

DCPCR's

CHILDREN FIRST

Journal on Children's Lives

Second Year of Covid-19:
Disrupted Childhoods, Disrupted Education



DELHI COMMISSION FOR PROTECTION OF CHILD RIGHTS (DCPCR)
Govt. of NCT of Delhi

CHILDREN FIRST

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(Theme: Second Year of Covid-19: Disrupted Childhoods, Disrupted Education)



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Aim and Scope

Children First: Journal on Children's Lives is a bi-annual and peer-reviewed journal, launched by Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) with the aim of deepening and broadening the discourse on child rights by providing a platform to all persons who are engaged with the rights of children in varied capacities to share their learnings, views and experiences in this context.

The Journal's first issue, published in November 2021, captured the initial impact, experiences and mitigating efforts in the context of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has not yet ended and nor has our curiosity and need to understand the monumental impact it has left on young children.

This issue focuses on the continued impact on children in the Indian context in the second year of the pandemic and the disruptions caused in the children's lives.

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From the Chief Editor's Desk

As schools begin to reopen across the country after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19, one of the longest school closures as compared to countries in the global north, and children are seen again streaming joyfully back into their new classes, we dedicate this second issue of our Journal: *Children First Journal on Children's Lives* specifically to the theme of Education. We chose this theme in adherence to our Journal's commitment to further "deepen the discourse on children and their rights" by focusing in this issue on children's Right to Education.

It is in this context that in this issue we explore what are the kinds of disruptions children have faced in their lives and in their education over these two years? What are the emerging challenges in classrooms and outside and what are the kinds of interventions that have worked and have the potential to contribute to mitigating these adverse effects of the pandemic? To what extent is online education or a hybrid mode a plausible answer? Further, a larger policy question, should our endeavours be confined only to mitigation of 'learning loss' in children and then reverting to the routine of syllabus completion and evaluations, or should we perceive this moment as a potential opportunity to reimagine education at all levels and make it more relevant for the present century?

Our peer-reviewed journal through its four sections of Research, Critique and Commentary, Voices from the Field and Best Practices provides us in this issue with a wealth of information and insights into different facets of children's lives and travails over these two years. Additionally, we also introduce a new section on childrens' and teachers' first-hand experiences and challenges during this phase. We hope the readers will be really enriched with this comprehensive and multidimensional coverage of the COVID-19 impact and the challenges ahead.

Our section on research, based on a number of surveys conducted across as many as twenty different states, captures very vividly, what could be considered a pan-India scenario of impact of school closure for two years on children's school participation, learning and

socio-emotional development. The impact ranges from the irregularity of participation in any educational activity for this period to concerns about learning loss in foundational literacy and numeracy skills, significantly more pronounced in the case of children from marginalized communities. Disastrous effects of suspension of mid-day meal schemes for children, many of whom are dependent on schools for at least one meal for the day, are reported. Efforts on part of governments and schools to offer online education or alternative modes, although laudable, given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the imperative for a quick response, have been as one author laments merely 'the fig leaf of online education masking the elephant of school exclusion for the best of two years'. These endeavours have also brought to the fore the emergence of the stark digital divide, particularly in rural areas, reinforcing the existing social divide. Issues of dropouts and increase in child labour which had seen a significant decrease over the last few decades appear to have again returned full steam as new challenges to be negotiated.

While a majority of the discourse is around learning loss and learning lag in the cognitive domain; the socio-emotional domain is also gaining prominence with evidence of increased parenting stress and domestic child abuse. Some critiques and commentaries raise valid overriding concerns: while more affirmative action is the need of the hour, given the increasing levels of diversity within already existing multi-level classes, for enabling children to learn at their own pace and 'catch up' on learning gaps, there is also an increase in numbers requiring institutional care and protection. In this context, some authors raise concerns regarding diminishing resource allocations and resource utilization for education, which is not at all commensurate with the emerging needs.

Best practices and lessons from the field offer some hope and optimism as they share positive initiatives that have added value to the mitigation efforts. Some of these include ensuring a supportive socioemotional learning environment for children in the classroom,

ensuring conceptual clarity rather than focusing on content and so on. Parenting and 'parent-school partnership' emerge as an asset in children's learning recovery and in restoring children's physical and mental health. Interventions for strengthening parenting and home support practices and quality of parental engagement with children assume great importance. Given the economic fallout of the pandemic and resulting job losses and wage reductions, there is however an equally significant challenge that needs to be addressed and that is of parental stress and anxieties, which unless addressed can add to children's stress and undo the gains from school-based interventions. Teachers' well-being is similarly a concern which needs to be acknowledged and supported.

In conclusion, this Issue raises some very vital concerns that are emerging as important in education, particularly school education, pointing to the need for a wider discourse and debate. Questions like – is the challenge in education today only of addressing 'learning loss' and 'learning gain' with reference to grade-specific learning expectations or are there equally if not more serious concerns that are becoming evident of social isolation and digital addiction, issues

of mental health, low self-esteem and self-motivation which go beyond the 'cognitive' and call for a more comprehensive approach? Given these challenges, are bridge programs to enable learning recovery sufficient, as many states are initiating as an immediate antidote; or is there a need to see this phase as an opportunity to work towards a new imagination for school education and explore, re-envision and shape new pedagogies and curricular practices which will address children's needs much more holistically and futuristically in pace with the 21st century? Perhaps it may be useful to recall and adopt in this context the four pillars of Education recommended in the well-known Delor's Report on Education (1996) to which India was a signatory and which summed up the Learning Goals of Education to be Learning to do, Learning to learn, Learning to live together and Learning to be!

And finally given the two years' experience of school closure, should we not call for a policy decision to ensure that in any pandemic or emergency preschools and primary schools should be “the last to close and first to reopen?”

Dr. Venita Kaul

Chief Editor

Children First Journal on Children's Lives

From the Desk of Chairperson

At the height of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DCPCR helpline got a call from a 16-year old boy. He wished to understand the process of cremating his father.

No one deserves to go through this pain. It is heart-wrenching. The tragedy is that his was not a story in isolation. Lakhs of children have lost their parent(s). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our lives beyond measure and imagination. We are very different people within two years.

However, there is less visible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the adverse effects of which will be borne by generations to come.

The last two years have been extraordinary and unprecedented. Two year long school closures have caused significant learning losses, and impaired children's social and emotional growth.

Anganwadi closures have compromised hard-earned gains made to immunise children against diseases, adversely impacted pregnancy care, and set our country back in its fight to combat malnutrition. Millions have lost jobs, and have been pushed back into poverty.

COVID-19 pandemic is now over, or at least we behave like it is. However, it has left behind an impact and memories from which we now need to reconstruct our lives and build back better.

Frankly, for all our bravado, we seem to know little about building back better, and it requires our collective brainstorming. Only a healthy, serious, and rigorous discourse can help us better understand the extent, nature, and depth of the problem we are in, and evolve pathways for resolution. Hence, a journal becomes even more important as it seeks to pursue the truth as it is.

I must compliment the Editorial Board for bringing into focus the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruptions on children's education and social-emotional growth through this journal.

I sincerely hope that the readers engage with the writings in this journal, offer comments, disagreement, contrarian analysis, critiques, and raise questions. That is the only way we can emerge wiser. That, we must. We owe it to that boy who called our helpline, and millions of other children

Anurag Kundu
Chairperson, DCPCR

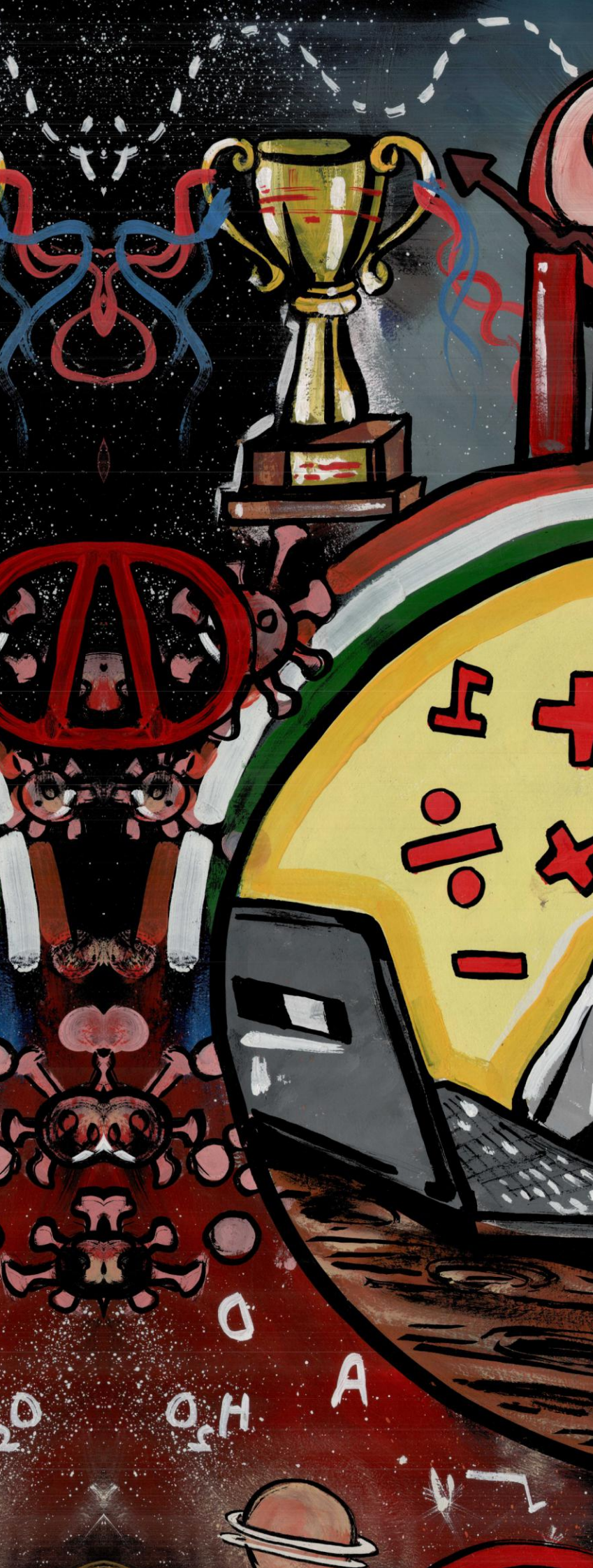
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01

Research

Painting by: **Karan Kumar**, Age 17

LOCKED OUT: Emergency Report on School Education¹

Nirali Bakhla | Jean Drèze | Reetika Khera | Vipul Paikra

A survey of nearly 1,400 school children in underprivileged households carried out in August 2021 brings out the catastrophic consequences of prolonged school closures in the last two years. In rural areas, only 8% of sample children were studying online regularly at the time of the survey, 37% were not studying at all, and about half were unable to read more than a few words. Most parents wanted schools to reopen as soon as possible.

Keywords: elementary education; social inequality; COVID-19 crisis; lockdown; education policy

Introduction

Primary and upper-primary schools in India remained closed for nearly two years from March 2020 onwards. During this period, a small minority of privileged children were able to study online in the comfort and safety of their homes. The rest, however, were locked out of school without further notice. Some struggled to continue studying, online or offline. Many others gave up and spent months milling around the village or *basti*, when they were not working. They were deprived not only of the right to learn, but also of other benefits of school participation such as a safe environment, good nutrition, and a healthy social life. It is time to wake up to the catastrophic consequences of this prolonged “lockout”.

This emergency report presents the main findings of the School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) survey. The SCHOOL survey took place in August 2021 in 16 states and UTs: Assam, Bihar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha,

Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal (hereafter the “SCHOOL states”). The survey focused on relatively deprived hamlets and *bastis*, where children generally attend government schools. In each of the 1,362 sample households, we interviewed one child enrolled at the primary or upper-primary level. The picture that emerges from this survey is absolutely dismal, especially in rural areas. The key findings, summarised in Table 1, speak for themselves. In rural areas, only 28% of children were studying regularly at the time of the survey, and 37% were not studying at all (for further details, see Table 2). The results of a simple reading test were particularly alarming: nearly half of all children in the sample were unable to read more than a few words. Most parents felt that their child's reading and writing abilities had deteriorated during the lockout. They were desperately waiting for schools to reopen. Indeed, for many of them, school education is the only hope that their children will have a better life than their own.

*Nirali Bakhla, Consultant, Policy & Development Advisory Group
Jean Drèze, Visiting Professor, Department of Economics, Ranchi University
Reetika Khera, Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi
Vipul Paikra, Research Fellow, Research Institute for Compassionate Economics (RICE)*

This Paper draws on an article previously published in the Frontline Magazine.

¹* The SCHOOL survey was a joint effort of nearly 100 volunteers across the country. This report was prepared by the four-member coordination team, with generous help from many volunteers including Ankita Aggarwal, Srujana Bej, Ashlesh Biradar, Krishna Priya Choragudi, Hindolee Datta, Aashish Gupta, Shraddha Jain, Pallavi Kumari, Jessica Pudussery, Arati Tawade, Kanika Sharma, Tejaswini Tabhane and Garima Topno.

Table 1: SCHOOL Survey 2021: Key Findings*

Proportion (%) of sample children who:	Urban	Rural
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Are not studying at all nowadays	19	37
Did not meet their teacher(s) in the last 30 days	51	58
Did not have a test or exam in the last 3 months	52	71
Are unable to read more than a few words	42	48
Proportion (%) of parents who feel that:	Urban	Rural
Their child has adequate online access	23	8
Their child's reading abilities have declined during the lockout	76	75
Schools should reopen	90	97

Table 2: Are children studying?*

Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who:	Urban	Rural
Studying regularly	47	28
Studying from time to time	34	35
Not studying at all	19	37

* Status at the time of the survey (children enrolled in Classes 1-8). Very similar figures apply when the reference period is extended to the preceding 3 months.

The SCHOOL Survey

The SCHOOL survey was conducted by volunteers (mainly university students) who responded to an appeal circulated in early August 2021. The survey guidelines requested them to conduct the survey in rural hamlets and urban *bastis* “inhabited by underprivileged families – the sort of families that send their children to government schools”. Within the selected neighbourhoods, they were asked to go from door to door (“skipping” households at even intervals in cases where time did not permit full coverage, and also skipping households with no child enrolled at the primary or upper-primary level). In short, the survey

Table 3: Multiple hurdles of online study

Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who:	Urban	Rural
Live in a family with smartphone	77	51
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Main reasons why children are not studying online regularly, in households that have a smartphone* (%)	Urban	Rural
Child does not have his/her own smartphone	30	36
Poor connectivity	9	9
No money for “data”	9	6
Online study is beyond the child's understanding	12	10
No online material is being sent by the school	14	43
Other	15	10

intentionally focused on underprivileged households, and the findings should be read in that light.

Close to 1,400 households (defined as nuclear families) were interviewed. About 60% of the sample households resided in rural areas, and close to 60% belonged to Dalit or Adivasi communities (SC/ST in the tables). Four states account for about half of the sample: Delhi, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. The sample children (hereafter “SCHOOL children”) were more or less evenly distributed by gender and grade. For further details of the SCHOOL sample, see Appendix 1.

In this emergency report, we present unweighted figures for all the SCHOOL states together, separately for rural and urban areas.

