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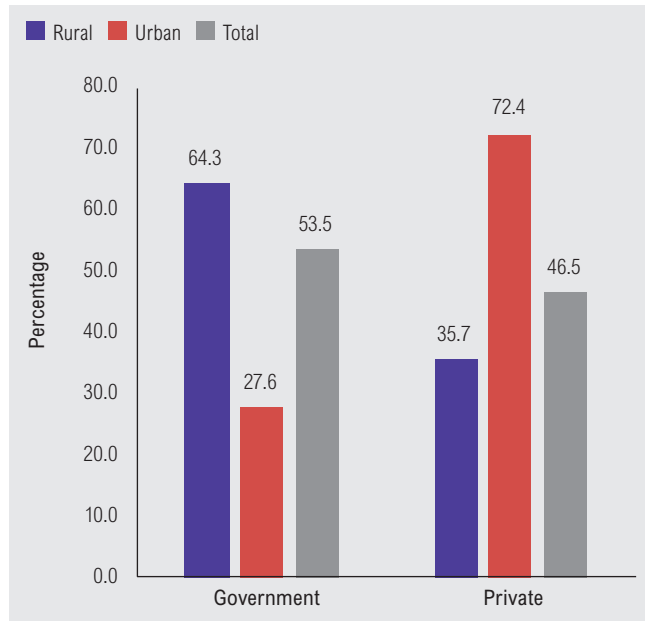
Are Schools in India Ready to Support Students During COVID-19?

India has one of the largest education systems in the world, with approximately 250 million students enrolled in 1.49 million schools (UDISE, 2017–18). Schools in India can be broadly divided into: (i) government schools managed and funded by the state; (ii) government-aided schools, which are privately managed but receive government funds to pay teachers' salaries, and generally charge much lower fees than private unaided schools; and (iii) private unaided schools, which are privately managed, do not receive any government aid, and survive by charging student fees.¹ For the purpose of the survey outlined in this brief, aided and private-unaided schools were both considered private schools, as the school management rests with private actors and not the government.

¹ It is important to note that private schools in India are not homogeneous. There are a proliferation of low-fee charging schools in rural and urban slums, but also internationally competitive high-fee charging elite private schools in urban areas, catering to economically advantaged students.

Figure 1 shows that while government schools had more than half the enrolment share (53.5 per cent), more than two out of every five students (46.5 per cent) were enrolled in private schools, with a much larger share in urban (72.4 per cent) than rural areas (35.7 per cent).

Figure 1: Percentage share of school enrolment in India, by management and location



Source: UDISE, 2018-2019.

In March 2020, schooling for students enrolled in both public and private schools was brought to a grinding halt by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address the impact of the pandemic on the lives of these students, and to understand whether schools are prepared with adequate support systems to address their students' needs, Young Lives undertook a phone survey during July and August 2020.

The survey interviewed 183 principals (hereinafter 'head teachers') from 116 government and 67 private schools in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in India. While 70 per cent of the sample schools were located in rural areas, translating into 128 head teachers in rural areas being interviewed, only 55 head teachers in urban areas were interviewed, representing 30 per cent of the urban schools across both states.

This policy brief analyses the survey findings and provides specific policy recommendations.

Background

Across India, the COVID-19 pandemic has crippled virtually all economic activities due to the enforcement of social distancing, and face-to-face teaching is still currently disrupted. Schools have effectively remained close for six months and counting, with the education sector facing unprecedented challenges, and required to find solutions for e-learning through the digital space.

The Government of India recently announced Unlock 4 and Unlock 5 Guidelines (MHA, 2020) which relaxed some of the measures around schools. While no schools are allowed to reopen for regular teaching, Grade IX-XII students are being allowed to visit their school for guidance from teachers (outside containment zones) on a voluntary basis. The guidelines also allow 50 per cent of staff (teaching and non-teaching) to work from schools for the purposes of online teaching, counselling, and so on.

At the outset it is crucial to realise that schools are not merely physical spaces for learning, which can be substituted through virtual classes. Schools offer invaluable opportunities for the physical, affective, and psychological development of learners. Their shutting down has resulted in students being deprived of these opportunities, which are fundamental for their growth and development.

