

It has been more than eight months since the COVID-19 lockdown saga began in India. Reports on the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown on the lives of children have been coming out. In June and July 2020 several reports were published on the situation on the ground as well as its impact on children. Each of these reports – the NSSO 75th Round on key indicators of household social consumption on education (NSSO, GOI November 2019, published in July 2020)ⁱ, the Central Square Foundation report on private schools (CSF, New Delhi July 2020)ⁱⁱ, the Save the Children (India) report on the post-pandemic situation (SC India June 2020), Young Voices – National Report of the task force examining Age of Marriage (CWC, Bangalore, July 2020)ⁱⁱⁱ and a number of newspaper reports and articles on the impact of the lockdown on the poor, especially teachers and children – all point to a situation that is not only grim but also one that demands urgent attention.

Some facts

An analysis of secondary data reveals that 50 percent of all students are enrolled in privately managed schools (UDISE 2019, cited in CSF 2020). Given the growing evidence on economic distress, joblessness, reverse migration, parents of children in private schools may find it difficult to pay school fees, putting their children at the risk of dropping out or trying to transfer to government schools. One does not know if state governments are ready for a surge in enrolment. A recent rapid survey of 7,235 families by *Save the Children (India)* found that 62 percent of households pulled their children out of school – especially private schools. ‘The assessment found that the discontinuation of children’s education was reported by three-fifths (62%) of the surveyed households with the highest number recorded in north India at 64 percent and the least in south India at 48 percent.’^{iv}

The implications of this finding are serious – children who have been pulled out of private schools will either try to enrol in government schools or may just stop going to school. The task force report commissioned by DWCD, GOI on Age

of Marriage reveals that many adolescent girls in secondary schools are fearful of being pulled out of school and either being married off or put into wage labour to sustain the family. This would also be the case for many boys, who would be expected to work in order to augment depleting family incomes. Unfortunately, given the situation of both the quality of education they receive in school and the lack of meaningful training opportunities, these young people end up doing unskilled work.

With so much emphasis on online education as a possible strategy, administrators and political leaders are turning their faces away from the fact that online education is not only a pipe dream but more importantly, *it is a passive mode of instruction*, especially when it is delivered in a one-way format with little scope for interaction. The cruellest joke has been about sending lessons via *WhatsApp*! The CSF report confirms that ‘more than 66 percent of the surveyed private schools have adopted *WhatsApp* as the mode...’ (p19, CSF 2020) ‘The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported that only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access. In rural households (66% of the population), only 14.9 percent had access, and in urban households only 42 percent had access. And males are the primary users: 16 percent of women had access to mobile internet, compared to 36 percent of men. Young people’s access is even less: a recent news report stated that only 12.5 percent of students had access to smartphones. Furthermore, most teachers are ill-equipped for online teaching...’ (Urvashi Sahni. 2020).

Equally significant is the fact that a large majority of parents may find it difficult to support their children in both digital education as well as one-to-one interactive educational processes (including private tuitions). The CSF (2020) survey found that only 33 percent of parents said they could support their children’s digital learning.

Points to ponder

- What are the implications of the pandemic and the resultant crisis on children from poor households?

- Are we, as a society, as the government and as educators asking the right questions?
- Are we looking at ground realities and then making decisions?
- Or are we just mouthing solutions without being sincere or serious about what our children need?

The COVID-19-related lockdown not only exacerbates all poverty and educational inequality-related issues, but it has also pushed a large number of the poor and not-so-poor into a precarious situation. Private (low-cost) schools that depend on fees are in danger of shutting down, contract teachers and those working in low-cost private schools have not been paid and online education is inaccessible to the majority of children in both rural and urban areas.

Equally disturbing is that there is so little discussion or serious national debate on what can be done to address the issue of education and learning. Online education privileges the already better off, leaving the poor to fend for themselves. Notwithstanding the warnings of so many educators and educationists about the ineffectiveness (and even harmful) effects of passive, one-way online communication that passes off as education, governments and several corporate supporters continue to talk about online classes as the only solution in the times of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Alternative viewpoint

There is another view or approach that merits serious consideration. In early 2019, I had the opportunity to interact with NGOs who are part of the *Transforming Rural India Initiative* in Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. I have also had the opportunity to interact with NGOs working with government schools in Karnataka and Odisha. The NGOs working with young women and girls and teachers in government schools, whether in rural or urban areas, have highlighted a number of serious issues. Among these are:

1. Teacher vacancies, especially in mathematics, science and English.
2. The status of school teachers, especially contract teachers. For instance, over 50 percent of the teacher workforce in Jharkhand is on contract.^v
3. Poor learning outcomes and teachers expressed helplessness to improve it.

4. Ineffective educational administration which leaves schools to manage or cope with what they have (including teacher shortages).
5. The pressure on completing the syllabus, no matter what the ground situation may be.

Wherever NGOs and other groups working with government schools were able to energise the community, the overall atmosphere in the school improved a great deal.