Fiction of Online Education

The SCHOOL survey made it clear that the reach of online education is very limited: the proportion of SCHOOL children who were studying online “regularly” was just 24% and 8% in urban and rural areas respectively. One reason for this is that many sample households (about half in rural areas) had no smartphone. But that was just the first hurdle: even

Table 4: Experience of online study among online children*

Proportion (%) of online children who:	Urban	Rural
Have their own smartphone	11	12
Watch live classes, not just videos	27	12
Have connectivity problems (often or sometimes)	57	65
Find online classes/videos difficult to follow	46	43
Proportion (%) of parents of online children who:	Urban	Rural
Feel that their child has adequate online access	44	25
Are satisfied with the online study material	29	20
Feel that their child's ability to read and write has declined during the lockdown	65	70

* Online children are those who were studying online (occasionally or regularly) at the time of the survey - 25.5% of all children in the SCHOOL sample, with an urban bias.

among households with a smartphone, the proportion of children who were studying online regularly was just 31% in urban areas and 15% in rural areas. Smartphones were often used by working adults, and may or may not be available to school children, especially the younger siblings (only 9% of all SCHOOL children had their own smartphone). In addition, there are other issues of online access such as poor connectivity and lack of money for “data” (Table 3). The proportion of parents who felt that their child had “adequate online access” was just 23% in urban areas and 8% in rural areas. Another major hurdle, especially in rural areas, is that the school is not sending online material, or if it is, parents are not aware of it. Some children, particularly the younger ones, lack understanding of online study in any case, or find it difficult to concentrate.

Table 4 focuses on children who were studying online (regularly or occasionally) at the time of the survey, or “online children” for short. The learning experience of online children is far from rosy. A majority had connectivity problems, and almost half found online videos (or classes if any) difficult to follow. Only a small minority of parents were satisfied with their child's online study material. As discussed further on,

two-thirds of urban parents with online children felt that their child's reading and writing abilities had declined during the lockdown.

Little Offline Study

Among “offline children” (those who were not studying online at the time of the survey), there was little evidence of regular studying. A large majority were either not studying at all, or just studying on their own at home from time to time. In rural areas, nearly half of the offline children were not studying at all at the time of the survey.

Table 5: Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who are currently studying in different ways

Proportion (%) of SCHOOL children who are currently studying in different ways	Urban		Rural	
	Regula- rly	Some- times	Regula- rly	Some- times
Online classes or videos	25	16	8	8
Watching educational TV programmes	3	5	0.1	1
Private Tuition	24	6	14	4
Studying at home, with family help	15	29	12	25
Studying at home, without help	19	30	15	31
Studying with friends in each other's houses	2	13	3	11
Studying in any of the above ways	81		64	
Sometimes at least	53		29	
Regularly*				

* Minor discrepancy with Table 2 reflects the use of a different part of the survey questionnaire.

In many states (including Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh), virtually nothing has been done to help offline children to continue studying in one way or another during the lockdown. In other states (e.g. Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab and Rajasthan), some efforts have been made, for instance by giving

“worksheets” to offline children by way of homework, or by instructing teachers to visit parents' homes from time to time for advice. Most of these efforts, however, are far from satisfactory, judging not only from the testimonies of parents and children, but also from the fact that children's reading and writing abilities have been in freefall during the lockout (see below). The youngest children, e.g., in Grades 1 and 2, have been especially deprived of support.

Modes of Offline Study

The main modes of offline study were private tuitions (mainly in urban areas) and, more frequently, studying at home – with or without help from other family members. In most cases of home study, however, the child was studying “sometimes” rather than “regularly”. It is only for private tuitions, confined to a small minority of relatively well-off children, that regular study is the norm (Table 5). TV-based education, for its part, seems to be a flop show. There are regular educational broadcasts for school children on Doordarshan, but only 1% of rural children and 8%

of urban children in our sample acknowledged TV programmes as a regular or even occasional mode of study.

School Outreach

Table 6 presents further indicators of educational support from the local school (generally a government school) for offline children. Support is very sporadic, and virtually nil in rural areas of some states. The main form of support is “homework”, a sensible step in principle but not always effective in practice. For instance, homework is often beyond the understanding of the child, and many children get no feedback on their homework. In any case, homework is a poor substitute for classroom learning, especially for children who are deprived of any help at home. Similarly, an occasional phone call from the teacher does not go very far, especially when it is about Aadhaar cards or food rations. In urban areas, 27% of offline children reported that some test or exam had taken place in the preceding 3 months, but the nature of these tests was not always clear. Sometimes, the main purpose seemed to be to help the teacher to meet the reporting requirements more than to help the child. Other forms of support were rare.

Teachers Out of Touch

A majority of children (51% in urban areas and 58% in rural areas) had not met their teacher at all during the 30 days preceding the survey. Few parents reported that the teacher had never come home during the preceding 3 months, or helped their child to study. Many teachers seem to be out of touch with their pupils, except for symbolic online interactions like forwarding YouTube links through WhatsApp to some of them (or, more likely, their parents) from time to time.

Having said this, some teachers did go out of their way to help offline children. In fact, the survey uncovered an impressive range of initiatives taken by caring teachers. Some convened small-group classes in the open, or at someone's home, or even in their own home. Others recharged the phones of children who were short of money, or lent them their own phones for online study. Others helped some children with their studies on the phone or even by visiting them. These

Table 6: Educational support for “offline children”*

Proportion (%) of offline children who benefited from the following educational support from the local school during the preceding 3 months:	Urban	Rural
School arranged a test at home or elsewhere	27	16
Teacher gave the child some homework	39	25
Teacher came home to enquire about the child or advise	5	12
Teacher phoned to enquire or advise	36	13
Teacher helped the child at home	3	2
Any other educational support**	6	5

* Offline children are those who were not studying online at the time of the survey.

** Examples: classes were held in the school (e.g. in Punjab); mohalla classes; teacher helps on the phone; teacher lends his/her phone for online study; teacher gave story books; teacher recharges children's phones; school provided a tablet; teacher motivates the child to study; teacher gives free tuitions; one-to-one help; parent-teacher meetings.

were all valuable gestures, but they cannot make up for locked schools and empty classrooms.

Exodus from Private Schools

About one-fifth of the SCHOOL children were enrolled in a private school when the lockdown began, in March 2020. During the lockdown, many private schools tried to survive by switching to online education and continuing to charge the same fees. Poor parents often became reluctant to pay the fees

Table 7: Midday meal substitutes in government schools

Proportion (%) of children enrolled in government schools who received food or cash in lieu of midday meal in the preceding 3 months	Urban	Rural
Food and Cash	11	15
Food Only	69	63
Cash Only	0	8
Nothing	20	14

Note: Food (or cash) is counted as received whether it was given to the child or his/her parents. Food generally means food grain (e.g. rice or wheat). In some cases, negative responses may reflect the fact that distribution takes place at intervals of more than 3 months.

and other costs (including smartphone and recharge), either due to depressed earnings or because online education did not work well for their children. Perhaps that is the main reason why many children switched to government schools – about 26% in the sample, among those initially enrolled in private schools. The survey showed that there were parents who were still struggling to transfer their child to a government school because the private school insisted on all fees being paid before giving them a “transfer certificate”.

Midday Meals Discontinued

Midday meals had been discontinued in all the SCHOOL states with the closure of schools. Among parents with a child enrolled in a government school, about 80% reported receiving some food (mainly rice or wheat) during the preceding 3 months as a substitute for their child's midday meals – see Table 7. But only a small minority received any cash, and a significant proportion did not receive anything during

Table 8: Reading test (percentage distribution of children by reading ability)*

Reading test (% distribution of children by reading ability)*	Urban		Rural	
	Grades		Grades	
	3-5	6-8	3-5	6-8
Able to read fluently	31	58	26	57
Able to read with difficulty	22	23	19	19
Able to read some words only	13	8	13	8
Unable to read more than a few letters	35	12	42	16

* Excluding 44 children who were too shy to read.
Column totals = 100% (or 101%, due to rounding).

that period. Also, among those who received some food, there were frequent complaints or indications that the parents had received less than what they were entitled to (100 grams per child per day at the primary level). All in all, the distribution of midday meal substitutes seemed quite sporadic and haphazard.

Reading Test

The survey included a basic reading test: children were asked to read a short sentence (just 12 simple words in Hindi or the local language) printed in large font. The findings were alarming (Table 8): about half of the children currently enrolled in Grades 3-5 were unable to read more than a few words. In rural areas, 42% were unable to read a single word.

Children in Grade 2 are not even included in Table 8 because most of them (65% in urban areas and 77% in

Table 9: Decline of children's reading and writing abilities

Proportion (%) of parents who feel that their child's ability to read and write has declined since the lockdown began:	Urban	Rural
Online Children	65	70
Offline Children	82	76
Grades 1-5*	78	79
Grades 6-8*	72	70

* Refers to current enrolment.

rural areas) could not read more than a few letters if any. It is important to remember that most of these children have never been to school (they were enrolled in Grade 1 after the lockdown began). Soon they will be in Grade 3. Even at the upper-primary level (Grades 6-8), the proportion of children who were able to read fluently was just over half, in both rural and urban areas. Further details of the reading test, by age and grade, are presented in Appendix 2.

Decline of Reading Abilities

To some extent, the dismal results of the reading test reflect the poor quality of schooling prior to the lockdown. In addition to that, however, many children have forgotten much of whatever little they had learnt earlier (Table 9). An overwhelming majority of parents felt that their child's reading and writing abilities had declined during the lockdown. Even among urban parents with "online children", the proportion who felt so was as high as 65%. In the sample as a whole, only 4% of parents felt that their child's reading and writing abilities had improved during the lockdown - something that should have been the norm.

Literacy Rates Off the Chart

To appreciate the gravity of the situation, we can also try to compare literacy rates among SCHOOL children with average literacy rates in the same age group from the 2011 population census. At that time, according to census data, average literacy rates in the age group of 10-14 years ranged from 88% to 98% in

Table 10: Literacy rates in the age group of 10-14 years SCHOOL Survey, 2021 Census of India, 2011 (R+U)*

	SCHOOL Survey, 2021			Census of India, 2011 (R+U) *
	Urban	Rural	Rural SC/ST	
Persons	74	66	61	91
Male	74	66	61	92
Female	74	67	60	90

* Population-weighted average of state-specific figures for 16 SCHOOL states/UTs.

Note: In SCHOOL survey figures, a child is counted as literate if he or she was able to read the test sentence (see text), "fluently" or "with difficulty". In the Census of India 2011, a person "who can both read and write with understanding in any language" is counted as literate.

all the SCHOOL states except Bihar (83%); the all-India average was 91%. Ten years later, one would expect literacy rates above 90% to be the norm for that age group. Among SCHOOL children, however, literacy rates in the 10-14 age group are as low as 74% in urban areas, 66% in rural areas, and 61% for rural Dalits and Adivasis (Table 10). The contrast is all the more startling as the official census definition of literacy (ability to read and write with understanding in any language) seems more restrictive than the definition used in Table 10 for SCHOOL survey figures. This contrast is too stark to be plausibly explained by the underprivileged background of SCHOOL children.

To look at this another way, the "illiteracy rate" in the 10-14 age group among rural SC/ST households in the SCHOOL sample (39%) is more than four times as high as the average for all children aged 10-14 in the SCHOOL states ten years ago (9%). Such are the combined effects of chronic inequality and a lopsided lockdown.

Dalits and Adivasis: Locked Out More

As the literacy figures illustrate, the predicament of Dalit and Adivasi children was worse than average in the SCHOOL sample. This point is pursued in Table 11, for rural areas (similar patterns apply in urban areas). Even among underprivileged households, the figures are much worse for Dalit and Adivasi families than for others, whether we look at online education, or regular study, or reading abilities. For instance, only

Table 11: Locked Out More: Dalits and Adivasis*

	SC/ST	Others
Proportion (%) of children who live in a house without a smartphone	55	38
Proportion (%) of children who are:		
Not studying at all	43	25
Studying regularly	22	40
Studying online regularly	4	15
Proportion (%) of online children who watch online classes, not just videos	5	29
Proportion (%) of parents of online children who are satisfied with the online study material	13	26
Proportion (%) of children who are unable to read more than a few letters	45	24
Literacy rate, age 10-14 years (%)	61	77
Proportion (%) of parents who feel that their child's ability to read and write has declined during the lockdown	83	66

* Rural areas only; a very similar contrast applies in urban areas.

4% of rural SC/ST children were studying online regularly at the time of the survey, compared with 15% among other rural children. Barely half of them were able to read more than a few letters in the reading test. Among rural SC/ST parents, 98% wanted schools to reopen as soon as possible.

The survey also uncovered some eye-opening cases of discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis in the schooling system. To illustrate, in Kutmu village of Latehar district (Jharkhand), most of the households were Dalits and Adivasis, but the teacher belonged to one of the few upper-caste families in the village. Some members of these families openly asked the survey team, “if these [SC/ST] children get educated, who will work in our fields?”. The teacher lived in the nearest town, came to school as per her convenience, and took it easy in the classroom. None of the 20 Dalit and Adivasi children we interviewed in Kutmu were able to read fluently. Their parents complained bitterly about the teacher's irresponsible behaviour, but they were powerless to do anything about it.

Promotion without Progress

Despite the mass decline of reading and writing abilities, children are being promoted to higher classes – two grades above their pre-lockout level at the time of the survey. In the higher classes, textbooks are way out of gear with their current learning levels. In some states, for instance, children currently enrolled in Grade 2, who have never been to school, are now expected to read English textbooks.

As schools reopen, in early 2022, children find themselves “thrice removed” from their grade's curriculum. This triple gap consists of (1) the pre-lockout gap, (2) the decline of literacy and related abilities during the lockdown, and (3) the onward march of the curriculum in that period. For instance, a child who was enrolled in Grade 3 before the lockdown, but did not master the curriculum beyond Grade 2 because of her disadvantaged position; she now finds herself closer to Grade 1 in that respect. She is enrolled in Grade 5 today and will be promoted to the upper-primary level in a few months. Dealing with this massive disconnect requires major changes in curriculum and pedagogy over an extended transition period – years rather than months.

Youngsters Adrift

One of the likely consequences of the lockdown is a rising incidence of child labour. Judging from the SCHOOL survey, child labour was still unusual among children below the age of 10 years, but it was quite common in the age group of 10–14 years. A large majority of girls in that age group, for instance, were doing some household work. In rural areas, about one fourth of girls in the same age group had also done unpaid work in family fields in the preceding 3 months, and a substantial 8% had done some paid work. Similar patterns apply to boys in the same age group, with lower figures for household work.

Even as some children had become labourers, others were struggling with idleness, lack of exercise, phone addiction, family tensions, and other side effects of being locked out. This was not the main focus of the SCHOOL survey, but many parents shared worries of this sort. For instance, some parents complained that their children had become undisciplined, aggressive, or even violent. Others, especially in urban areas, found it a burden to have children around the house most of the time, or were worried about their child's outdoor activities and acquaintances. For mothers who work outside the house, the closure of schools is a calamity.

Clamour for Reopening of Schools

Most of the parents that were interviewed wanted schools to reopen as soon as possible. In urban areas, a small minority (6%) had some hesitation about this, or even – in a few cases – opposed the reopening of schools. In rural areas, however, 97% of parents supported the reopening of schools. When we asked whether they wanted schools to reopen, most of them felt that the answer was self-evident. As one startled mother put it, “*yah poonchne wali baat hai?*” – do you really need to ask this question?

A Looming Disaster

Schools are an essential service. It has been wisely said that they should be the last to close and the first to reopen. In India, the opposite has been happening: soon after the COVID-19 crisis struck in early 2020, all schools were closed without batting an eyelid and most of them were still closed at the time of the survey.

When schools began to reopen in late 2021, the main focus was on higher classes instead of the younger children, who need their teacher's help the most. The fig leaf of online education masked the elephant of school exclusion for the best of two years. The fact that this monumental injustice remained virtually unquestioned for so long is a telling indictment of India's exclusive democracy.

