Interrupted Education in India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana): Support for Students During the COVID-19 School Closures

This report presents findings from the Young Lives COVID-19 survey of head teachers in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in India. It provides a snapshot of the support that secondary schools in the Young Lives sites were providing for students and their families during the COVID-19 school closures between March and July 2020, and the challenges they faced in doing this. The survey investigated teaching and learning during school closures, with a focus on accessible and meaningful learning for all children.

Introduction

As of 1 September 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in India had reached just over 3.6 million, with over 64,000 deaths recorded as a result of the disease (WHO 2020). India went into a nationwide lockdown in response to the pandemic in late March 2020. This included shutting down educational settings, and as a result nearly 320 million pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary-level learners have been staying at home (Sahni 2020). In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, schools were ordered to close on 17 March 2020 and have not reopened as of 1 September 2020.

Concerns have been raised nationally and internationally regarding the extent to which school closures in India may be increasing inequality. School closures bring an increased risk of hunger, as 120 million children in India usually receive food at school as part of the midday meal scheme. Most states and union territories have had to pause this initiative during the school closures (Upadhyay 2020), although some states, including Andhra Pradesh, are making efforts to provide dry rations (EPIB 2020). In addition, the school closures are likely to lead to unequal access to formal learning. Though schools have been encouraged to shift to online teaching, households in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – and across India – have unequal access to the internet (Sahni 2020) and technology (Marshall and Moore 2020). Recent Young Lives findings show that of the two-thirds of 18-year-olds in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana who were in education when COVID-19 hit, only around a quarter have been able to switch to virtual classes or to access other online learning tools (Favara, Scott, and Porter 2020). Children's learning will also be affected by the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, which are disproportionately affecting already disadvantaged groups across the world.

India has been successful in expanding access to schooling in recent decades, but learning levels often remain low and there are large gaps in achievement, with poor children, girls and those from marginalised social groups being most disadvantaged (Singh et al. 2017). Schools have a key role to play in minimising COVID-19's negative impacts on learning, especially for the most marginalised.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Almost all schools were providing support during the school closures. This included support for students' and parents' well-being, and teaching and learning provision. Following a state initiative, food was provided in schools in Andhra Pradesh.

2. The most common barriers to learning while schools were closed were a lack of technology and internet access.

3. Lack of student motivation was also a challenge, particularly in government and tribal social welfare (TSW) schools where head teachers were conscious of other demands on students' time.

4. Head teachers expected the effects of school closures on learning to be long-lasting, and identified already disadvantaged groups – weaker learners and students from the poorest households – as being most at risk.

5. Head teachers in private schools were particularly concerned about students dropping out, reflecting the fact that enrolment will be affected by the economic effects of the pandemic as well as the school closures themselves.

6. Concern about impacts on disadvantaged learners was not matched with targeted support for these groups. Instead, efforts were focused on students approaching important exams.

Methods

The Young Lives COVID-19 survey of head teachers in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana was a telephone survey of the schools that took place in YL secondary school surveys in 20 sites in 2016/17 (Moore et al. 2017). Fieldwork took place between 4 July and 1 August 2020, while schools were closed.

The survey asked about the support offered to students and families during the school closures, the reach of this support and whether it was targeted at specific groups. It also asked about guidance that head teachers had received, the challenges they faced in supporting learning at this time, and the impacts that they expected the school closures would have on their students. Finally, it asked about plans for reopening.

The Young Lives secondary school surveys in India include state government schools, tribal social welfare (TSW) schools schools and private (aided and unaided) schools in the 20 sites that had at least 15 pupils in Grade 9 in 2014/15.[1] [2] Head teachers from 183 of the 205 schools who took part in the surveys in 2016/17 completed the Young Lives COVID-19 survey of head teachers (an 89 per cent response rate). Table 1 shows the key characteristics of the participating schools, compared to the population of eligible schools across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. We group schools into government/TSW and private schools to address the under-representation of private schools in our sample and to provide meaningful comparisons between the two groups.

Findings

1. Provision of support

Head teachers in all government/TSW schools and almost all (93 per cent) private schools reported that they were offering support for student learning during the school closures (Figure 1). Almost all (95 per cent) government/TSW and most (84 per cent) private schools were supporting student well-being and around three-quarters (77 per cent of government/TSW and 72 per cent of private schools) were offering provision for parents or other adults with responsibility for their students.

