve better prospects in life and thus ignites a sense of nationalism among the students. The educational values enshrined in our Constitution were also highlighted and then all the students took a Pledge on the preamble of the Constitution of India. This provision meant for their development; if it used them properly they could advance.

Drama: The programme highlighted the impact of a serious social problem. As an example, in one of the dramas, the theme of education was emphasized. The script was about the problems of an illiterate sarpanch (village head) in the public service. A literate, educated person who can read and fill in various forms can make effective use of all government services. On the other hand, an uneducated person might be deceived or given the wrong help in official procedures. It helped students understand the value of education for their future." Another drama dealt with the issue of drugs, highlighted the importance of the child helpline and discussed challenges related to menstrual hygiene. The drama has a very high impact on the students .

Poster presentation: Clearly present problems and possible answers. Legal aid members used simple visuals and relatable topics to connect complex laws to real life. Each poster contained a single, core message such as "Say No to Mobile Games While Studying" or "Know Your Rights." The headlines were bold, and the text was minimal so it could be read from ten feet away. The presentation also had detailed discussions on helpline numbers, safety issues and reporting mechanisms. The main themes of the posters were career guidance, hygiene, impact of mobile phone and mobile game usage on studies and importance of education.

Quiz: A quiz competition was held for school students to bring balance between basic knowledge and practical awareness. This was one of the most attractive features of the legal awareness programmes . Students had prepared a set of questions on general awareness on Constitution of India, child rights, girl safety, drug abuse and general facts on independent India. The Principal and school teachers awarded prizes to the students who answered the questions correctly. The students were enthusiastic participants, answering questions and claiming prizes with gusto. This was a sign of their confidence and appreciation of the efforts that went into the event.

Interactive storytelling: Interactive storytelling is a powerful tool used by students in schools that turns passive listeners into active participants, making complex social and health issues relatable and memorable. The emphasis is on teaching students that rights are not just rules but basic needs for leading a happy life. Students can be engaged by asking them to look at themselves in a large mirror and describe themselves, stressing that each child is unique, has value and the right to a name and identity. Set up a "Story Tunnel" where one student walks between two rows of other students who are giving advice or words of encouragement to a character who is dealing with a violation of their rights (e.g., a child who must leave school to work). Also use painted stones with symbols (e.g., a heart,

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a bicycle, or a piece of fruit) and have the students take turns picking a stone to build a story together about a girl becoming strong and healthy. Split students into groups. Each group will research a drug and create a pamphlet. Each pamphlet must contain a fictitious story about a character's battle with drugs and, importantly, a positive ending where they seek help to get off drugs. The session really impacted the students and made them think of their life and future prospects.

Educational games: Offer an interactive way of managing sensitive issues such as children's rights and drug abuse and at the same time enhance motivation in school. For example, a focus game where students take turns counting up to a target number. If two students talk at the same time, the game starts again, which helps improve concentration and social awareness. Another is a free 15-minute digital game in which students traverse virtual landscapes and dodge illicit drugs. This game takes a harm reduction approach to teach players about substances such as cannabis and methamphetamine and how they affect the body. They have also rolled out gender equality games, such as a version of kickball with modifications, to teach children about inclusion and the empowerment of girls.

Mime Activity: Mime is a great way for school students to communicate complicated social messages through exaggerated gestures and facial expressions without using words. In one of the scenes a group of children play ball, the ball is a symbol of freedom. Then, adult figures come in and take the ball away. They give one child a heavy bag to represent child labour and a household broom to another child. Children stretch for a floating book, representing the Right to Education, but are hindered by their burdens. Then comes a figure called the "Teacher" or "Protector." This figure lifts the heavy burdens and gives the children books and a ball. The children hold hands, forming a protective circle. Education, play, and protection are the rights of every child. Another scene is on drug awareness. Either a bright, energetic student is studying or playing sports when a "tempter" figure shows a "invisible" small object representing a drug. At first the student is reluctant but gives in. They move slowly, and they tremble. They "lose" their friends and books, as if invisible walls were closing in on them. The student calls for help and friends and family band together to pull them out of a "dark pit" mimed as a tug-of-war against an invisible force. At last the student straightens up and makes a gesture of "pushing away" the tempter. In a third scenario, a girl at school suddenly gets a "cramp" and looks worried as she checks her clothes. Other students start whispering and pointing. That's what the stigma about her situation means. The girl tries to hide away and ceases to participate in school events. But the friend understands her distress and gives her a "wrapped gift" which is a sanitary pad, and real-life case presentations.