The SCHOOL survey gives an inkling of the colossal damage created by this extended lockdown – one of the longest in the world. As we saw, the damage is not lost on parents themselves. “*Baccha ka life to khatam hi ho*

raha hai” (the child's life is being ruined) is the sort of words many of them used to express their despair.

It will take years of patient work to repair this damage. Reopening schools is just the first step. After that, the schooling system needs to go through an extended transition period not only to enable children to catch up with a reasonable curriculum but also to restore their psychological, social and nutritional wellbeing. As things stand, the system seems to be heading towards “business as usual” – this is a recipe for disaster.

Appendix 1: SCHOOL Households and Children

	Urban	Rural
Number of sample households	520	842
Household characteristics		
Proportion (%) in different categories		
SC	44	47
ST	5	20
OBC	16	20
Other	24	9
Unclear	12	5
Proportion (%) reporting various forms of employment as one of their “main occupations” ^a		
Farming	2	36
Non-agricultural self-employment	20	15
Casual labour	48	60
Contract work	12	7
Regular employment	12	5
Housework	16	14
Other	11	3
Proportion (%) owning a smartphone	77	51
Child characteristics		
Gender distribution (%)		
Male	54	50
Female	46	50
Transgender	0	0
Grade distribution ^b (%)		
Grades 1-2	19	18
Grades 3-4	24	27
Grades 5-6	33	31
Grades 7-8	24	24
Proportion (%) enrolled in:		
Government school	74	84
Private school	21	11
Other	5	5
State-wise sample size		
Jharkhand	32	182
Delhi	185	6
Maharashtra	3	160
Uttar Pradesh	5	155
Odisha	0	93
Haryana	39	49
Karnataka	70	3
Punjab	35	24
Assam	33	23
Bihar	6	46
Other states/UTs	112	101

^a Two main occupations were allowed.

^b Under-representation of Grades 1 and 2 may reflect enrolment issues during lockdown.

^c “Other states/UTs” are those with fewer than 50 sample households each: Chandigarh (45), Rajasthan (40), West Bengal (38), Tamil Nadu (35), Madhya Pradesh (34), Gujarat (21).

Appendix 2: : Reading Test Percentage distribution of children by reading ability*

	Able to read fluently	Able to read with difficulty	Able to read some words only	Unable to read more than a few letters
Urban				
Grade 2	9	9	17	65
Grade 3	23	9	16	52
Grade 4	26	26	13	36
Grade 5	41	28	10	22
Grade 6	49	21	11	20
Grade 7	69	19	5	7
Grade 8	58	31	6	6
Rural				
Grade 2	7	13	3	77
Grade 3	11	14	14	61
Grade 4	31	26	7	36
Grade 5	33	19	17	31
Grade 6	48	20	9	22
Grade 7	59	23	6	12
Grade 8	66	13	7	13

* Excluding 44 children who were too shy to read. Figures add up to 100%, row-wise (99% or 101% in some cases, due to rounding).

Effects of COVID-19 on Learning and Development of Children:

Insights from a Survey of Parents After Opening of Schools

Research Team, National Coalition on the Education Emergency

Abstract

The National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE) undertook a study of poor households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu to understand the lived realities for children who had to cope with the 18-month-long disruption in schooling that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted through a survey of parents. To our knowledge, this is the first survey of its kind that has been conducted after schools began re-opening in India. Around 500 households having 900 children between the ages of 6 and 18 were covered between September 2021 and January 2022. This paper presents the methodology and findings of this study that were originally published in [the report 'Cries of Anguish'](#) (NCEE, 2022). The findings reveal the deep fissures in the system through which thousands of children have been falling. The study also brought to attention the resilience of these families who seem to have been failed by the system and yet carried on with the hope that the opening of schools would prove to be the light at the end of their tunnel. It would be a shame and a grave injustice for their 'cries' to go unheard and for their children's rights to continue to be violated.

Keywords: online education, pandemic, school opening, socioemotional development, equity concerns

Introduction

In most states in India, middle and high schools across the country were fully or partially closed for an average of 18 months due to the pandemic. Primary schools and pre-schools or anganwadis were shut for even longer. The severity of the impact of these continuous school closures on children is almost immeasurable, especially for those from marginalized groups, who bear the brunt not only on the educational front but also on the social, emotional, and economic fronts.

At a recent public hearing held in Bengaluru organised by ActionAid Association & Slum Mahila Sanghatane, 64 case studies from 5 districts of the state of Karnataka were presented. 14 aggrieved children and their distressed families shared several concerns and challenges they have had in accessing education. The key takeaway from the report presented by the jury was that these 'parents are without jobs, their families are without food to eat and their children are without

education' (CWC, 2022; NCEE, 2022). Multiple reports and studies suggest that the school closures along with the multiple 'waves' of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in learning deprivation, a substantially larger 'digital divide' than ever before, including physical illness, malnutrition, psychological harm, child labour, and early marriages (SCHOOL, 2021; Reddy et al, 2020; Ghatak et al, 2020; Oxfam, 2020; Azim Premji Foundation, 2021; Lancet Covid-19 Commission, 2021). Through all this, it is clear that there has been a gross violation of children's fundamental rights during the pandemic. They have been deprived of their right to free and compulsory education (Article 21A), their right to life and personal liberty (Article 21) and their rights against exploitation (Articles 23 and 24), all guaranteed to them by the Constitution of India.

Against this background, a rapid survey of poor households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu

was conducted by the NCEE to understand the lived realities for children who had to cope with the 18-month-long disruption in education. The coalition sought to get this understanding not from the school system, teachers or NGOs, but directly from the parents who have suffered and seen their children suffer. This is the first survey of its kind that has been conducted after schools started re-opening in India. Around 500 households having 900 children between the ages of 6 and 18 were surveyed between September 2021 and January 2022. This paper presents the methodology and findings of this study that were originally published in the report '[Cries of Anguish](#)' (NCEE, 2022).

Methodology

Sampling

Districts were selected purposively but were largely those that are considered educationally backwards. Within these settlements, households were selected randomly, with those households which had at least

one child in the age group 6-18 years being chosen. If a household that was selected at a regular interval did not have such a child, the next one was selected. In Karnataka, the survey was conducted in two districts. The sample included some households from urban settlements in Bengaluru and some from villages. In Telangana, three districts were chosen (Warangal, Mahbubnagar and Hyderabad). In Tamil Nadu, it was decided to sample from 4 districts to get a greater geographical range (Ramnad, Pudukottai, Karur and Tiruvallur). The differences in the sampling were useful for the pilot study. In particular, the Telangana sample was more differentiated in terms of socio-economic groups, while the Tamil Nadu sample was more concentrated on disadvantaged groups. Table 1 shows the sample households and details of the children. Further details of the sampling methodology are explained in the report (NCEE, 2022).

Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed by the NCEE research team, using the categories of principles of education recovery outlined in 'A Future at Stake - Guidelines for School Opening' (NCEE, 2021). Incremental improvements to the way the questions were worded and their options were made for the Telangana and Tamil Nadu surveys. Additional questions for Tamil Nadu on the Illam Thedi Kalvi (School Comes Home) program were included. Questionnaires were translated, reviewed and entered into 'ODK' (Open Data Kit) software. This software tool was used because it can be used to collect data offline and the offline submissions are synced automatically when a connection is found. This proved beneficial to investigators who were administering the survey in remote areas that lacked proper internet connectivity. Field investigators were trained on the questionnaire and how to sample households within the selected urban and rural settlements. All interviews were conducted face to face and investigators were supported to clarify any doubts, while the survey was ongoing. Qualitative comments of the parents and of the investigators, collected in the survey instrument and through debriefing sessions with the investigators, provided a rich source of additional information.

Table 1: Sample households and details of children

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
Period of survey	Oct-Nov 2021	Dec 2021	Jan 2022
Number of districts	2	3	4
Number of households surveyed	100	212	200
Rural	51	122	130
Urban	51	90	70
Children aged 6-18 years	176	432	371
of which enrolled:	150	432	367
In govt. schools (%)	56 %	46 %	88 %
In private schools (%)	41 %	54 %	12 %

Source: NCEE, '[Cries of Anguish](#)', pp 5

Note: In Karnataka, a small percentage of children were enrolled in madrasas

Ethical Considerations

The participants of the survey did so on a voluntary basis and gave their informed consent. The questionnaire was designed in a manner to collect minimum sensitive information and to provide the respondent with an option of 'don't wish to say'. The questionnaire was pre-tested and based on the responses received, certain questions were reframed.

Data Analysis

The data collected using the ODK software was downloaded in the form of '.csv' files and synthesized using a python script. This data was then analysed using spreadsheets and R programming. From the output of this analysis, charts and tables as well as some unique visualizations were generated. Due to differences in timing of the surveys and sampling of settlements and villages, the data for the three states have not been merged. All data presented in the findings of the study are unweighted figures.

Findings and Discussion

The main finding of the study of households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu was that 'poor parents are desperate about the educational future of their children and fully conscious of the devastating toll that prolonged school closure has taken on the learning, socio-emotional development and behaviour of their children'.

Knowledge and Abilities

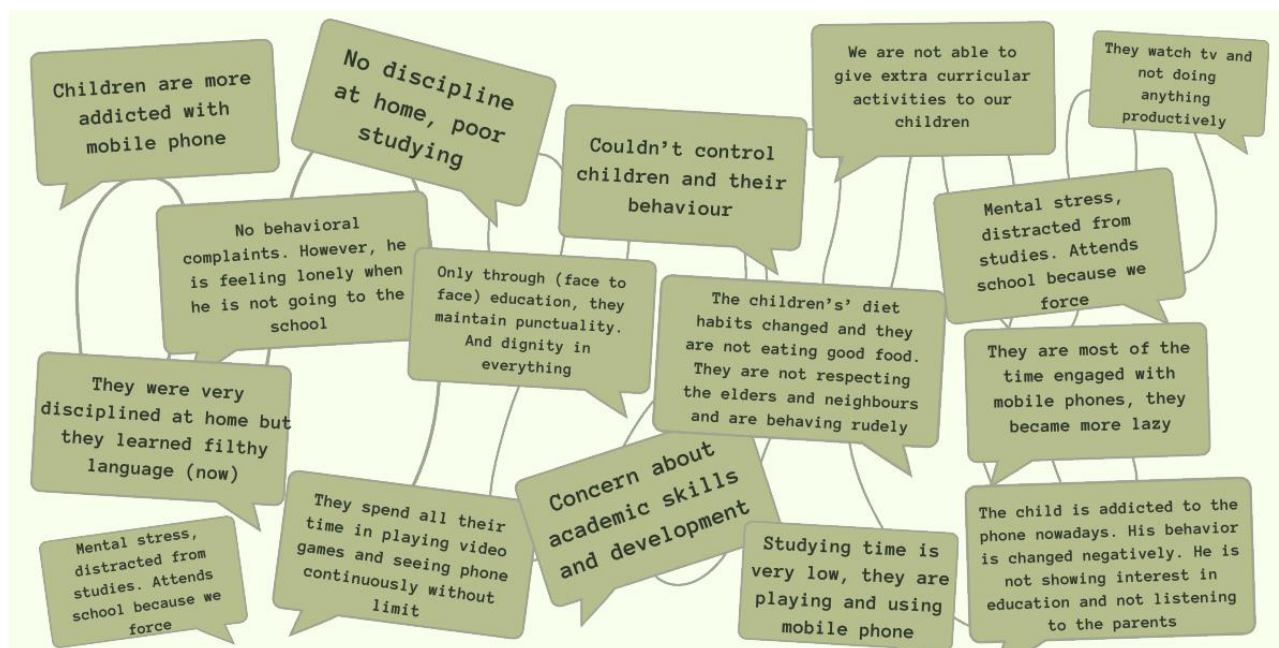
The survey asked parents about their child's ability to read and write' because this is a competency that parents can assess more easily than other competencies (such as mathematics). The question was asked about the youngest child who was enrolled at the time. The options given were 'improved', 'stayed the same', 'declined' or 'cannot assess'. Between 70-80% of parents felt that their children's ability to read and write had declined or stayed the same (or they were unable to assess). The differences between what parents of children in government and private schools reported are striking. Between 75-90% of children in the government schools had suffered or stagnated in their learning. The proportions for private schools were significantly lower compared to government

schools in Karnataka and Telangana, and somewhat lower in Tamil Nadu. Overall, fewer than 25% parents in each of the states felt that the ability of their youngest child to read and write had improved. The qualitative comments of the parents provided a shocking reality check. One of the respondents from Karnataka said, *"She was reading and doing better at studies in UKG. She has not been studying during the pandemic. It will be very difficult to cope after school opens. Don't know how she will manage."* Another parent's concern was expressed so aptly in this statement: *"Forgot rhymes. Forgot reading. School must open"*. Another comment was: *"The children are going to write the public exam, but they don't have much knowledge"*. This speaks of the sorry state of affairs with respect to the 'exams must go on' mindset of our examination system which became 'cruel, more than ever before' during the pandemic (Sharma, 2021). What these findings point to is that gaps in educational opportunities are huge. Summative and high-stakes assessments cannot and must not be prioritized the way they currently are as focus needs to be laid on learning recovery, and socioemotional development.

Socio-Emotional Development and Behaviour

Throughout the study, parents highlighted the changed behaviour, lack of focus, and attention and the addiction to mobile phones amongst their children. One of the parents who responded to the survey said, *"Using mobiles for attending classes is so dangerous and it made the child lazy during the pandemic."* The survey did not pose a direct question about this aspect, so these were spontaneous responses, which indicated the extent of alarm and concern amongst parents. The key changes noted by parents were the inability to focus, lack of motivation and interest in education, addiction to mobile phones, games and TV, lack of routine and discipline, mental stress, and loneliness. One parent commented, *"Children are experiencing heightened stress levels as they can't acquire knowledge from online education."* Many parents have nobody to supervise the children when they go out to work and are forced to leave them behind to be looked after by neighbours or older children living in their settlements. Parents of young children, in particular, mentioned that their children had lost even

Figure 1: Issues identified by some parents in Tamil Nadu



Source: NCEE, & Cries of Anguish; pp 12

the daily routines of eating and hygiene. The issues identified by some of the respondents have been presented in Figure 1.

The findings presented above emphasise the need for education recovery programs that involve re-organising of curricula to support socioemotional development. They cannot be sidestepped in the name of 'catching up with the syllabus' and 'returning to business as usual'. Some recommendations from the NCEE that were published in 'A Future at Stake - Guidelines for School Opening' included providing enough time in lessons for children to express their emotions about themselves and others, and to engage in conversations and teamwork. The guidelines also emphasized that social emotional learning should be integrated across all subject areas and that teachers should be provided guidance on how to do this (NCEE, 2021).

Engagement with School

As per the findings of the study, the majority of children in the sample households were enrolled and reportedly going to school. In Karnataka, about 15% of children were not enrolled at the time of the survey. In Tamil Nadu, schools had just closed in January the week before the survey, and while 97% of children were enrolled, they were not going to school. There

are likely to be more unenrolled children in remote districts, particularly in Telangana and Karnataka. Attendance data was only available in Telangana; in Karnataka, schools were just reopening when the survey was conducted and attendance was irregular, while in Tamil Nadu, the schools had closed again due to the Omicron wave, just before the survey. It is striking that, in Telangana, even two months after the opening of schools, only two-thirds of the children attended school on all days in the previous week.