Figure 1: *Provision during school closures by school type*
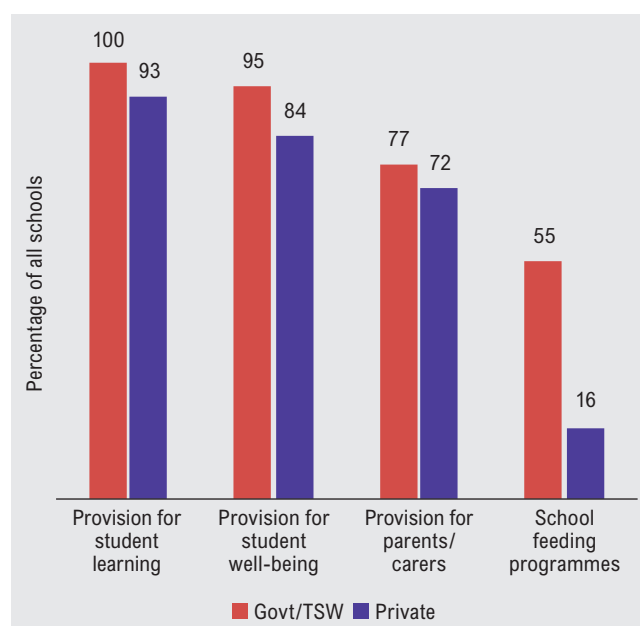
More than half (55 per cent) of government/TSW schools were providing meals for their students during the closures, compared to fewer than one in six (16 per cent) of private schools. The main reason for this difference is that only some private aided and no private unaided schools were providing food before the closures, compared to almost all government/TSW schools. Providing food was much more common in Andhra Pradesh, due to a state initiative to provide dry rations. Students were receiving food in 79 per cent of government/TSW schools that usually provide school meals in Andhra Pradesh, compared to just 11 per cent in Telangana.

Looking specifically at support for learning (Figure 2), the most common way that schools were doing this was by encouraging students to watch lessons on television or online, and/or messaging students via SMS or WhatsApp. Fewer schools supported learning through phone or video calls, signposted students to lessons on the radio, or provided access to physical learning resources such as textbooks. Although less common still, a sizeable minority of schools were offering online teaching and/or recorded lessons. All of these teaching and learning activities were more common in government/TSW schools than in private schools, though the difference was only statistically significant for signposting children to lessons on the radio or online.[3]

Table 1. *Achieved sample and population of eligible schools in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana*
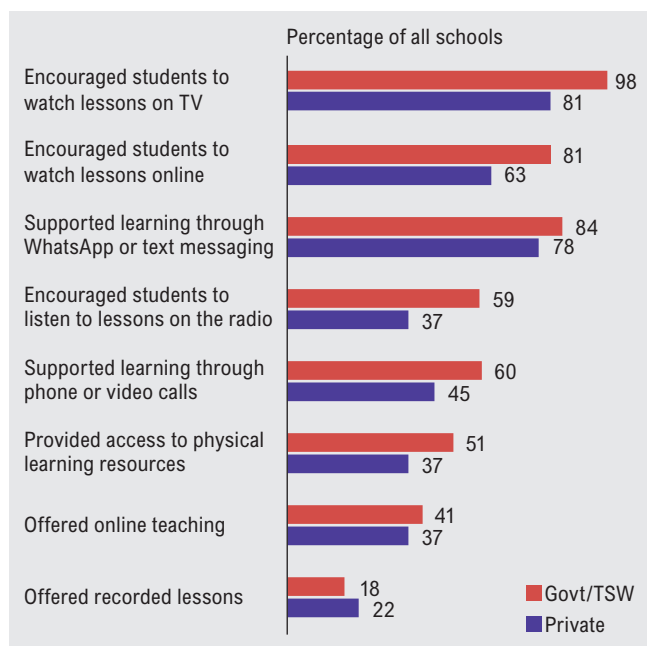
		School type				Locality		State		Total
		State govt	TSW	Private (aided)	Private (unaided)	Urban	Rural	Andhra Pradesh	Telangana	
Achieved sample	n	82	34	19	48	55	128	117	66	**183**
	%	45	19	10	26	30	70	64	36	
Population	n	245	42	33	379	431	268	316	383	**699**
	%	35	6	5	54	62	38	45	55	