Real-life case presentations: It aims to show the real-life impact of drug abuse through case studies and how such situations violate basic child rights. The phrase "bad company" is often used to describe the first step towards drug use. So, choosing your friends wisely is an important way to protect yourself. Families can be a "protective shield" for children, but when communication breaks down in the family, vulnerability increases. Students should be able to grow up in a safe environment, free of illegal substances.

Students' Feedback: The above activities had a great impact on the government school students, as they understood the importance of education and need to restrict the use of unnecessary smart phone usage. There was some change in their mind-set, based on feedback from the school program one week later. Students realized that they were spending time on their phones and they didn't really understand how this was affecting their grades and relationships with their friends. Now, they have designated phone times so they can concentrate better on their studies."

It felt good to be able to talk openly about their struggles and it was encouraging to know other

students were going through similar things. “Through awareness programs they were taught to prioritize tasks well. They have been able to balance school work and social life without being glued to phones by managing their time better. Now, students know that mobile addiction affects not only their studies but also their whole life. They are more driven to achieve their academic goals. In short, they thank the program organizers and members of the legal aid for their voluntary support in creating a healthier balance between technology and studies. From these reflections it can be seen that the program has greatly influenced the attitudes of the students regarding the use of mobile phones and their focus on academic success.

The intervention was also very successful in being completely surprise-based. Their first reactions were completely transparent, as the students had no time to prepare or to cope with the anxiety of being assessed. The dramatic change from initial male restlessness in hour 1 to total, energetic participation in hour 2 proves that experiential learning (learning by doing via art, theatre and play) is the most effective tool to break post-pandemic digital isolation and bring student interest back to life.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The sudden transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on student behaviour, particularly on male students in rural school districts such as Shankarpally Mandal. This action research successfully demonstrated that post-pandemic academic disengagement, classroom drowsiness, and smartphone addictions cannot be cured by traditional, punitive discipline. Rather, these contemporary issues call for creative, highly engaging and empathic interventions. A brief, structured intervention grounded in the core principles of Restorative Justice in Education (RJE) can completely transform a classroom, this study showed. Blending important social consciousness with creative, hands-on learning, the two-hour program was able to cut through student apathy. The first hour was a success in equipping students with essential knowledge on digital safety, child rights, the POCSO Act, and personal hygiene. The second hour used high-energy drama, mime and team games to safely re-engage students and rekindle their focus and motivation. Furthermore, the unannounced, blind intervention strategy proved to be a very effective way to capture and correct actual student behavior without the interference of classroom anxiety. The positive changes observed post-program, such as increased class involvement, improved homework completion, and a significant reduction in classroom sleepiness in male students, suggest that active and experiential learning is the key to breaking digital isolation. This study provides a workable and scalable model that can easily be adopted by rural schools to heal the post-crisis behavioral issues, gender-based learning gaps and rekindle a true love for education in young learners on the whole.

To replicate the success of this pilot project, other rural school districts should adopt the same two-hour model and use a structured three-step framework. Districts must first establish a two-tier administrative system. This requires full operational clearance from the school heads in advance but keeping the schedule secret from the students so as to preserve genuine baseline behavioral responses. Secondly, the intervention must be performed using the split-hour delivery method. The first hour should focus on gender responsive socio-legal literacy, explicitly covering digital safety, POCSO Act, and menstrual hygiene to address hidden student anxieties. The second hour needs to completely shift to high-energy, kinesthetic learning platforms—such as educational drama, mime, and team quizzes—to re-engage screen-dependent attention spans. Finally, districts should put in place institutional follow-up tracks by training local teachers to monitor engagement in the classroom and appointing resilient female peer-ambassadors to maintain a continuous dialogue, ensuring sustainable, long-term academic recovery.

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