This was the feedback before the pandemic and the lockdown. The situation on the ground may have changed since then and students, teachers and families may be facing severe challenges related to livelihood, migration and isolation.

What can we do during the times of COVID-19 lockdown? Are there strategies that we can adopt that may help us respond with empathy and determination? I spoke to a number of people working on the ground in NGOs and with government schools in district-based initiatives.^{vi} These are some of the concrete suggestions that emerged in the course of the interactions.

Some suggestions

Assessing the situation

School heads, teachers, administrators, community leaders and local NGO facilitators need to come together and discuss the specific impact of the pandemic on their areas/communities. The following questions need to be asked in every panchayat and ward: Will there be a huge rush into government schools as the schools reopen? Would it consist of reverse migrants? Or would it be those who have not been able to continue in private schools? What is the rough estimate of the number of children who are at the risk of either dropping out completely or considering shifting to government schools?

There could be meetings of CRC, school heads, teachers, active SMC members and panchayat/urban bodies to assess the situation with respect to children and whether there could be a surge in enrolment. While a house-to-house survey may be difficult during these (COVID-19) times, this group would have the ability to evaluate the situation on the ground. The India Education Collective and *Prajayatna* -- two NGOs that work with government schools in several states -- have been using this strategy not only to get a better idea of ground realities but also as a means to sensitise and involve the key stakeholders.

Thousands of villages and wards have a low incidence of infection and, using the recommended physical distancing/masking/hand-washing norms, surveys could also be done in such areas. This, by itself, will give the government a realistic idea of the scale of the problem. This process is also important because teachers, school heads and administrators rarely come together to discuss strategies and bringing all of them together would be extremely valuable.

Prioritising

The most affected and at-immediate-risk are children in rural and tribal areas who will be appearing for their class X and class XII board examinations in 2021. These children are extremely worried about how they will cope (Vidya Das of *Aragamee*, email correspondence, 25 July 2020). Board examinations, where essential, could focus on the key learning outcomes necessary for certification. This could also be done through open-book examinations that do not privilege memorisation but focus instead on comprehension and understanding of basic concepts.

Simultaneously, there is a need for socio-psychological and academic support and counselling of parents and students as some parents may be pressurising their children without an adequate understanding of their mental and/or emotional states and academic preparedness.

Within school

Closer school and community linkages and partnerships could be made in creating learning spaces and bringing the school closer to the children and their families. The pandemic has provided many activists, education workers and teachers the opportunity to redefine ownership of the school. Parents have come forward to take responsibility, older children are supporting the education of younger students, some teachers and school heads are taking the support of parents to distribute worksheets and other study material.

The school is no longer seen as the preserve and the property of the government alone – parents, local communities and youth have come forward to sustain some teaching-learning processes. Community libraries and learning centres are working with teachers and school heads. This has been an important strategy of the M V Foundation of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Clearly, the post-pandemic environment can make the doors of the schools more open and welcoming.

Psycho-social preparedness

Children and adults are known to have been traumatised by the pandemic, the forced migration and loss of livelihoods. Teachers and school heads need to be prepared to address issues of trauma, anxiety and despondency in an empathetic manner. This means that state governments need to organise workshops (in clusters of 15-20 schools or, where feasible, online discussions) in order to mentally prepare the teachers and school heads and also physically prepare the schools to welcome more children. Online consultations and webinars could also help in areas that have good connectivity and where school heads and teachers are comfortable with technology. Where there is an existing network of either NGO or CSR programmes which work closely with government schools, members could initiate outreach with children and parents, new migrants in their area (village or ward), teachers and school heads and others working in education in the field.

This is also the time to reach out to the private schools as they too are facing huge distress. Many may be thinking of shutting down. Getting a list of the children in such schools and facilitating their enrolment is essential. Flexibility and openness to new ideas and area-specific innovations need to be encouraged and welcomed, especially among school heads, teachers and local administrators, NGOs and education groups.

Coming to grips with online teaching-learning

It is well-known and accepted that technology is a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction and needs to be used alongside it. Using technology as an alternative to regular teaching-learning processes compromises both the equity goals as well as the quality of delivery.

It would be important, against this backdrop, to take serious stock of what online learning has actually achieved so far. While high-end private schools have been able to use interactive tools, most of the not-so-well-off or well-endowed schools have resorted to one-way, passive communication with children. Even some so-called high-end schools have continued with the chalk-and-talk method – just delivering lectures to children. Even small children in kindergarten and grades I to III are subjected to this.

Preliminary feedback through small surveys and interactions reveals that online learning has not reached the majority of poor and lower-middle-class children, rural or urban. If this is indeed the

situation, schools and local education NGOs and CSR units could prepare and deliver ‘workbooks’ to children at home. The *India Education Collective* has tried this with some positive response. The idea is not to cover the syllabus but to keep the children engaged in the process of learning. A combination of workbooks and storybooks would perhaps be ideal.