1   The latest District Information System for Education data available when sampling for the 2016/17 surveys.

2   See Moore (2016) for more information on the sampling strategy used in the India secondary school survey.

3   Significant at p<0.05. Signposting to lessons on television and supporting learning through phone or video calls were significantly more common in government schools at the p<0.1 level.
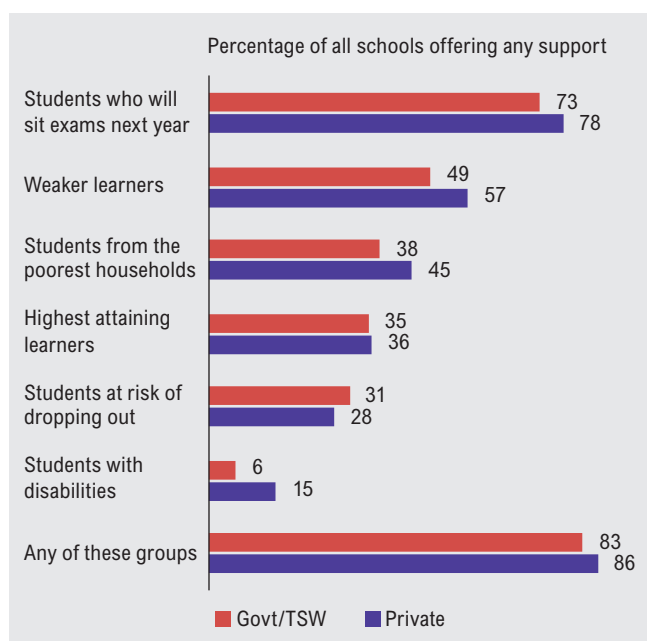
Figure 2: *Provision for student learning by school type*

Percentage of all schools

	Govt/TSW	Private
Encouraged students to watch lessons on TV	98	81
Encouraged students to watch lessons online	81	63
Supported learning through WhatsApp or text messaging	84	78
Encouraged students to listen to lessons on the radio	59	37
Supported learning through phone or video calls	60	45
Provided access to physical learning resources	51	37
Offered online teaching	41	37
Offered recorded lessons	18	22

2. Targeting and reach of support

Most schools (83 per cent of government/TSW and 86 per cent of private schools) who were offering support during the school closures had targeted particular groups of learners (Figure 3). The most commonly reported strategy was targeting support at students who would be sitting exams next year, reported by around three-quarters of schools (73 per cent of government/TSW and 78 per cent of private schools). Around half of schools (49 per cent of government/TSW and 57 per cent of private schools) had targeted support at weaker learners.

Figure 3: *Targeting of support at particular groups by school type*

Percentage of all schools offering any support

	Govt/TSW	Private
Students who will sit exams next year	73	78
Weaker learners	49	57
Students from the poorest households	38	45
Highest attaining learners	35	36
Students at risk of dropping out	31	28
Students with disabilities	6	15
Any of these groups	83	86

Fewer than one in ten head teachers (just six per cent in government/TSW schools and 10 per cent in private schools) reported that their school had been able to be in contact with all students and/or their families during the school closures (Figure 4). Most (56 per cent) government/TSW schools had been in touch with less than half of their students and families, compared to 41 per cent of private schools.

Figure 4: *Proportion of students/families reached by school type*

Percentage of schools offering any support

	Govt/TSW	Private
100% (all students/families)	6	10
76-99%	15	26
51-75	23	23
26-50%	41	21
1-25%	15	20

Legend: ■ 1-25% ■ 26-50% ■ 51-75 ■ 76-99% ■ 100% (all students/families)

3. Challenges

Students' access to technology was the primary challenge that schools faced in trying to support students' learning during the school closures, and this barrier was most pronounced for government schools (Figure 5). Almost all (97 per cent) head teachers of government/TSW schools reported that students did not have the technology they needed, compared to three-quarters (76 per cent) of those in private schools. Moreover, 84 per cent of government/TSW head teachers said that students lacked access to (strong enough) internet connection, compared to just half (51 per cent) of private school head teachers. Students' lack of digital literacy was a barrier for a sizeable minority of all schools – 44 per cent of government/TSW schools and 39 per cent of private schools.

The second most prevalent set of barriers centred around children and their families' willingness and ability to prioritise education during the pandemic. Government schools in particular struggled with students' engagement. Around half (49 per cent) of government/TSW school head teachers identified limited student motivation as a challenge, compared to 36 per cent of private school head teachers.[4] Government school head teachers were also more likely to report that students' competing priorities were a barrier – this being the case for 40 per cent of government/TSW schools compared to 27 per cent of private schools.[5] In contrast,

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4   This difference appears notable, but was only significant at the p<0.1 level.