Further, in the Indian context, it is critical to address the inequities due to the digital divide, which have resulted in the exclusion of children belonging to the most vulnerable groups from the education system. For students from disadvantaged groups, schools provided not only educational opportunities but also guaranteed a hot mid-day meal, services which are currently suspended in various states of India. These students have been severely deprived of access to both education and food.

Policy initiatives in light of COVID-19

To address the challenges created by the pandemic, the central and state governments of India have introduced a large number of initiatives focusing on student learning, using a mix of radio, television and online learning platforms to provide educational continuity. Amongst these initiatives, the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) released an alternative academic calendar for four weeks of home-based activities for different subjects, while teachers will be conducting classes through internet-based platforms, or sending SMS and voice recordings if these platforms are not available.

The e-learning and digital initiatives vary across states and union territories and need to be studied against the backdrop of the 75th report of the National Sample Survey (NSS, 2017-18).

The NSS Report highlights that less than a quarter (23.8 per cent) of Indian households have internet facilities: in rural areas only 14.9 per cent of households have access to internet facilities, while in urban areas this is significantly higher at 42 per cent. Only one out of every five Indians are able to use the internet (20.1 per cent), with rural figures at a low 13 per cent compared to 37.1 per cent for urban citizens. While the report's findings are from 2017-2018 and digital penetration has taken place across the country since then, a recent NCERT study (NCERT 2020) reveals that 27 per cent of students do not have access to smartphones or laptops to attend online classes.

Survey findings and policy implications

The phone survey was only undertaken in two southern states and represents the opinions of head teachers alone. These findings, while useful in providing context, should not be generalised to account for the experiences of students across the country.

Support services extended by schools

Table 1 highlights that across both states only two out of every five schools (40 per cent) provided online teaching, while half the schools (54 per cent) provided support to students through phone or video calls.

Fewer than half of the schools (46 per cent) provided physical learning resources to students, while only one in every five schools surveyed (20 per cent) sent students recorded lessons.

An encouraging finding is that more than four out of every five schools (85 per cent) provided both academic and well-being support to students. Government schools provided more academic and well-being support to students (87 per cent) than private schools (82 per cent).

One of the most important consequences of the school closures has been the temporary suspension of mid-day meals in government schools. The mid-day meal programme in India, is the largest school feeding programme in the world (World Food Programme, 2013), catering to about 144 million children, with wide-ranging benefits related to increased school attendance and food security. Some states, such as Andhra Pradesh,

have managed to provide the mid-day meal entitlement to children in-kind, cash, or both during the pandemic. While 79 per cent of head teachers in Andhra Pradesh government schools reported dry rations or school meals being provided, this was reported by only 11 per cent of government school head teachers in Telangana.

Are students accessing support services?

While schools are providing a variety of services, the survey specifically asked head teachers about students' access to services during the pandemic. The results reveal that 56 per cent of government schools and 43 per cent of private schools reported being in contact with less than half the student population across both the states during the pandemic. Only a miniscule 6 per cent of government schools and 10 per cent of private schools reported contacting 100 per cent of their student population. Given the digital divide and economic pressures faced by many households, head teachers outlined the various challenges schools faced in making learning accessible for all students (Table 2).

Nine out of ten head teachers reported that the non-availability of technology was a key challenge in supporting student learning during school closures, while seven out of ten head teachers (72 per cent) highlighted that students had no access to the internet.

Almost all government school head teachers reported students facing challenges around a lack of technology (97 per cent) and lack of internet facilities (84 per cent), while three quarters of private school head teachers (76 per cent) reported students lacking technology and half (51 per cent) reported students' lack of internet facilities.

Table 1. Support extended to students

Type of school	Offered online teaching (%)	Support students through phone/video calls (%)	Provided physical learning resources (%)	Offered recorded lessons (%)	Provision of academic and well-being support by teachers (%)
Government	41	60	51	18	87
Andhra Pradesh	39.2	67.9	45.6	6.3	87.3
Telangana	45.9	41.7	62.2	43.2	86.5
Private	37	45	37	22	78
Andhra Pradesh	31.6	44.7	28.9	13.2	81.8
Telangana	44.8	46.4	48.3	34.5	82.1
All schools	40	54	46	20	85