A probable reason for the high levels of enrolment may be the availability of mid-day meals in government schools in these three states. The study found that 96% of children in government schools in Telangana got mid-day meals. Similarly, about 91% were getting either cooked meals or dry rations in Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, the proportion was reported to be about 80%. This lower proportion may be due to the fact that schools were closed at the time of the survey.

The study also looked at whether parents received communication from schools during and after the lockdowns. Between 67-75% of parents in the three states reported that they received some communication from the school/district/block or other education authorities (about school re-opening, health protocols, etc). While this is encouraging, it is most

likely that these were general mass communications. In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, more parents received such communication in government schools compared to private schools. The study found that the situation was worse regarding specific communication about the academic performance of the child. In this case, 50% or fewer parents in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu reported getting any such communication from the school or the teacher. Again, the situation was worse in private schools than in government schools. In Telangana, the proportion of parents who reported this type of communication was about 75%: close to 60% for government schools and close to 90% for private schools.

These findings give us some insight as to where the challenges lie with respect to enrolment and attendance of students. The report indicates that many children have not returned to schools. A positive finding was that most children who had returned to school, seem to have received either cooked meals or dry rations in the second half of 2021. An important implication of the findings on communication from schools is that it must be seen as an essential part of any efforts made in the direction of recovering from the learning deprivation caused by the pandemic. It is necessary in order to increase enrolment and attendance, to enable parents to support socio-emotional development and understand how they can support their child in learning.

Tamil Nadu's Community Based Program - 'Illam Thedi Kalvi' (School Comes Home)

When the rapid survey of parents was conducted in Tamil Nadu, it included questions about the awareness and availability of the 'Illam Thedi Kalvi' program. The survey did not assess the quality of the program but was able to track the expansion of and attendance in the program over a short period of a month. This program is a community-based after-school program that was designed for a period of 6 months, to bring children in elementary education (grades 1-8) back to school and get them to re-engage with learning. With the help of close to 100,000 volunteers, the learning support centre would allow children to (re)develop their relationship with learning, skills of learning, etc. Another objective was to simply ensure that children,

especially those who had dropped out or were at the risk of dropping out were brought back to school. The most important findings (see table 2) and implications were:

- High level of awareness: about 95% of the parents were aware of the program, in December and in January. This shows the success of the communication efforts at the state and local levels.
- Significant increase in program availability between December and January (in or close to the neighbourhood of the households that were surveyed): 44% of parents reported that the program was not available in December. This had reduced to 25% in January, reflecting a rapid expansion of the program. Availability increased more rapidly in rural areas in this sample, compared to urban areas
- Increase in children's participation between December and January: Of the children whose parents were aware of the program, who were eligible, and who had access to the program, 36% attended on all or most days in December. This proportion rose to 45% in January. The increase in

Table 2: Illam Thedi Kalvi: Awareness, Availability, Eligibility and Participation

	December 2021	January 2022 (1 st week)
Awareness/availability/eligibility	Percentage of all parents	
Parent was NOT AWARE about the program	5 %	6 %
Program was NOT AVAILABLE in the settlement or nearby	44 %	26 %
Child was NOT ELIGIBLE	10 %	10 %
Total of above	59 %	42 %
Of those who were aware, could access program and child was eligible:	Percentage of the subset of parents	
Child attended ALL/MOST days	36 %	45 %
Child attended SOME days	24 %	24 %
Child attended NO days	40 %	30 %

Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 18

Note: Data are for the youngest child who is currently enrolled.

participation may be due to increased availability and the fact that schools had closed in January.

Availability of Textbooks

In government schools, in Karnataka and Telangana, less than two-thirds of students had all textbooks. In Tamil Nadu, the proportion was over 80%. Most of the remainder had at least some books. Almost all students in private schools in Telangana and Tamil Nadu had all textbooks, while about 72% of private school students had this in Karnataka. Taking into account those participants who shared that the child had some books, the proportion of children in government schools who had no textbooks at all was negligible. The pattern was similar across different levels of education.

In the context of the learning crisis reflected by the findings of this survey and other similar studies (SCHOOL, 2021; Azim Premji Foundation, 2020), the relevance of sheer textbook availability may not be significant. With children having fallen behind by almost two years and younger children having forgotten even the alphabet, having a single textbook for each class, in which children are at very different levels, is clearly insufficient. The use of language and other textbooks from earlier grades in the class could be helpful. A small library of textbooks of all previous grades can be made available for student use. In all cases, teachers need to be trained and regularly supported to use a variety of materials to address the different learning levels of children.

Extra Support for Learning

Parents were asked about whether the school had been providing additional after-school classes, or classes on weekends and vacations, provided free of charge. They were also asked whether their child, in addition to attending school, watched educational programs on television or on the phone (if these are provided), or listened to them on the radio. Parents were also asked if they provided private tuition to their child. The results are presented in Table 3. These responses are to be treated as indicative, as parents may not have a precise idea of what the child is doing (for instance, the child may be purportedly watching TV or following classes on the phone but may not be engaged in

learning). Private tuition was not widespread among the sample children in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, reflecting the fact that the sample was focused more on the disadvantaged sections. 40% children in Telangana were reported to be taking private tuition. This could be because, in Telangana, the sample had a broader dispersion of caste and occupation groups than in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Table 3: Extra support for student learning

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
	Percentage of parents		
Some extra classes organized by school (after hours):			
Govt. schools	23 %	38 %	13 %
Private schools	5 %	39 %	42 %
Watches educational programs on TV	15 %	35 %	15 %
Follows classes on phone	38 %	60 %	24 %
Listens to educational programs on radio	12 %	18 %	11 %
Private tuition	12 %	40 %	8 %

Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 20

Note: The questions were asked about the youngest child who is currently enrolled.

Online vs Face-to-face Interactions

The opinions of parents about online education were unequivocal: that children learnt virtually nothing. While they acknowledged that health and safety were important, parents were found to be overwhelmingly in favour of keeping schools open for in-person learning. In particular, parents highlighted the fact that children could not follow lessons, could not comprehend, and did not enjoy online classes (usually taken via phone, if at all), leading to a loss of interest and motivation. The lack of devices and stable internet connectivity, the need to supervise children closely to keep them engaged, and the need to support them academically, were other reasons cited by parents for wanting schools to be open. Given the concerns raised in the media about COVID-19 transmission, there were also some concerns expressed by parents about whether sanitary precautions are being followed and the risks to

Figure 2: Issues with online education identified by some parents in Telangana



Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 21

children. Some examples of the major concerns of parents can be seen in Figure 2.

Financial Burdens

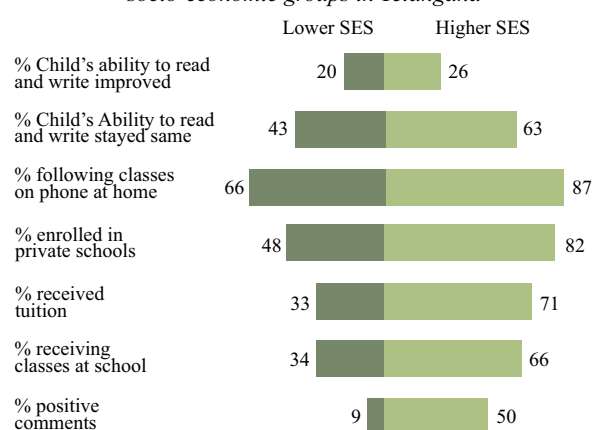
Two main concerns that emerged through the study were that parents were unable to pay fees in private schools and they had to bear the extra financial cost of online classes (paying for devices and data), whether in government or private schools. In Tamil Nadu, about 15% of parents who had children in private schools said they had not paid the fees. During the previous year, the proportion was 6%. In the Telangana sample, while only 4% of parents said they had not paid fees in private schools for the current academic year, about 20% did not pay fees during the previous year. The additional financial burdens imposed on parents due to online education is not highlighted often. In fact, during the pandemic, it appeared that poor parents have had to pay more to access online education of low quality or else forego education for their children.

Education Inequality

The sample in Telangana had a broader dispersion of caste and occupation groups than in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These households were separated into two broad socio-economic groups to study them in greater depth. The relatively 'higher socio-economic status'

group had the following characteristics: employed in 'formal sector', belongs to 'other castes', and speaks English at home, while the 'lower socio-economic status' group had the following characteristics: employed in 'informal sector', belongs to SC/ST/OBC, does not speak English at home. The striking differences in the educational experiences of children

Figure 3: Differences in parents' responses across socio-economic groups in Telangana



Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 25

from these two groups are shown in Figure 3 for a selected set of important variables.

The findings indicate that the period of school closures deepened inequality in the system. While children from poor and marginalized families found it extremely challenging to access online education,

those parents who could support their children's online education felt that their children had made some academic progress, even during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The findings of this rapid survey of parents in three states have implications for how the reopening of schools should be reorganised. There is a need to not only 'resume' but also 'renew' education. Many parents in this study have expressed the hope that with the return to school, their children can improve in learning. But the reality is that, as these children return to school, teachers face incredible challenges in the classroom. Resuming the normal academic curriculum, offering short bridge courses or some cursory 'remedial classes' will not cut it. A comprehensive recovery plan will have to be developed by each state. Decentralized teacher interactions at cluster and block levels, with facilitation, to discuss challenges, identify local solutions and share successes, as well as support for children's learning and development outside schools through community learning centres and parents are essential.

Many state governments and the Union Government are pushing for digital solutions, but the overwhelming response of parents from disadvantaged groups is clear: keep schools open; online learning is not working for children; many children are excluded, and there are unforeseen impacts on children's behaviour. Without parents who are able to guide and support children at home, the broad-brush use of

technology can only lead to greater inequality. Any technological components should be simple, those which can be handled by teachers, and mainly for teacher support such as sharing of resources, accessing open education resources, and teacher webinars. The danger of reinforcing passive approaches, for example, watching videos during the class instead of facilitating children's learning, must not be underestimated.

The community-based Illam Thedi Kalvi (School Comes Home) program launched by the Tamil Nadu government is proof that a massive communication and mobilization effort is possible in order to complement the changes introduced in the school curriculum, especially at the foundational level. The Karnataka government has also launched Kalika Chetarike (Learning Recovery), an initiative which prioritizes learning recovery for the next year. These seem to be positive steps from a policy-making perspective but their success will depend on how they are implemented and how they impact children's lives on the ground. Guidelines such as 'A Future at Stake' (NCEE, 2021) and 'Covid-19 Recovery and Early Years' Education' (NCEE, 2021) can be very useful in enabling systemic changes at the school, cluster, block, and eventually state level. More steps in this direction and their adoption are the need of the hour. Every child is important and every child should be supported.

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Impact of Covid-19 on Children's Education and Lifestyle Behaviour: Evidence from Online Survey in Himachal Pradesh

Shailika Rawat

Abstract

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented capriciousness all over the world and has gradually taken a toll on almost every sector. Children have been affected by COVID-19 restrictions such as the closure of educational institutions and social distancing. In this context, the present paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on children's education and lifestyle behaviour. With the help of a self-administered questionnaire, 121 responses were collected from children studying in the schools and colleges of Himachal Pradesh. The findings revealed that flexible schedules, increased technology literacy, and less time consumption are the major benefits of online classes perceived by children. However, the challenges faced include technical issues in terms of lack of connectivity and limited internet speed and less understanding of the concepts due to reduced face-to-face interactions with the teachers. The findings related to the impact of COVID-19 on lifestyle behaviour have indicated a low level of physical activity (PA) and high levels of sedentary behaviour (SB) among children.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, children, education, lifestyle behaviour

1. Introduction

The first officially confirmed case of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) was noted on the December 31, 2019 in Wuhan, China. Since it was deemed a contagious disease and found to be rapidly spreading all over the world, on March 11th, 2020, WHO declared it a pandemic (Senol and Zeren, 2020). India has also been affected by this contagious disease, and the first case of COVID-19 was reported on January 30, 2020, in Kerala. Since then, exponential growth has been witnessed in the reported cases daily.

The imposition of curfews, lockdowns, travel restrictions and the shutting down of workplaces, shopping malls, trade, and businesses by the government have shuddered all economies (Senol and Zeren, 2020). The education industry was the worst hit, as COVID-19 led to the closure of educational institutions. In India, all educational institutions were

temporarily closed in March 2020. As such, educational institutions started to search for ways of providing education to children. They were able to deal with the problem of educational institution closures by using creative digital interventions (Muthuprasad et.al, 2021). Thus, online learning tools emerged as a boon in times of need. In April 2020, the erstwhile Ministry of Human Resource Development came up with Alternative Academic Calendar guidelines on continuing formal education online in the 2020-21 academic year. The Government of India took several measures to reduce the adverse impact of COVID-19 on the education sector. Remote-learning solutions using traditional tools such as textbooks and home visits, tech-enabled and mass communication solutions (like WhatsApp, YouTube, TV and radio), and learning-enabling solutions (like midday meals, sanitation kits, and monetary support) are among the measures (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2021). Various e-

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learning platforms were used to cater to learners' needs, like e-Pathshala, DIKSHA, Swayam, and the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2021).

An impact on the lifestyle behaviour of the children has also been witnessed, besides the impact on education. COVID-19 restrictions led to the closure of schools and universities, which reduced sports-related activities. Furthermore, social distancing norms and the closure of public places, parks, gyms, and sports clubs have hampered the physical activity that has an impact on the healthy lifestyle of children (Greier, 2021).

State factors such as healthcare infrastructure and the proportion of services in the economy influenced health and economic results, stressing the necessity of proper social spending and healthcare infrastructure (IMF, 2021). The COVID-19 vulnerability index, according to Economics Times 2020, identified Himachal Pradesh as the most vulnerable state among the 36 states and union territories, while Meghalaya was the least vulnerable. The index was created using factors relating to health infrastructure, demographics, and underlying health problems. The first case was reported in Himachal on March 20, 2020, and it had a wide-ranging economic impact. Mining and quarrying (-18.4%), followed by forestry (-17.5%), saw the largest drop in primary sectors in 2020-21 (Economic Survey 2020-21). Owing to the lack of labour due to the lockdown, the state's manufacturing and construction growth rates have slowed. In 2020-21, the state saw the greatest decrease in visitor arrivals (-81.33%) compared to the previous year (Economic Survey 2020-21). The closure of educational institutions had a significant impact on the education of children. Poor connectivity and network challenges were reported by deputy directors, principals, and headmasters during the COVID-19 pandemic in some sections of Kullu, Sirmaur, Chamba, Una, Mandi, Lahaul, and Spiti, for online lessons (The Tribune, 2021).

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought an unforeseen change in the lives of many people, including children. In this context, this study aimed at examining the impact of COVID-19 on children's education in Himachal Pradesh, as the scenario of online classes is

different in hilly areas or rural areas as compared to plain areas or urban areas. Further, an attempt has been made to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the lifestyle behaviour of children, an area that has been less explored in the context of India. Therefore, the objectives of the study are as follows.

Objectives of the study:

- To investigate children's perceptions of the benefits of online classes.
- To investigate the children's perceptions of the challenges they face in online classes.
- To investigate the children's satisfaction level with online classes
- To examine the impact of COVID-19 on children's lifestyle behaviour

Null Hypothesis:

Null hypothesis (Ho1): There is no significant difference in benefits perceived, challenges confronted and lifestyle behaviour concerning gender, age, class and nature of school/college.

To test the framed null hypothesis, either parametric or non-parametric tests can be used. Since based on Shapiro–Wilk test, the normality assumption for the data is not met, Kruskal Wallis Test has been used to test the null hypothesis at a 5% level of significance.