5   Only significant at p<0.1.

there was no difference in the levels of parental support across school types. Almost half of head teachers reported that a lack of parental support for learning was a challenge during the school closures (43 per cent of government/TSW schools and 45 per cent of private schools).

Very few head teachers reported that staff lacked the technology, skills or motivation to support learning during the school closures.

Figure 5: *Challenges faced by school type*
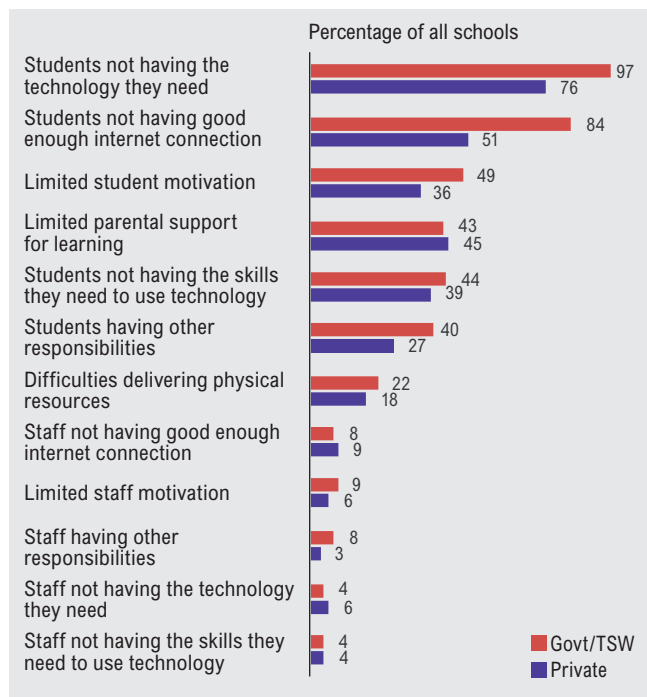
4. Anticipated impacts

All head teachers of government/TSW schools and 99 per cent of private school head teachers expected students' learning to be affected by the school closures, and most felt that the effects would be long-lasting. Only just over a quarter of head teachers (28 per cent of both government/TSW and private school head teachers) felt 'very confident' that students will be able to catch up on learning lost as a result of the closures (Figure 6).

While the level of concern about long-lasting impacts was similar across government/TSW and private schools, head teachers in government schools were more concerned about the immediate implications of the crisis. Only just over one-third (36 per cent) of government/TSW head teachers were very confident that they were able to support learning during the closures. Confidence was higher in private schools, though still only just over half (55 per cent) of private school head teachers were very confident in their ability to support learning at this time. Overall, head teachers who were more confident about their ability to support student's learning during the closures were also more confident that students will be able to catch up when schools reopen.

Figure 6: *Head teacher confidence*
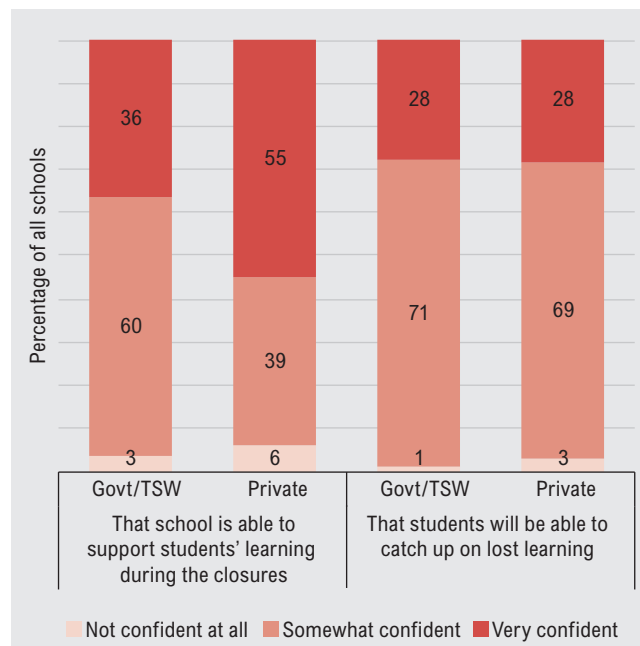
Head teachers in private schools were most concerned about the impacts on mathematics skills, while those in government/TSW schools were more concerned about impacts on students' motivation to learn. Across both school types, head teachers were particularly concerned about lost learning for students from the poorest households and for weaker learners (Figure 7). In government/TSW schools, 84 per cent of head teachers who anticipated impacts on learning expected students from the poorest households' learning to be particularly affected, and 83 per cent expected weaker learners to be particularly impacted. A similar proportion (78 per cent) of head teachers in private schools expected weaker learners to be particularly impacted. A lower proportion, though still a marked majority (70 per cent), raised particular concerns about their poorest students.