Table 2. Challenges to accessing learning

Type of school	No access to technology by students (%)	No access to internet facilities by students (%)	Limited student motivation (%)	Students burdened with other responsibilities (%)	Students not having the skills to use technology
Government	97	84	49	40	44
Andhra Pradesh	96.2	83.5	44.3	27.8	32.9
Telangana	100	86.5	59.5	64.9	67.6
Private	76	51	36	27	39
Andhra Pradesh	65.8	42.1	18.4	2.6	21.1
Telangana	89.7	62.1	58.6	58.6	62.1
All schools	90	72	44	35	42

More than two out of every five head teachers (44 per cent) from both government and private schools reported the limited motivation of students as well as students lacking the skills to use technology (42 per cent).

While 40 per cent of government school head teachers reported that students were burdened by other responsibilities, only 27 per cent of private school head teachers reported this challenge. This clearly demonstrates that the poorest students who are attending government schools, are the most deprived in accessing services due to the non-availability of technology and internet facilities, which is exacerbated by the extra burden of responsibilities that they shoulder within their households.

The success of online education is dependent on the infrastructure available and teachers' familiarity with distance learning tools already in place. The survey findings suggest that while children from economically prosperous homes and those in urban areas are likely to benefit from online education, the most marginalised are likely to be left behind.

Recommendation 1

The replacement of regular classes by distance learning must overcome the unequal access to online learning technology and broadband. Given the digital divide that exists in India (between urban and rural areas), it is imperative that a blended approach to learning is used to address the needs of students belonging to the poorest households. No single model will work and district action plans should be developed, taking into account the availability of digital infrastructure, with emphasis placed on using low-tech solutions such as radio/television and distributing printed materials where digital penetration is limited.

Are we doing enough for the most disadvantaged students?

Given that every head teacher in government schools and 99 per cent of private school head teachers felt that students' learning was impacted by COVID-19, it is imperative to focus on the most disadvantaged students (including students with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged students, or those in remote locations with limited access to basic services and infrastructure) who face the greatest impact on account of multiple exclusionary forces.

While a third of head teachers expressed concern about student dropout (33 per cent), it is important to note that this concern was higher among private schools (43 per cent) than government schools (28 per cent). This could well be associated with the fact that students in private schools may not be in a position to pay fees, in light of the loss of livelihoods of many families during the pandemic. Furthermore, only 28 per cent of head teachers were fully confident that their students would make up for the learning lost during the pandemic.

In terms of students who were considered most likely to drop out, students from the poorest households were highlighted by 80 per cent of the head teachers (78 per cent of government schools and 82 per cent of private schools), followed by 45 per cent head teachers showing concern about weak learners dropping out (47 per cent government and 43 per cent private). Head teachers in government schools showed greater concern for girls (38 per cent) than boys (34 per cent).

Head teachers were also asked about the learning of specific student groups and who were most likely to be affected by the pandemic. Head teachers across both school types were particularly concerned about weaker learners (82 per cent), followed by students from the poorest households (80 per cent). More than half of the head teachers from government schools (57 per cent) expressed concern for rural students, while two out of every five head teachers (41 per cent government and 38 per cent private) were concerned about high achievers being adversely impacted.

Overage students and students with disabilities were seen as vulnerable groups by 17 per cent and 14 per cent of head teachers respectively, across government and private schools.

When questioned about the prioritisation of targeted interventions by schools, three-fourths of head teachers across schools mentioned students taking high-stake exams (secondary and higher secondary), followed by weak learners (52 per cent), as priority areas. Only 40 per cent of head teachers mentioned targeting students from the poorest households.

Recommendation 2

School closures could mean a disruption in the learning process and increase in dropout rates, especially among the poorest children. Education interventions have to be targeted at reaching the 'last child', since the most disadvantaged students are those who are most vulnerable and likely to drop out if not provided with adequate support.

Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers and head teachers

While various studies have analysed the impact of the pandemic on student learning, scant regard has been paid on its impact on the service providers, the teachers themselves. The survey acknowledges the vital importance of teachers in the education system, and its findings reveal that only one out every ten private school head teachers (9 per cent) was 'very confident' that their school would survive the financial impact of COVID-19. A quarter of the head teachers were not confident at all (25 per cent) and close to half (57 per cent) were only 'somewhat confident' that they would be able to survive the economic impact of the pandemic.