2. Research Methodology

The research design is exploratory until the identification of COVID-19 impact parameters for education and lifestyle behaviour. When it comes to evaluating children's perceptions of COVID-19 impact, the study becomes descriptive.

Data Collection

For the study, a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect primary data from the target respondents, which included children studying in schools and colleges in Himachal Pradesh, covering the age group of 14–19 years old.

The self-administered questionnaire was developed with the help of Google forms. Then, the link was shared with the target respondent. The respondents were selected using a convenience and judgement

sampling method. The children who did not have their smartphones, filled the questionnaire by using their parents' smartphones. Open-ended questions were kept in the questionnaire, which allowed the children to share their opinions on different aspects of the COVID-19 impact on education and lifestyle behaviour. The data was collected between March 4, 2022 and April 7, 2022. 121 valid responses have been received from respondents through the questionnaire. The data collected is a representative sample as it reflects the experiences of the children from different age groups and of different education levels. Further, due to the online survey, the respondents were included from different districts of Himachal Pradesh.

Data Analysis

The data collected with the help of a Google form-based questionnaire was compiled into an excel sheet. The data collected has been analysed using Excel and SPSS software and the results have been depicted with the help of frequency tables, pie charts, and stacked bar charts. Due to the multiple response options in the question related to lifestyle behaviour, the multiple response tool of SPSS has been used for the analysis of recorded responses.

Limitation of the Study

Sample size is small because the time available for the study was short, so if sufficient time was there, then more samples could be there as such results would also vary. Since Google forms were used for preparing the questionnaire, the honesty and frankness of the respondents involved cannot be completely assured. One more limitation is that the area covered for the survey is limited as responses have been collected from the respondents residing in Himachal Pradesh only. Thus, if the area covered is increased, the results may vary.

3. Results and Discussion

The study is an attempt to examine the impact of COVID-19 on children's education and lifestyle behaviour. Due care has been taken during the collection of data to ensure there is no personal bias in the data collected.

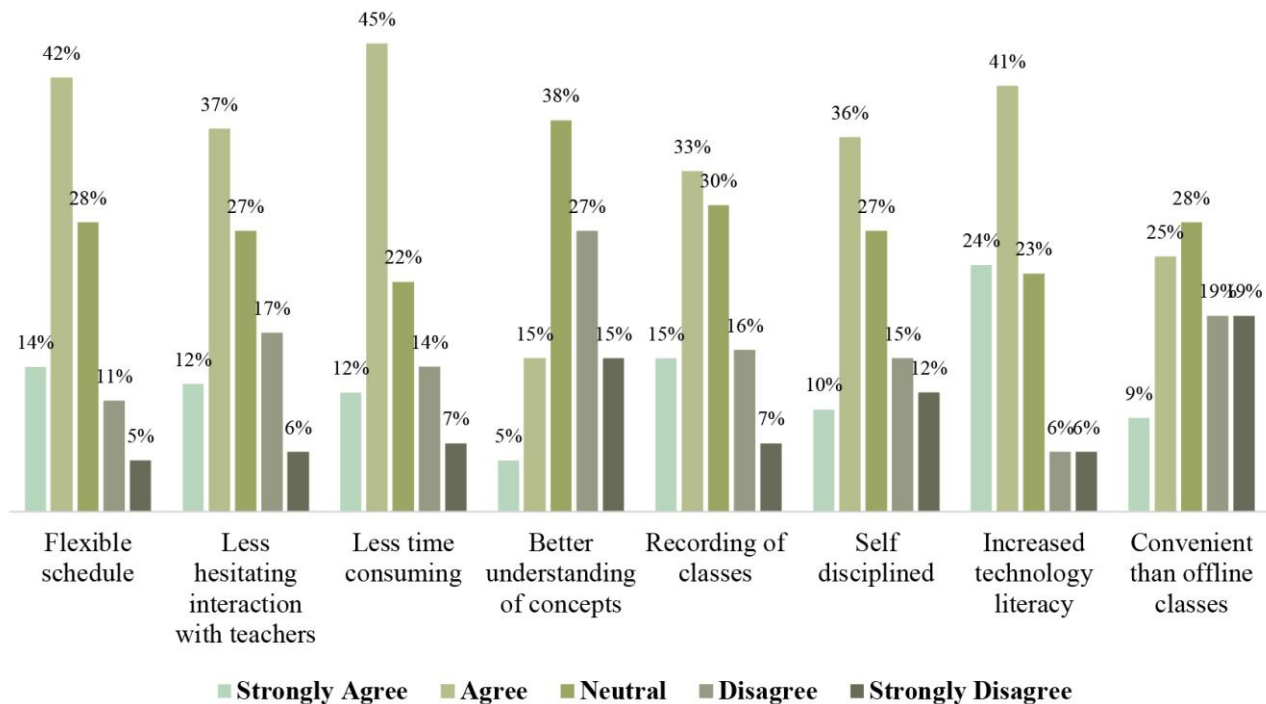
I. Analysis of Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographics are personal characteristics such as age, gender, occupation, etc, used to categorise respondents. It helps in the determination of whether the individuals covered in the study are a representative sample of the target population for generalisation purposes. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. A total of 121 valid responses from the children in the 14-19-year-old age group were recorded. Of the total 121 respondents, 49.6% were female, and the other 50.4% were male. The respondents included children studying in both schools and colleges.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

		Frequency (percent)
Gender	Female	60(49.6)
	Male	61(50.4)
Age	14 years	2(1.7)
	15 years	8(6.6)
	16 years	17(14.0)
	17 years	26(21.5)
	18 years	37(30.6)
	19 years	31(25.6)
Class	Grade8	1(0.8)
	Grade9	1(0.8)
	Grade10	8(6.6)
	Grade11	20(16.5)
	Grade12	30(24.8)
	Bachelor's(1st year)	15(12.4)
	Bachelor's(2nd years)	32(26.4)
	Bachelor's(3rd year)	6(5.0)
Nature of School/ College	Others	8(6.6)
	Government	64(52.9)
	Private	57(47.1)

Source: Data collected by author

Figure 1: Demographic profile of respondents

II. Survey on COVID-19 Impact

1. Benefits of Online Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are many benefits to attending online classes, like a flexible schedule, less hesitation during interactions with teachers, recording of classes becoming possible, increased technology literacy, etc. For all the children, the benefits may not have the same weightage. Some may give more weightage to recorded classes, while others may appeal to flexible schedules.

Figure 1 shows that around 64.3% children agreed with the fact that online classes have increased their technological literacy. A tech-literate child can assess, acquire, and communicate in a digital environment with digital tools (e.g., computers, smartphones, and tablets). The second most agreed benefit of online classes is that they are less time-consuming, as per 57% children. Online classes require less time to learn than offline classes because students can learn from the comfort of their own homes and at their own pace (World Economic Forum, 2020). It also reduces travel time and expenses. Flexible schedules are found to be another most selected benefit perceived by children. With a flexible schedule, they

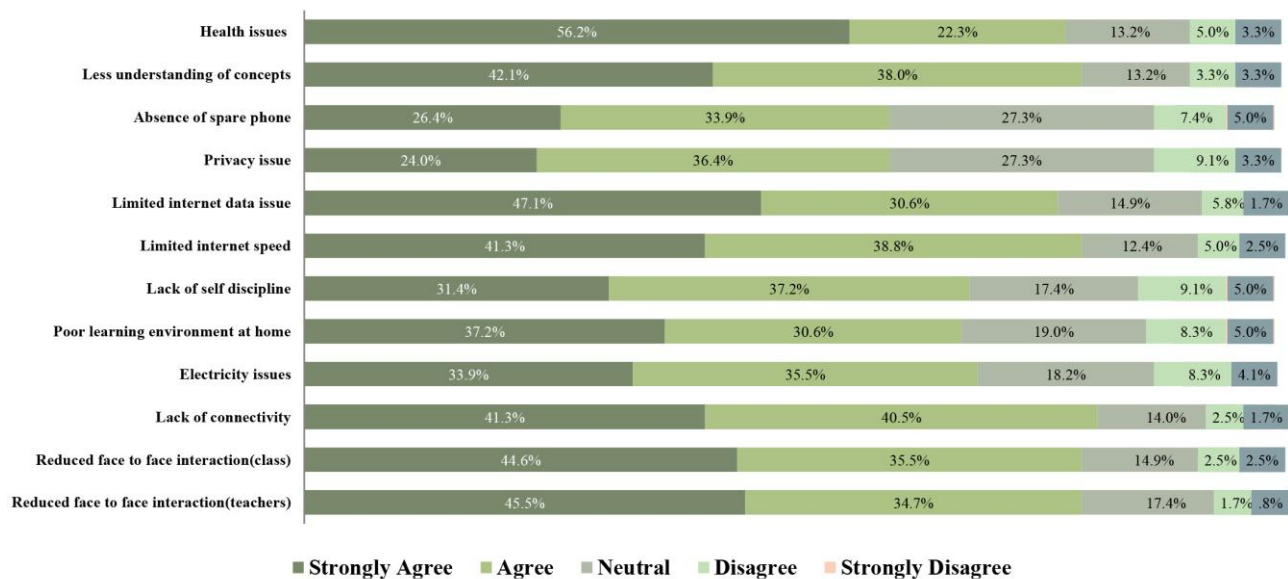
have not been tied down to a fixed schedule of the offline classroom settings. Muthuprasad et al. (2021) in their study also found similar results, where they concluded that flexible schedules and an increase in technical skills were major perceived benefits by the students. From all the possible benefits offered as an option in the questionnaire, most of the children have indicated their disagreement with a better understanding of the concepts. It shows the difficulty of children in understanding academic course syllabuses via an online platform.

2. Challenges faced during Online Classes

As a way to overcome the problem of closure of educational institutions, a shift from offline classes to online platforms and TV channels was witnessed across various countries. However, the shift threw up many challenges to be faced by children, like lack of face-to-face interactions with teachers, technical issues (e.g. lack of connectivity, limited internet speed, and limited data issues), privacy issues, health issues, etc.

Figure 2 shows the challenges faced by children during online classes. The 5-point Likert scale was used in which respondents specified their level of agreement towards listed possible challenges. It can

Figure 2: Challenges faced during online classes



be observed from the stacked bar chart that 81.8% and 80.2% of the total children have faced technical issues, i.e., lack of connectivity and limited internet speed, respectively.

A 16-year-old girl studying in Grade 11 expressed, *"Online classes are very poor for some people who have no source of internet in their village, so please check that they get the internet for online classes."*

As per Census 2011 data, 89.97% of the total population of Himachal Pradesh lives in the villages of rural areas, where people face internet connectivity issues. According to the reports of deputy directors, principals, and headmasters, during the COVID-19 pandemic, poor connectivity and network issues were faced in some parts of Kullu, Sirmour, Chamba, Una, Mandi, Lahaul, and Spiti for online classes (The Tribune, 2021).

Further, other major challenges mentioned by children included reduced face-to-face interactions with teachers, reduced face-to-face interactions with their class, and less understanding of concepts. Online classes are found to be less effective than offline classes when it comes to interaction with the teacher, as it becomes difficult to understand the concepts (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Children feel motivated by social interactions with their classmates. However, during online classes, it is difficult to indulge in interactions or discussions with classmates, especially when they have to complete group projects (Wut and

Xu, 2021). This is in line with the least preferred benefit of online classes by children, i.e., a better understanding of concepts, as mentioned in the results of Figure 1.

According to 78.5% children, health issues have been observed as another major challenge. During online classes, children faced health issues like eye strain, back pain, and neck pain due to prolonged sitting and screen time.

The least selected challenges include the absence of a spare phone and privacy issues. It highlights the easy availability of smartphones for children to take online classes.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on Childrens' Lifestyle Behaviour

Lifestyle behaviours include everyday activities that result from an individual's norms, values, and knowledge shaped by socio-economic and cultural surroundings (Jarosz, 2018). Lifestyle behaviours have an impact on overall health and are influenced by several social characteristics. The study examined the impact of COVID-19 on the lifestyle behaviours of the children. Physical activity and sedentary lifestyle behaviour have a crucial impact on the health of a person. Physical activity (PA) refers to all the activities like cycling, walking, running, etc, that lead to body movement, whereas there is little physical movement in sedentary behaviour (SB) (e.g., watching television or videos, playing computer

Table 2: Activities increased during COVID-19 period

Activities	Frequency of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses	Percentage of Persons
Going for walk	51	9.4%	42.1%
Sports practice/training	39	7.2%	32.2%
Household activities (eg. Cleaning, cooking etc.)	73	13.5%	60.3%
Jogging/running	29	5.4%	24.0%
Cycling	29	5.4%	24.0%
Watching television/videos/ movies	66	12.2%	54.5%
Playing computer or video games	36	6.7%	29.8%
Using social media (eg. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube etc.)	74	13.7%	61.2%
Reading newspaper or online news	30	5.5%	24.8%
Reading novels	22	4.1%	18.2%
Video calls with relatives	35	6.5%	28.9%
Video calls with friends	50	9.2%	41.3%
Others	7	1.3%	5.8%
Total	541	100.0%	447.1%

Source: Data collected by author

games or video games, etc.). Sedentary behaviour tends to cause health issues like obesity, heart problems, depression, anxiety, etc. The children were asked to choose the activities that have increased in their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to study the impact of COVID-19 on lifestyle behaviour. The children were given the option to select more than one response. As such, multiple response analysis has been done for the recorded multiple responses.

It is evident from Table 2, that 61.2% of the children had witnessed an increase in the use of social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube etc.). Children were accustomed to sitting in front of a computer screen for extended periods to complete their schoolwork. Children had become accustomed to using social media platforms as a result of the limited social interactions available during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further led to increased screen time and thus an increase in sedentary behaviour (Greier et al., 2021). 60.3% children have admitted that their involvement in household activities (e.g. cleaning, cooking, etc.) had increased during the pandemic. Researchers have found that doing household chores is as effective as running or

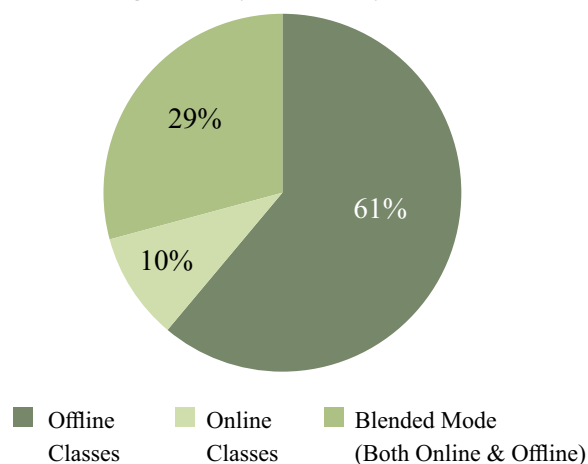
going to the gym, thus having a positive impact on heart health (Shelley Emling, 2017). The third most selected activity is watching television, videos, or movies, which again constitutes a part of sedentary behaviour. Children have been observed as less active when it comes to reading novels, followed by jogging, running, and cycling. Moreover, jogging, running, and cycling form a very important part of the physical activity required for a healthy lifestyle.

In the others category, an open-ended question was there, where children mentioned other activities being performed that were not given in the list. It includes a healthy lifestyle, painting, dancing, reading holy books, mental exercises, reading books, and increased sleeping time.

A boy in Grade 12 selected cycling and stated that he “*Couldn't do any other activity. The reason is not able to understand concepts in online classes so required to watch online video lectures on YouTube, making notes and all. Thus, didn't get much time to utilise it for sports activities.*” It shows the difficulty of managing an academic syllabus during online classes.