Figure 7: *Groups whose learning head teacher expects to be particularly affected*
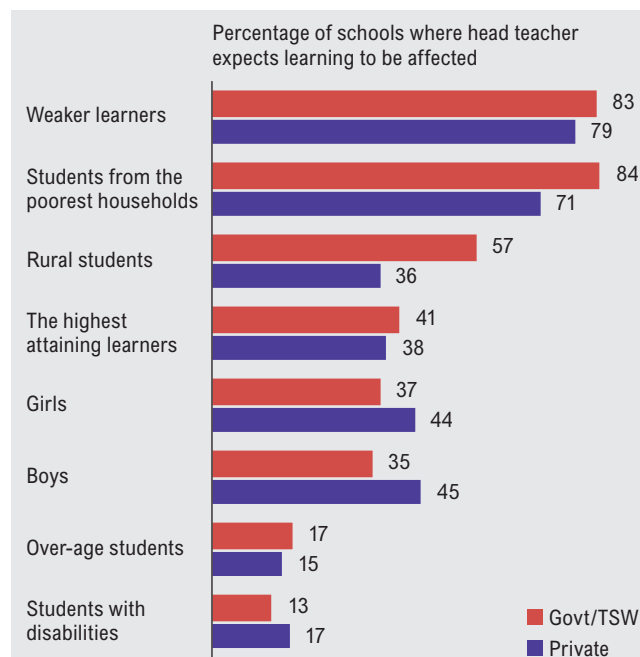
Poor students were also expected to be most likely to drop out of school altogether. Among head teachers who expected any learners to drop out as a direct result of the school closures, four in five (78 per cent of government/TSW head teachers and 82 per cent of private head teachers) said that students from the poorest households were most at risk. Overall, concern about dropout was highest in private schools. While a sizeable minority (28 per cent) of government/TSW head teachers expected that some of their students would drop out of school because of the closures, this rose to 42 per cent in private schools.

Concluding remarks

Sharing in the widespread concern about the impact of the COVID-19 school closures on their learners, **schools in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were offering a wide range of support while students were at home**. While Government/TSW schools were more likely to be offering support for learning and for student well-being, head teachers in private schools reported being able to reach a higher proportion of learners and families.

Despite these varied efforts to support learning, almost all head teachers anticipated that learning would be affected by the closures. Perhaps more importantly, **most head teachers felt that the effects would be long-lasting**. Only a quarter of head teachers felt confident that students would be able to catch up on the learning lost during this time. Private schools were particularly concerned about students dropping out as a result of the closures – reflecting the more precarious nature of enrolment in a fee-paying context. As well as the impacts of the school closures themselves, families' ability to pay fees will be affected by the economic implications of the pandemic.

Schools were being strategic in their delivery of support during the closures, but the primary focus of targeting was on students who would be taking exams next year. Fewer than half of schools were intentionally targeting support at their weaker learners and an even lower proportion were targeting students from the poorest households. This was despite most head teachers agreeing that these groups were at particular risk of falling behind in their learning or dropping out. These findings suggest that **concerns about the school closures exacerbating existing inequalities are well founded** and that there will be a lot to do to narrow these gaps when schools reopen, including ensuring that all children return.

The findings support the concern that access to technology and internet connectivity will be the biggest barriers to learning at this time. While the most common support for learning was to signpost students to watch lessons on television, which is accessible to more households, three-quarters of schools were also encouraging students to watch lessons online and fewer than half were providing access to physical learning resources. **There is a risk that students without access to online learning will fall behind**, and indeed the vast majority of head teachers said that access to technology and/or the internet were challenges for at least some of their students.

Head teachers also highlighted a lack of student motivation as a barrier to learning during school closures, particularly in government/TSW schools where head teachers were more likely than those in private schools to point to students' other responsibilities, such as caring or paid work. Recent Young Lives findings show that among young adults the pandemic has particularly increased caring responsibilities faced by young women (Favara, Scott, and Porter 2020). Caring responsibilities, the need to take on paid work, and lack of access to technology and/or the internet are all more likely to affect children in poorer households, and highlight **the need for targeted support for disadvantaged learners when schools in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana reopen**.

References and further reading

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Acknowledgements

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Young Lives