Shorter academic sessions and truncated syllabi

In view of the reality that this academic session (2020-21) has been drastically cut short, we need a creative approach to utilising the time available. Instead of a mindless cutting of lessons in textbooks, it has become more important to focus on foundational skills that are required at each grade/level and working with children in small groups.

Practitioners working on the ground suggest that the focus could be on basic abilities in language and mathematics in the lower grades. In the higher grades, prominence could be given to core subject ideas, like developing reading comprehension in language, critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving abilities and conceptual clarity in mathematics. Similar focus areas could be worked out in other subjects. (Rudresh, email correspondence, 26 July 2020).

Equally, it would be important to maximise student learning during school hours through worksheets and continuous self-assessment/teacher-initiated assessment of learning. (Rakesh Tiwari, email correspondence, 27 July 2020).

India has a wealth of experience in accelerated learning (Ramachandran, 2004, Nirantar, 1997; *Balika Shikshan Shivir/Mahila Shikshan Kendra* documentation) and creating innovative bridging programmes to help children get back to formal schooling, second-chance programmes and many more which have been used by both non-governmental and government schools and centres. Maybe it is time we revisited such initiatives and used them to create gentle bridge programmes to ease children back into formal schools and learning.

Increased hunger, poverty and joblessness

Given the evidence of increasing poverty and joblessness, hunger and malnutrition have emerged as serious issues, particularly in some areas. Again, a micro-context-specific assessment can help schools restart the midday meal and school health initiatives even before schools reopen formally. Augmenting nutritional supplements, introducing breakfast and thorough health check-ups need to be carried out,

especially when children first come back to school. This could be done through interesting activities with the help of para-medical workers and, where possible, doctors and nutritionists.

Support for teachers

Finally, and most importantly, teachers need support. They need our confidence in their abilities and; they need respect to get back to school after the pandemic and the lockdown. They will have to reinvent themselves and play multiple roles – of counsellor, teacher, guide, guardian, etc.

We will need many more teachers in schools to cope with not only the increased enrolment in government schools, but also the varied roles that teachers will be expected to play. Accelerated learning cannot be done in large groups of fifty or sixty; evidence shows that it works best in small groups of children who are roughly at the same level, therefore, many more teachers will need to be recruited. Several state governments have not paid contract teachers during the lockdown and a large number of private schools have laid off their teachers (waiting to re-hire if and when they reopen). Many teachers have known to have resorted to MNREGA work or retail selling to make ends meet. This is a time when teachers need support, encouragement and training to enable them to come back to school with optimism and energy.

Lessons for the future

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant crisis have provided India with an opportunity to get back to the drawing board and think afresh. The new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is an open and progressive document, one that can provide space for trying out new approaches. Equally, it also provides administrators with opportunities to take a holistic view and stop working on different elements in silos. A well-coordinated strategy to overhaul and energise the school education system is called for.

While this may be too much to expect, it is important to recognise that there is a paralysis of governance. We seem to be going with the flow and not thinking or doing anything significant. There are highly committed and sensitive administrators in many states; if a national overhaul looks like an uphill task, we can surely work with state governments, district administrations and school clusters to bring about the much-needed transformation and make our school system vibrant.

Abbreviations used

- CRC : Cluster Resource Centre
CSF : Central Square Foundation
CWC : Concerned for Working Children (a not-for-profit organization)
DWCD : Directorate of Women and Child Development
NSSO : National Sample Survey Office
SMC : School Management Committee
UDISE : Unified District Information System for Education

- ⁱ Government of India, MOSPI. November 2019. *Key indicators of household consumption on education in India – Report no. 75/25.2 – based on NSSO 75th Round done between June 2017-June 2018.* New Delhi
- ⁱⁱ Central Square Foundation. July 2020. *State of the sector report – Private Schools in India.* New Delhi.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Concerned for Working Children. July 2020. *Young Voices – National Report of the taskforce (DWCD, GOI) Examining Age of Marriage.* Bangalore.
- ^{iv} Hindustan Times, 11 July 2020 - <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/children-in-62-surveyed-homes-discontinued-education-amid-pandemic-save-the-children-report/story-rAVQCjfr7ff7CIP6zpaRP.html>
- ^v The situation was summed up succinctly during interactions with facilitators from NGOs: “The low status of contract teachers, the uncertainty that envelopes their lives, irregular pay and almost no professional/academic support – all together have rendered the school system dysfunctional in many parts of the country...” (Ramachandran, Vimala, February 2020)
- ^{vi} Vidya Das from Atragamee Odisha, Javed from Transforming Rural India, Sreeja from India Education Collective, Rudresh, Rakesh Sihori, Rajiv Sharma and Hardy Dewan from APF/APU, Kameshwari Jandhyala from ERU, Ankur Sarin from IIM-A. I am indeed grateful for their concrete suggestions.



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