4. Children's Perception of Preferred Mode of Class

A preferred mode of class means the best mode of class perceived by children for a better learning experience. Figure 3, indicates that 61% children are in favour of offline classroom settings for a better learning experience. The reason could be the challenges faced by the children during online classes, which include reduced face-to-face interaction with teachers and classmates, less understanding of

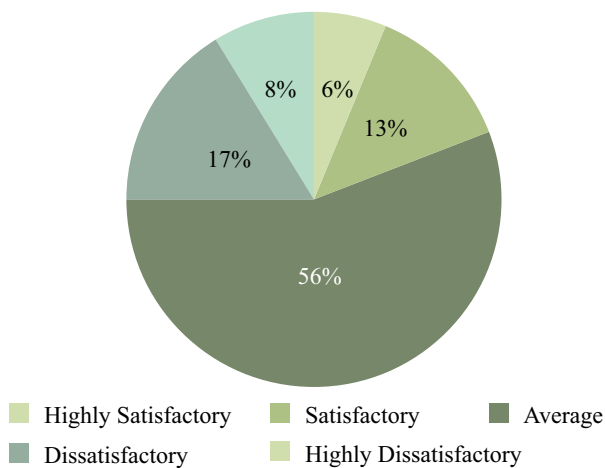
Figure 3: Preferred mode of class

concepts, and technical issues like lack of connectivity and limited internet speed. Only 10% children preferred online classes, whereas the blended mode (both offline and online classes) was preferred by 29% children. *"It would be better to be available for classes in person as compared to online"; "Classes are better when conducted through offline mode"* was stated in the suggestion category of the questionnaire by 2 children, respectively.

5. Children's Perception Towards Overall Satisfaction Level with Online Classes

Figure 4 shows that 56% children have given an average rating of the overall satisfaction level with online classes. A girl in Grade 12 expressed *"Online classes were new to all the students. We were never*

Figure 4: Overall Satisfaction Level with Online Classes



introduced to it. That's why it was difficult for us to adjust. Because it was new to us, we as students suffered a lot, especially when you are in higher classes like the 11th and 12th when you need to understand each and every topic carefully, which wasn't possible in online mode. Also, as we were not very clear with the concepts, it had a huge impact on our marks".

Only 19% children have shown satisfaction with online classes. On the other hand, 25% children have shown dissatisfaction with the experience of online learning. It can be concluded that most of the children were not satisfied with their experience of online learning. Therefore, their preferred mode of class is offline class for better learning, as revealed in Figure 3 results.

Table 3 presents the Kruskal Wallis Test computation.

It exhibits that no significant difference was found for all the variables across categories of class. On the basis of gender, a significant impact was found for three variables that include a flexible schedule, sports practice/training and jogging/running. In comparison to boys, more girls see flexibility in online education as a plus. In addition, boys were more likely than girls to participate in sports practice/training and jogging activities. In comparison to boys, it is evident that girls are more serious and committed to academic achievement. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to participate in outdoor activities and face less sociocultural barriers to doing so (Dunton et al., 2020; Shukla et. al, 2021).

The findings demonstrate that children in the age range of 16 years (school students) had much more difficulty than children in the age category of 17-19 years, mostly college students, due to limited face-to-face interaction with the class. In the school years, face-to-face engagement with classmates is crucial. It provides a neutral atmosphere for social interactions, allowing children to practice skills such as setting boundaries, learning collaboration, group discussion, and empathy. These abilities are critical for developing social relationships as a youth and as an adult.

The perceived benefits of better understanding of concepts were much lower among 16 years old children than among 17-18 years old children due to reduced face-to-face interaction. Considering the nature of school/college, children studying in government institutions have a considerably higher inclination to read newspapers or online news than children studying in private educational institutions.

Conclusion

The present study examines the impact of COVID-19 on children's education and lifestyle behaviour. For this purpose, the data was collected from children studying in schools and colleges in the age group of 14–19 years. The findings relate to the benefits of online classes revealed that flexible schedules, increased technology literacy, and less time consumption are the major benefits perceived by children. Similar results were given by Muthuprasad et.al. (2021) in their study. However, some challenges

Table 3: Hypothesis testing: Kruskal Wallis Test

Variables	Gender		Age		Class		Nature of school /college	
	Chi-Square	p-value	Chi-Square	p-value	Chi-Square	p-value	Chi-Square	p-value
Challenges								
Reduced face to face interaction (teachers)	.681	.409	9.007	.109	12.099	.147	.301	.583
Reduced face to face interaction (class)	2.304	.129	11.419	.044	12.342	.137	1.533	.216
Lack of connectivity	.256	.613	6.200	.287	12.613	.126	.584	.445
Electricity issues	2.178	.140	8.565	.128	13.055	.110	.116	.734
Poor learning environment at home	.111	.739	2.209	.820	7.414	.493	.267	.606
Lack of self discipline	.387	.534	9.045	.107	9.055	.338	.287	.592
Limited internet speed	.077	.781	9.418	.093	6.097	.636	1.475	.225
Limited internet data issue	1.340	.247	7.350	.196	5.924	.656	.794	.373
Privacy issue	.054	.816	4.337	.502	4.875	.771	1.006	.316
Absence of spare phone	1.443	.230	5.534	.354	4.032	.854	.000	.996
Less understanding of concepts	.499	.480	1.444	.919	9.773	.281	.127	.721
Health issues	1.572	.210	4.701	.453	7.032	.533	.001	.975
Benefits								
Flexible schedule	3.864	.049	5.733	.333	9.320	.316	2.682	.102
Less hesitating interaction with teachers	1.311	.252	1.260	.939	9.731	.284	1.757	.185
Less time consuming	.299	.585	1.658	.894	5.569	.695	3.604	.058
Better understanding of concepts	.174	.677	13.501	.019	6.617	.578	.028	.867
Recording of classes	.183	.669	10.103	.072	4.233	.836	.987	.321
Self-disciplined	.367	.544	4.614	.465	14.254	.075	2.365	.124
Increased technology literacy	.724	.395	4.923	.425	6.843	.554	.672	.412
Convenient than offline classes	.498	.481	7.577	.181	5.286	.727	.598	.439
Activities								
Going for walk	.224	.636	6.577	.254	7.033	.533	.000	.993
Sports practice/training	13.091	.000	3.202	.669	1.374	.995	.059	.807
Household activities (eg. Cleaning, cooking etc.)	.088	.767	5.475	.361	7.037	.533	.051	.821
Jogging/running	7.324	.007	2.377	.795	5.939	.654	.079	.779
Cycling	3.452	.063	1.675	.892	7.333	.501	.021	.886
Watching television/videos/movies	.070	.791	4.366	.498	9.558	.297	.484	.487
Playing computer or video games	2.327	.127	2.779	.734	9.706	.286	1.456	.228
Using social media (eg. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube etc.)	.067	.796	9.625	.087	13.325	.101	2.063	.151
Reading newspaper or online news	2.642	.104	10.500	.062	8.208	.413	4.647	.031
Reading novels	1.865	.172	5.563	.351	9.056	.338	.592	.442
Video calls with relatives	.020	.887	3.808	.577	5.904	.658	.990	.320
Video calls with friends	.197	.657	10.060	.074	9.592	.295	.328	.567
Others	.133	.715	2.266	.811	12.647	.125	1.749	.186

have been faced by the children during online classes. The findings show that most of the children have faced technical issues in terms of connectivity and internet speed. The measures should be taken by administrators and policymakers to ensure proper internet networks, especially in the villages of Himachal Pradesh, where children faced network issues during online classes. The measures are required to meet future COVID-19 pandemic-like uncertainties. Another challenge faced by children was lesser understanding of the concepts due to a lack of face-to-face interactions with the teachers.

The findings relate to the impact of COVID-19 on children's lifestyle behaviour have indicated an increase in the sedentary behaviour of the children. It is evident from the fact that children have witnessed an increase in sedentary behaviour like the use of social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube etc.), watching the television/videos/movies, and

video calls with friends. Similar results have been found in different studies (like Greier et al., 2021; Dunton et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). They have concluded that during the COVID-19 pandemic, physical activity (PA) decreased and sedentary behaviour (SB) increased as compared to the pre-COVID period. Low PA activities and high SB activities could lead to obesity, diabetes, mental stress, and heart diseases among children. Therefore, strategic interventions by policymakers, educational institutions, and, more importantly, parents are required to promote PA and reduce SB among children.

Policymakers and concerned authorities should analyse how the pandemic has impacted different sectors, like education or health, and accordingly invest in the required areas. Also, they should take measures to meet pandemic-like situations or uncertainties that may arise in the future.

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Learning Disruptions during COVID-19: Findings from a Survey in National Capital Region

Manjitha Banerji | Reem Ashraf

Abstract

School closures on account of the pandemic have caused unprecedented educational crises across the world. In this paper, we assess the impact that the pandemic caused in terms of disrupted learnings in the Delhi metropolitan area drawing on a unique representative panel survey carried out across 5,253 households in the National Capital Region in the years 2019 and 2021. Results indicate that in contrast to what is usually observed a higher proportion of children are out-of-school in the younger (6- 10 years) than older (11- 14 years) age group at 12% and 9% respectively. A plausible reason for this pattern is that because schools were closed during the pandemic, many young children who would have otherwise been enrolled in school have been left out of the schooling system. A comparison of enrolment status between 2019 and 2021 indicates that of all the enrolled children in 2019, 90% remained enrolled and 10% dropped out in 2021. Patterns of dropout are along expected lines with more children dropping out from rural than urban areas. The number of dropouts is least in the union territory of Delhi. Older children are more likely to drop out as are children from socially and economically marginalized groups. Rather intriguingly, girls are not more likely to drop out than boys. Furthermore, only 51% of all children, 6 - 18 years of age, had access to remote learning provided by the school in the form of in-person online learning or access to learning materials such as lessons, notes, and worksheets in digital or non-digital form or through assignments of homework or school projects. Further disaggregation highlights that privileged children were more likely to access remote learning than their marginalized peers though gender differences continue to remain non- significant. The absence of gender differences in the study may be a peculiarity of the NCR or it may be because some of the other dimensions of school closure such as the gendered burden of household work were not taken into consideration. Children in secondary/ senior secondary grades had better access to remote learning than their peers in primary and upper-primary levels. This trend is likely to be motivated by the fact that board examinations are held at the secondary/senior secondary level and schools prioritized these classes when making provisions for digital or non-digital education during their closure. Future policy steps to help children overcome the learning disruptions include the following: bringing children, particularly young ones who are not part of the schooling system either because they dropped out or did not enrol during the pandemic, within the schooling fold. Second, ensuring regular attendance of children through its monitoring with the help of teachers, parents, and the community at large. Foundational reading and arithmetic skills need to be emphasized as well as steps need to be taken to enhance the quality of digital education.

Keywords: learning disruptions, COVID-19, national capital region, remote learning, school closure

1. Introduction

The learning disruptions during COVID-19 pandemic have received comparatively less attention than other disruptions such as to livelihoods and health. While this is understandable, the extent of the educational crisis caused by the pandemic should not be underestimated. It is

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estimated that the closure of schools has itself adversely impacted 320 million students in India¹ while a recent survey conducted by the Centre for Global Development across Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan found that more than 6% of children reported that they are unlikely to return to school (Akmal et al 2020). According to the United Nations, the quantum of education loss already amounts to two decades of educational gains being lost (UNESCO 2021).

Furthermore, it is expected that the learning crisis which existed in the country prior to the pandemic has been further exacerbated (Azim Premji University 2021; ASER Centre 2020; Young Lives 2020). For more than a decade, studies have documented glaring issues in the quality of education in two major providers—public and low-fee unaided private schools (Härmä 2009; Bhattacharjee 2019; Kundu 2019; Subramanian 2020; Lall et al 2020). With approximately 250 million students enrolled in 1.49 million schools (2017-18)², according to ASER, half of the rural students in grade five were unable to read text from grade two and two-thirds of them were unable to perform basic division (ASER, 2019). Other aspects of the learning crisis in India include absenteeism (Banerji and Mathur 2021); gendered differences in school outcomes (Mohanraj 2010) and other lines of socioeconomic stratifications (Alcott and Rose 2017).



Source: Photograph taken by author

With schools reopening and resumption of daily life past the peak of the pandemic and gradual lifting of lockdown, it is time to begin assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the education of children in the country so that appropriate steps can be taken to ameliorate the situation. In this paper, we present results from a panel survey conducted in the National Capital Region of Delhi in 2019 and then subsequently in 2021. The use of panel data allows us to draw a comparative picture of before (2019) and since (2021) the pandemic.

The National Capital Region was formed with the objective of planned decentralization of outer areas of Delhi and even areas outside of it.³ The latter comprises of the districts of the union territory of Delhi along with 2 districts in Rajasthan, 7 districts in Uttar Pradesh and 13 districts in Haryana. It is, therefore, a unique region surrounding Delhi with the latter enjoying considerable privilege by virtue of it being the national administrative capital of the country. However, considerable heterogeneity remains within the region across different socio-economic markers.

In terms of the economy, with a per capita income of ₹3,54,004/- at current prices, Delhi is one of the most prosperous regions in the country as reflected in per capita income (Economic Survey of Delhi, 2019). In contrast, the average per capita income in Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh is much lower. However, while district-level per capita income is not available, there are pockets of affluence in these states such as Gurugram and Faridabad in Haryana and, Noida and Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh on account of their strong economic linkage with Delhi.

A similar picture of inter-state disparity emerges with respect to education. The literacy rate among men and women in Delhi stood at 90.2% for men and 83.7% for women as per the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey. Haryana too does well; at 91.7% for men and 79.7% for women. Corresponding percentages for India are 84.4% and 71.5%. Literacy rates in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are lower than the all India percentages. About 65% of women in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are literate. The corresponding figure is 89% for men in Rajasthan and 82% in Uttar Pradesh.

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

² Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE), 2019.

³ <http://ncrpb.nic.in/history.html>

The Economic Survey of Delhi for the year 2018-2019 noted that it has a variety of 'good' schools but like other parts of the country, schools in Delhi too are stratified across quality (Juneja 2010; Endow 2018; Rao 2019; Subramanian 2020). Issues in publicly provisioned schools in Delhi are not limited to compromised learning in MCD schools and teacher shortages (Subramanian 2020). A recent study of Delhi-NCR's English medium low-fee private schools suggests poor learning achievement in English at the end of the primary level culminates further into poor learning in other subjects. The profile of children in two major types of schools i.e. publicly provisioned and unaided private low fee charging schools are more or less similar to those from across the country; most of the children fall in either one or more than one disadvantaged category such as urban poor, living in difficult terrains or sparsely populated regions, economically weaker sections, and socially disadvantaged groups. These children are most often with low levels of education in their families or are first-generation learners and lack the necessary support for learning at home (Lall et al 2020; Human Rights Watch 2021).

Finally, let us consider digital access, which is an important parameter in the context of school closure due to the pandemic and reliance on the internet as a means to reach out to children during this period. The details from NFHS- 5 are summarized in Table 1.1. Yet again district-level estimates are not available, but it is clear that Delhi has an edge over other regions within the National Capital Region in terms of access to the internet though it is by no means universal.

Table 1.1: Percentage of men and women who have ever used the internet in Delhi and its adjoining states

	All areas		Rural		Urban	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
All India	57.1	33.3	24.6	48.7	72.5	51.8
Delhi	85.2	63.8			85.1	63.7
Haryana	72.4	48.4	68.8	42.8	79.7	60.2
Rajasthan	65.2	36.9	59.4	30.8	81.7	56.1
Uttar Pradesh	59.1	30.6	54.2	24.5	72.4	50.2

Source: National Family Health Survey, 5th round

Given this backdrop, a study on the educational impact of COVID-19 in Delhi-NCR will highlight the variation in experiences and ability to deal with the crisis within a relatively small geographic and heterogeneous area. In the following section, we provide information about data and methods, followed by a section discussing the results. Conclusions are presented in the final section.