While over half (54 per cent) of the private head teachers stated that they had the freedom to make all the decisions about schooling provision, this was reported by less than a quarter of the government head teachers (23 per cent). More than half of the head teachers across schools (58 per cent) stated that being able to open schools in a safe manner was their highest priority, while a quarter of private school head teachers prioritised the financial stability of their schools. Close to half (47 per cent) of private head teachers reported not receiving any guidance from external bodies such as the school management body or the national/state government, whereas slightly more than one out of every four (28 per cent) government head teachers reported receiving guidance.

Four out of every five head teachers (85 per cent) reported that their teachers were involved in providing both academic and well-being support to students, while 10 per cent of head teachers reported that that staff were not working (21 per cent in private schools and 4 per cent in government schools). In spite of the work undertaken by teachers during the pandemic, only 10 per cent of head teachers reported that their staff were getting their usual salary. Sixty-seven per cent of government and 39 per cent of private school head teachers reported salaries being deferred, while a quarter of private school head teachers (25 per cent) reported that their teachers had not been paid at all during the pandemic. The survey data clearly highlight that teachers' working conditions are an area that requires immediate and prompt policy attention.

Recommendation 3

Policymakers must focus on teachers' working conditions to ensure they perform to the best of their abilities during the pandemic as they are the single point of contact to realise and affect students' educational trajectories. It is imperative that head teachers and teachers in both government and private schools are paid on time, and provided with suitable training and support to transition to distance learning while schools remain shut.

Conclusion

Based on the survey findings, in a developing country like India the solution to the learning crisis invoked by the shutting down of schools due to the pandemic cannot rely entirely on technologically driven digital e-learning solutions.

This approach may work well for elite private schools in urban areas, but fails to take into account the lived realities of a vast majority of students from socio-economically disadvantaged households, and those living in rural areas attending government or low-fee charging private schools with limited infrastructure for e-learning.

While the recently released National Education Policy, 2020 aims for the 'extensive use of technology in teaching and learning, removing language barriers, increasing access for *Divyang* students,² and educational planning and management', these laudable goals must move beyond rhetoric and mandate action to be taken by the central and state governments to ensure they are realised.

While the lockdown continues, there is a real, pressing need for the adoption of a blended approach to learning based on local realities. Government must encourage innovators to develop low cost, accessible technologies that can help students learn remotely, especially in the most isolated and vulnerable parts of the country, while also accommodating the learning needs of the most marginalised children.

It is essential that policymakers recall the Sustainable Development Goals' targets for 2030, around ensuring the completion of primary and secondary education by all boys and girls, and guaranteeing equal opportunities to access quality technical and vocational education for all. As the survey highlighted, the policies currently adopted are a far cry from realising equitable opportunities for all and only further widen the chasm on account of the digital divide. Unless education policies are formulated that bridge the gaps in equitable learning opportunities for the most marginalised groups of students, the pandemic will lead to increasing dropout rates among these vulnerable populations.

India currently spends 4.6 per cent of its total GDP on education. While the National Education Policy, 2020 mandates raising education expenditure to 6 per cent, given the current financial strain faced by the Government of India, it is essential that the allocated 4.6 per cent is spent on public education and not further curtailed during the pandemic. Any reduction will amount to negligence by the state towards securing the fundamental child right to education.

The survey also calls policymakers' attention to teachers' working conditions, which undoubtedly impact students' learning conditions. The absence of timely pay, coupled with additional burdens on teachers and a lack of training will further exacerbate an already difficult situation for teachers, without adequate training or support.

It is vital to note that while technology and innovative solutions will aid how learning occurs, it undoubtedly falls upon the capable shoulders of the teacher to motivate students and harness their true potential.

As Mahatma Gandhi rightly said '*True education must correspond to the surrounding circumstances or it is not a healthy growth*'. This crisis presents an opportunity to reevaluate what a classroom, school and the education system as a whole means, and to present solutions to build a more inclusive, equitable, and accessible education system that accommodates each and every child.



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Acknowledgements and credits

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Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam). Young Lives is a collaborative research programme led by the University of Oxford and conducted in India in partnership with the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) and Young Lives India.

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