2. Survey Details

The analysis presented below draws on the Delhi Metropolitan Area Study. The study is based on a representative panel survey of 5,253 households or 27,417 individuals in the National Capital Region covering both rural and urban areas.

The baseline was conducted in 2019. The endline was scheduled for 2020 which had to be suspended due to the pandemic. The survey resumed in the period August-November 2021. Attrition is common in a panel survey and is more likely in this instance where the survey could be done only after a worldwide pandemic had subsided. Of the 5,253 households who participated in the baseline, the number of households at the end line was 4,292 households.

We lost a total of 961 households in the second round of the survey. Attrition was greater in Delhi, among well-off and general caste households. Nevertheless, a comparative assessment of the distribution of background characteristics of households at the base and end line suggests that they are broadly similar (see Table 2.1). For example, about 23% of households were residents of Delhi at the time of the baseline survey, which drops to 20% during the endline. Likewise, the richest households were 14% of the sample in 2019 which dropped to 10% in the survey round post-pandemic.

Education was one of the several domains covered in the survey. For all members of the household, information was collected on their level of education and current enrolment status. Further detailed questions, particularly on the disruptions caused by COVID-19, were asked at end-line to all members between the ages of 6-18 years. These questions form the basis of the results given in the next section.

Table 2.1: Sample characteristics of baseline and end line households (Unweighted)

	Baseline, n (%)	End line, n (%)	Non- response by demographic
Overall	5,253 (100)	4,292 (100)	18.3
National Capital Region			
Delhi	1,233 (23)	854 (20)	31.0
Haryana	1,736 (33)	1,492 (35)	14.0
Rajasthan	900 (17)	827 (19)	8.1
Uttar Pradesh	1,384 (26)	1,119 (26)	19.0
Area of residence			
Rural	2,639 (50)	2,455 (57)	7.00
Urban	2,614 (50)	1,837 (43)	30.0
Religion			
Hindu	4,517 (86)	3,731 (87)	17.0
Muslim	625 (12)	491 (11)	21.0
Other	111 (2.1)	70 (1.6)	37.0
Caste			
General	1,887 (36)	1,376 (32)	27.0
Other Backward Class	1,970 (38)	1,695 (39)	14.0
Scheduled Caste	1,296 (25)	1,135 (26)	12.0
Scheduled Tribe	84 (1.6)	73 (1.7)	13.0
Other	16 (0.3)	13 (0.3)	19.0
Economic status			
Poorest	1,342 (26)	1,189 (28)	11.0
Poorer	838 (16)	720 (17)	14.0
Middle	1,315 (25)	1,116 (26)	15.0
Richer	1,039 (20)	827 (19)	20.0
Richest	719 (14)	440 (10)	39.0

Source: Field survey

The total number of children in the age group 6-18 years is 6,668 in 2019 and 5,327 in 2021. Key sample characteristics of surveyed children at baseline and endline are summarised in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Sample characteristics of children between 6- 18 years at baseline and end-line (Unweighted)

	Baseline, n (%)	End line, n (%)
Overall	6,668 (100)	5,327 (100)
Gender		
Boys	3,580 (53.69)	2,864 (53.76)
Girls	3,088 (46.31)	2,463 (46.24)
Age group		
6- 10 years	2,477 (37.15)	2,027 (38.05)
11- 14 years	1,935 (29.02)	1,592 (29.89)
15- 18 years	2,256 (33.83)	1,708 (32.06)
National Capital Region		
Delhi	1,360 (20.40)	960 (18.02)
Haryana	1,982 (29.72)	1683 (31.59)
Rajasthan	1,280 (19.20)	1,106 (20.76)
Uttar Pradesh	2,046 (30.68)	1,578 (29.62)
Area of residence		
Rural	3,683 (55.23)	3,226 (60.56)
Urban	2,985 (44.77)	2,101 (39.44)
Religion		
Hindu	5,432 (81.48)	4,374 (82.11)
Muslim	1,142 (17.13)	888 (16.67)
Other	93 (1.39)	65 (1.22)
Caste		
General	1,966 (29.48)	1,457 (27.35)
Other Backward Class	2,751 (41.26)	2,265 (42.52)
Scheduled Caste	1,805 (27.07)	1,498 (28.12)
Scheduled Tribe	125 (1.87)	107 (2.01)
Other	20 (0.30)	
Economic status		
Poorest	2,023 (30.34)	1,783 (33.47)
Poorer	1,208 (18.12)	1,011 (18.98)
Middle	1,661 (24.91)	1,295 (24.31)
Richer	1,133 (16.99)	854 (16.03)
Richest	642 (9.63)	384 (7.21)

Source: Field survey

3. Results

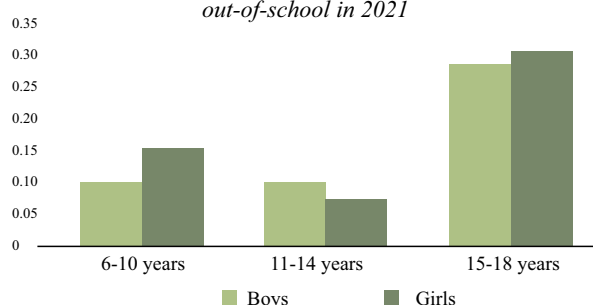
Enrolment Rates

We begin with a look at the proportion of children who were reported as out-of-school (that is, they were either never enrolled or dropped out) in 2021 (see Figure 3.1). Usually, a higher proportion of children are out-of-school in the older than younger age group. For example, ASER 2019 reveals that overall, in rural India about 2% of children in 7-10 years were out-of-

Children First

school; the corresponding percentage for children in 15-16 years is 14%. But, in this instance, a higher proportion of children are out-of-school in the younger (6-10 years) than older (11-14 years) age group at 12% and 9% respectively. A plausible reason for this pattern is that because schools were closed during the pandemic, many young children who would have otherwise been enrolled in school have been left out of the schooling system. Further, the breakdown by gender indicates that the gap is wider for girls than boys in the 6-10 years and it is the other way round for 11-14 years. Thus, about 10% of boys in both 6-10 years and 11-14 years are out-of-school; the corresponding percentages for girls are 15% and 7% respectively. A comparison of enrolment status between 2019 and 2021 also throws light on the disruptions brought

Figure 3.1: Proportion of children who are out-of-school in 2021



about due to the pandemic. Given that these are mostly the same group of children that are tracked in both 2019 and 2021; it is perhaps not surprising that we see an overall reduction in children who never enrolled and a corresponding increase in dropout between these two rounds (Table 3.1). The sharp increase in dropouts between 2019 and 2021 can reasonably be attributed to the pandemic. Overall, for the age group 6-18 years, dropout in 2021 was slightly less than 1 and a half times of what it was in 2019. Disaggregated by age group, it was particularly striking for the 6-10 years (about 4.5 times).

While Table 3.1 allows for a comparative assessment of enrolment in 2019 and 2021, it is also important to draw on the panel component of the data to examine the percentage who were enrolled in both the years, those that dropped out between 2019 and 2021, those who were never enrolled in 2019 but enrolled in 2021 and those who were never enrolled in both these years. Table 3.2 illustrates that about 4,317 children were

Table 3.1: Enrolment status of children between 6 - 18 years by age group and gender (weighted), 2019 and 2021

	2019			2021		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
n	6,668	3,580	3,088	5,327	2,864	2,463
All children						
Enrolled	86.45	87.38	85.25	83.04	83.85	82.01
Drop out	9.69	9.50	9.95	13.90	13.47	14.45
Never enrolled	3.86	3.12	4.81	3.06	2.68	3.54
6- 10 years						
Enrolled	94.25	94.54	93.86	87.61	90.03	84.48
Drop out	1.42	2.07	0.57	6.51	5.16	8.26
Never enrolled	4.33	3.39	5.57	5.88	4.81	7.26
11- 14 years						
Enrolled	92.01	92.60	91.29	91.16	89.90	92.69
Drop out	4.55	4.27	4.89	7.63	8.48	6.59
Never enrolled	3.44	3.13	3.82	1.21	1.61	0.72
15- 18 years						
Enrolled	73.43	75.55	70.62	70.69	71.64	69.53
Drop out	22.84	21.62	24.45	27.48	26.97	28.11
Never enrolled	3.73	2.83	4.92	1.83	1.39	2.36

Source: Field survey

tracked in both rounds. Among dropout children, the majority continued to remain out of school. About a third of all never enrolled children in 2019 did not enrol in 2021 as well, while around a quarter were now enrolled. Worryingly, about 41% of the never enrolled children who had presumably enrolled in the interim period between 2019 and 2021 dropped out as well. It is, however, possible that these children were dropout even in 2019 but they were incorrectly recorded as never enrolled by the interviewer.⁴ Finally, of all the enrolled children in 2019, 90% remained enrolled and 10% dropped out in 2021.

Table 3.2: Enrolment status in 2019 and 2021

	Enrolment status in 2021			
	Currently enrolled	Drop out	Never enrolled	n
Enrolment status in 2019				
Currently enrolled	89.52	10.03	0.45	3,978
Drop out	19.54	76.54	3.91	208
Never enrolled	25.56	41.30	33.14	131
n	3,669	571	77	4,317

Source: Field survey

Table 3.3 presents the individual and socio-economic background characteristics of all children who were enrolled in 2019 but dropped out in 2021. This is presented for all children as well as disaggregated by gender. The table indicates that there are more boys than girls among this group of children. A pattern of dropout is along expected lines with more children dropping out from rural than other urban areas. Dropouts are least in the union territory of Delhi.⁵ Older children are more likely to drop out as are children from higher grades. In light of evidence that there is caste differentiation among Muslims (Tiwari et al 2022; Trivedi et al 2016); we have grouped them into general and marginalised, scheduled castes/ other backward castes. As one would expect, more dropouts belong to the marginalized castes. The widest gap, however, emerges between general castes among Muslims (13%) and scheduled castes among Hindus (29%). Economic affluence is also associated with dropout. It is intriguing to note that the differences in these characteristics by gender are not significant.

School Closure and Remote Learning during the Pandemic

Schools were closed in March 2020 as a means to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. However, education being a state subject, periods of school closure varied across states in the National Capital Region. Rough calculations incorporating both periods of academic closure and the pandemic indicate that between March 2020 - October 2021, Delhi had the longest period of school closure (585 days), followed by Uttar Pradesh (481 days), Haryana (318 days) and Rajasthan (310 days). Schools opened only briefly for primary grades; greater emphasis was placed on opening schools for Class IX-Class XII because board examinations are held for Class X and Class XII.

Schools extended remote learning through digital and non-digital resources to help children learn during the lengthy period of school closure. The survey asked respondents about the following ways in which they

could reach out to their students while they were closed:

1. In-person online teaching.

Table 3.3: Background characteristics of children (weighted) between 6- 18 years who dropped out between 2019- 2021

	All children	Boys	Girls	Test of significance (chi - square)
<i>n</i>	383	210	173	
Location				
Delhi	12.64	12.62	12.66	
Other urban	32.46	31.40	33.97	
Rural	54.91	55.98	53.37	0.403
Age group				
6- 10 years	11.52	10.53	12.93	
11- 14 years	23.13	25.61	19.59	
15- 18 years	65.35	63.85	67.48	0.744
Religion				
Hindu	67.53	62.32	74.97	
Muslims	31.16	36.59	23.39	
Others*	1.31	1.09	1.64	0.968
Caste				
General	17.69	18.26	16.89	
OBC	21.65	20.03	23.97	
SC	29.45	25.12	35.63	
ST	0.05		0.12	
Muslim - General	13.19	19.86	3.68	
Muslim -OBC/ SC	17.96	16.74	19.71	0.433
Quintiles				
Poorest	37.59	32.56	44.78	
Second quintile	22.66	21.18	24.78	
Third quintile	23.92	28.47	17.41	
Fourth quintile	10.79	11.13	10.31	
Richest	5.04	6.66	2.72	0.962
Level of schooling				
Pre - primary	0.29	0.40	0.13	
Primary	26.34	28.43	23.38	
Upper primary	22.14	28.02	13.77	
Secondary/ Senior Secondary	51.23	43.16	62.73	0.219

Source: Field survey

⁴There is a small percentage of anachronous reporting in 2021 vis-à-vis 2019. For example, about 4% of the dropout children in 2019 reported themselves as never enrolled in 2021. Likewise, less than 1% of currently enrolled children in 2019 were reported as never enrolled in 2021.

⁵Delhi consists of the Union Territory of Delhi alone. Other urban areas include all the urban areas in the states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Rural areas include the rural areas of these 3 states.

2. Providing learning materials such as lessons, notes and worksheets. (whether in digital or non-digital form)
3. Regularly assigning homework or assignments or projects.

We grouped children into 2 groups based on whether or not any of the above forms of remote learning/blended learning were received by them. Thus, enrolment status now consists of four categories:

1. Never enrolled
2. Drop out
3. Currently enrolled without remote learning
4. Currently enrolled with remote learning

It is only the last group of children who have had some semblance of learning when schools were closed because of COVID. For the Delhi-NCR this stands at only 51% for all children in the 6- 18 years of age (see Table 3.4 below). About only half of all children had access to some form of remote learning which is indicative of the seriousness of learning loss that children have faced in the extended period of school closure.

Further disaggregation highlights that privileged children were more likely to access remote learning than their marginalized counterparts. Children in the union territory of Delhi (78%) were better - off than their peers in other urban (56%) and rural areas (35%). Gender differences in access to remote learning are not significant. In contrast, the age group emerges as a significant variable with children between the ages of 11-14 years more likely to access remote learning than children in other age groups. A far lower percentage of Muslim children (28%) reported having access to any form of digital and non-digital learning than Hindu children (57%). General castes, both belonging to Hindus and other religions in the sample, had far better access to remote learning than other marginalized communities, with the difference being widest among the former (65%) and Scheduled Tribe (40%) children. About 55% of both Scheduled Castes and Other backward caste children were currently enrolled with access to remote learning. Once differentiation among Muslims is taken into account, a curious pattern emerges wherein children belonging to

Muslim general castes (21%) were less likely to have benefitted from some form of remote learning than those from marginalised Muslim castes (32%). Indeed, viewed in this manner, Muslim general caste children perform worse than scheduled tribe children. It comes as a little surprise that affluence defined in terms of ownership of consumer durables is associated with access to remote learning; with it improving linearly as one moves up from the poorest (31%) to the

Table 3.4: Background characteristics of children (weighted) between 6- 18 years who dropped out between 2019- 2021

	Never enrolled	Drop out	Enrolled without remote learning	Enrolled with remote learning	Test of significance (chi-square)
All	3.06	13.90	32.34	50.70	
Gender					
Boys	2.68	13.47	33.16	50.69	
Girls	3.54	14.45	31.31	50.71	0.198
Age group					
6- 10 years	5.88	6.51	41.06	46.55	
11- 14 years	1.21	7.63	33.62	57.53	
15- 18 years	1.83	27.48	22.00	48.69	0.000
Location					
Delhi	1.09	7.88	13.03	78.01	
Other urban	2.55	15.50	26.41	55.54	
Rural	4.29	16.11	44.81	34.79	0.000
Religion					
Hindu	1.37	10.54	31.03	57.06	
Muslims	9.00	26.26	37.14	27.60	
Others*	4.77	8.41	29.56	57.26	0.000
Caste					
General	1.00	10.20	24.11	64.70	
OBC	1.19	10.24	34.42	54.15	
SC	1.80	11.10	31.69	55.41	
ST	2.91	5.96	50.76	40.37	
Muslim-General	9.92	29.50	39.55	21.02	
Muslim-OBC/ SC	8.41	24.16	35.58	31.86	0.000
Quintiles					
Poorest	4.95	19.62	44.13	31.31	
Second quintile	4.27	13.37	34.49	47.86	
Third quintile	1.01	12.14	28.69	58.16	
Fourth quintile	1.80	8.61	19.98	69.60	
Richest	0.13	5.91	7.49	86.47	0.000
Level of schooling					
Pre-primary		100.00			
Primary		13.32	43.69	42.99	
Upper primary		14.71	29.23	56.06	
Secondary/ Senior Secondary		14.26	25.27	60.47	0.000

Source: Field survey

Note: * Unweighted sample size is 65 only.

richest quintile (87%). Finally, children in secondary/senior secondary grades had better access to remote learning than their peers in primary and upper-primary levels. This trend is likely to be motivated by the fact that board examinations are held at the secondary/senior secondary level and schools prioritized these classes when making provisions for digital or non-digital education during their closure.

Schooling Disruptions in a Multivariate Framework

Next, we examine to what extent these differences hold true in a multivariate framework. We carry out two sets of logistic regression. The sample in the first regression is restricted to all children who were currently enrolled in 2019 ($n=3,957$ children) and the outcome variable is whether the child continued to be enrolled or dropped out between the survey rounds in 2019 and 2021. In the second regression, the sample is restricted to children enrolled in both rounds ($n=4,540$). The outcome variable is those who received some form of remote education during the COVID period versus those who did not receive such education.

The results presented in Table 3.5 confirms that there is no significant gender difference in the likelihood of dropping out between 2019 and 2021. Older children, particularly in the age group 15-18 years, are more likely to drop out than children in the reference category of 6-10 years. Children in other urban areas have a higher chance of dropping out than children in Delhi; though there is no significant difference between the latter and rural children. Caste differences are not significant as well, but affluence reduces the likelihood of dropout. In a regression framework unlike what we see in bivariate distribution chances of dropout reduce at higher grades with primary grades as the reference category.

Moving on to the second regression, gender and age group to which a child belongs does not have a significant bearing in regards to access to remote learning. In contrast, the regression model confirms the pattern that we observe in descriptive statistics, viz., the likelihood of access to remote education is lower in other urban areas and rural areas as compared to Delhi. While there is no significant difference

between general caste and children belonging to marginalised scheduled castes, children belonging to all other caste groups (OBC and scheduled tribes) including Muslim general caste and marginalised castes have a lower chance of remote learning than children belonging to general caste. Affluence

Table 3.5: Odds ratio for logistic regression on the likelihood of dropping out and with access to remote learning, March 2020- October 2021

	Outcome variable: Whether drop out (1) or not (0)	Outcome variable: With remote access (1) or not (0)
Gender (Reference: Boys)		
Girls	1.056 (0.126)	1.004 (0.0712)
Age group (Reference: 6- 10 years)		
11- 14 years	3.431*** (0.762)	0.952 (0.112)
15- 18 years	65.62*** (18.78)	1.032 (0.166)
Location (Reference: Delhi)		
Other urban areas	1.541** (0.300)	0.242*** (0.0319)
Rural areas	1.181 (0.204)	0.177*** (0.0206)
Religious/ Caste background (Reference: General castes)		
OBC	0.786 (0.135)	0.719*** (0.0714)
SC	0.813 (0.142)	0.939 (0.0991)
ST		0.592** (0.154)
Muslim- General castes	1.239 (0.374)	0.456*** (0.0965)
Muslim- OBC/ SC/ ST	1.074 (0.232)	0.512*** (0.0702)
Affluence (Reference: Poorest)		
Second quintile	0.828 (0.133)	1.569*** (0.155)
Third quintile	0.484*** (0.0834)	2.170*** (0.208)
Fourth quintile	0.568*** (0.113)	4.168*** (0.492)
Richest	0.320*** (0.103)	8.415*** (1.641)
School level (Reference: Primary grades)		
Upper primary grades	0.315*** (0.0674)	2.032*** (0.235)
Secondary/ Sr. Secondary grades	0.0671*** (0.0179)	2.646*** (0.389)
Observations	3,639	4,202
Standard Error in parentheses		
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1		

Source: Field survey

increases the likelihood of some form of remote learning as does being in higher grades.

In summary, the results point out that as expected COVID-19 related school closures have adversely impacted children's education, particularly of those belonging to disadvantaged communities. While the latter is true for the country as a whole, certain findings presented here are specific to this region alone and cannot be extrapolated to a pan-Indian context. This includes the absence of a significant gender difference in the likelihood of dropout and in access to remote learning. Pandey et al (2022) in their study of adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh note the gendered impact of school closures. Furthermore, certain facets of school closures such as the increased burden of household chores on girls were not captured in the survey. Second, setting aside the issue of quality of online education for a moment, it is a marker of the relative affluence of the NCR that nearly 50% of children had access to some form of remote learning. All- India percentages are likely to be far lower and even worse in pockets of relative deprivations.

4. Discussion

To conclude, steps are needed to address the learning disruptions on an urgent basis. First and foremost, this includes bringing children, particularly young ones who are not part of the schooling system either because they dropped out or did not enrol during the pandemic, into the schooling fold.

In this context, regular school attendance may also emerge as a problem with schools being closed for a year and a half. Thus, it is essential that students' attendance be monitored; the latter is likely to require schools reaching out to parents and the community at large while simultaneously efforts are made to make them an attractive place for children with the provision of diverse reading materials beyond the textbooks and play materials (Banerjee and Banerji 2021).

Even prior to the pandemic, substantial percentages of children did not have foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. The pandemic has aggravated this pre-

existing crisis with even fewer students not restricted to primary grades alone having these skills. For example, the ASER survey in Karnataka indicates that 70.3% of Class VIII students could read a standard II text in 2018, and the corresponding percentage in March 2021 was 66.2%. Under these circumstances, it would be wiser to decentralize academic decisions and powers in favour of teachers and school administrators so that they can “step away” from the course curricula in order to address the learning deficiencies with which children are coming back to classrooms post reopening of schools and teach in classrooms that have children of different learning levels (Indian Express, 2022).

Third, it is imperative that adequate investment be made in regards to digital education to deal with the unfortunate situation(s) that may arise if schools were to close again on account of a spike in COVID infections. The latter entails investment in digital infrastructure as also the creation of community digital libraries as a means to bridge the digital divide in the country. Lack of digital resources was among the reasons for not being able to access online education regularly in the study sample.

The second aspect relates to the quality of digital knowledge resources. Even when children accessed digital education, the quality of such education particularly that accessed by children belonging to marginalized communities left much to be desired as has been attested in interviews done with parents in NCR (Pramanik et al 2022). Likewise, while Doordarshan does regular broadcasting educational shows, TV-based education has been a “flop show” with only 1% of rural children and 8% of urban children reporting such programmes as a regular or occasional mode of study in a survey across 15 Indian states (The SCHOOL Team 2021:10). Clearly, there is a need to improve the quality of digital knowledge resources, with such investment being in accordance with the objective articulated in NEP 2020 too of creating a national repository of high-quality resources (termed as DIKSHA or Digital Infrastructure of Knowledge Sharing).

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An Insight into the Lives of Street Connected Children During Covid-19 Pandemic in Lucknow

Shailendra Singh Rana

Abstract

This study is a result of primary survey conducted for four months from March 2021 to June 2021 when mobility restrictions were imposed as a response to curb the spread of coronavirus in the second wave of the pandemic. Not a single child is supposed to live or work on the streets. Known as street children, their engagements in informal economic activities on the streets provide them with livelihood. They disappeared from the streets, not due to any deliberate policy efforts for their betterment, but rather, immobility measures in the forms of curfews, lockdowns, quarantines, and isolation that left them with no choice but to stay away from the streets. This article analyses the deepened vulnerability of already vulnerable street children due to forced immobility restrictions imposed during the second wave of the pandemic in Lucknow. It also studies the awareness of street children towards COVID-19. A sample of fifty street children was taken through convenience and snowball sampling and their responses were collected through a schedule, verbally administered by the researcher. Images of street children have been used for drawing attention to Phenomenon of Street Children. The findings of the study are alarming and require immediate attention from all the stakeholders.

Keywords: children, COVID-19, lockdown, Lucknow, streets.

Introduction

Sights of children working, living, begging, or roaming on the streets have become common for most of the people plying on the streets of metro cities in India. Commonly termed street children among researchers and policymakers, according to (Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003), do not form a homogenous population. Around the world, children in large numbers are pushed onto the streets every year, however, according to (Rana, 2020a) the number of street children is more in developing economies where street children are the most marginal categories of citizens.

United Nations Commission on Human Rights (1994) defines a street child as 'any girl or boy for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including

unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults.¹

UNICEF has described three categories of street children- 'children on the streets or street working children', 'children of the streets or street living children' and 'abandoned children'.

Lusk (1992) developed four categories of street children: poor working children who after working on the streets return to their families at night, independent street workers with dwindling family ties, children of street families, and children residing on the streets full time with no family ties.

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¹ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-35_en.pdf

In India, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) uses the term 'Children in Street Situation' (CiSS) rather than street children. NCPCR has defined three broad categories of CiSS, which are:

- (i) Children without support living on the streets all alone,
- (ii) Children staying on the streets during the day and are back home at the night with their families who reside in nearby slum/hutments and,
- (iii) Children living on the streets with their families².

The term 'street children' has been defined in different ways by different researchers, for instance, few researchers rely on the place of living criterion to fit their definition, while others rely on the amount of time spent by them on the streets, and the type of relationship the child holds with their family is yet another criterion. Street children, no doubt, comprise a heterogeneous population and a universally applicable definition of a street child does not exist. The term 'street children' per se is a labelling term and more neutral terms such as 'street-connected children', 'children in street situations', 'street working children', and 'street living children' have started appearing in recent literature on street children. However, definitional boundaries are weak; there is an overlap among definitions, and the category to which a child belongs at a point of time can change easily. For instance, 'street working child' is at risk of becoming a 'street living child', a 'street living child' may already be an 'abandoned child' or at risk of moving from 'street living' to 'abandoned'. All of them have some connection to streets and as pointed out by Parveen (2016) every child in the street situation is unique and so is his/her background.

Though considered as a labelling term, 'street children' is an umbrella term which includes all the categories of children in street situations such as 'street roaming children', 'street working children', 'street living children', 'street family children' or 'abandoned children'. Due to this simple reason, 'street children' in the author's opinion is a non-labelling term in

comparison to other terms which put a label of 'working', 'roaming', 'living', 'begging' etc. in describing a child in street situations and thus, this study retains the term 'street children' only.

The actual number of street children is not known. The estimate of 100 million children (The State of the World's Children 2006,) across the world is a widely quoted figure (Volpi, n.d., Abdullah et al., 2014, Povian, 2015), though this figure has no empirical backing (Naterer & Lavrič, 2016, Thomas de Benítez & Consortium for Street Children, 2011). In the case of India, estimates of number of street children vary between 2 million (Thomas Chandy, 2018) to 11 million (Ikram, 2018).^{3,4}

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly or indirectly affected almost everyone including street children. First identified in Wuhan, China, this highly contagious disease soon spread across the world. Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh became one of the worst COVID-19 hit districts⁵. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, a nationwide lockdown was imposed in India on 25th March 2020, when there were 530 cases of infection across the country and after that the lockdown was extended three times. Gradually, life started coming back on track when after one year India was again hit badly by the second wave in March 2021. The second wave was more infectious, and the pace of its spread was faster than the first wave.

Children on the streets are already subjected to several vulnerabilities but added hardships of COVID-19 have made their lives more miserable. If street children belong to the homeless category, they cannot 'stay home and stay safe'. Without working on the streets, they cannot access food and water. They cannot seek care in case of illness. The ensuing economic chaos after the immobility measures are lifted will make their life more difficult (Consortium for Street Children, 2020).

In Tanzania, due to movement restrictions, typical economic activities of street children – vending food and small consumer goods, shining shoes, washing windcreens, repairing tyres, scavenging, rag-

² <https://ncpcr.gov.in/showfile.php?lang=1&level=0&linkid=116&lid=2002>

³ Figure of 2 million given by CEO, Save the Children. <http://www.businessworld.in/article/There-Are-Over-2-Million-Children-Living-On-The-Street-In-India-Thomas-Chandy-CEO-Save-The-Children/02-01-2018-136112/>

⁴ 11 million street children in India as quoted by Ikram on <https://inbreakthrough.org/street-children-statistics-lives/>

⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/explained-in-5-charts-impact-of-second-wave-of-covid-19-on-uttar-pradesh/articleshow/82232933.cms>

picking, and begging were reduced, which further lowered their already meagre earnings. Due to deprivation and hunger, there are chances of street children becoming prone to be engaged in illegal activities such as stealing and robbery, and dangerous forms of child labour such as commercial sexual exploitation⁶.

In Mumbai, street children under the age of fourteen with no families had been placed in institutions due to the lockdown but the older boys between sixteen to eighteen years of age who are without families continued to be unprotected. (DW, 2020)⁷

Being dependent on begging, vending, and rag-picking for livelihood; in Delhi, the livelihoods of street children have been affected badly. They have also developed several health problems and it is not possible to maintain social distancing for those who have no choice but to live in night shelters.⁸

(Rana, 2020) stated that street children depend on the random sympathy of strangers but during lockdown street children just disappeared. Their whereabouts and the conditions in which they were living are not known to anyone, they could not make their living without working on the streets.

(Griffin, 2020) noted that more children may turn to the streets after lockdowns and there may be an increase in poverty and children getting orphaned due to a recession in the economy and death of parents from the virus.

(UN, 2020) mentioned that street children are particularly at risk of abuse and vulnerable to additional stressors during the pandemic.

According to Al Jazeera, 'thousands of children have lost one or both parents in the new pandemic wave ravaging India, where there were already millions of orphans. The prospect of a surge of abandoned minors worries many'.⁹

NCPCR found that in the COVID-19 pandemic, 9300 children lost their parents or were abandoned in India.

Madhya Pradesh has the highest number of orphaned (318) and abandoned (104) children and Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of children (2110) in 'vulnerable position'. These vulnerable children in Uttar Pradesh have been abandoned, orphaned or have lost one parent in the pandemic.¹⁰

In absence of someone to look after them and if they are not placed into institutional or non-institutional care, there are very high chances of these children ultimately ending up on the streets.

Objectives

This research study was conducted with the following objectives:

- Assess the level of awareness and attitude of street children towards COVID-19.
- Know about the experiences of street children through the COVID-19 pandemic in Lucknow.

Methodology of Research Study

Type of Study

This study was a cross-sectional study conducted with each respondent once. No funding was obtained from any agency and the researcher conducted this study as an external researcher. The results of the study are based on the analysis of primary data collected during the field survey.

The Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of children who work or live on the streets alone or with their families. Respondents were street children. Proxy respondents participated in the study in those cases where it was not able to elicit responses from the street children.

Data Collection Tool

A questionnaire administered verbally by the researcher was used to collect the information. The researcher read questions and the responses were noted down. Several covert and overt techniques were

⁶ How Covid-19 is playing with street children in Tanzania- Global March, n.d.

⁷ Where Have the Children on the Streets Gone? n.d.

⁸ How Coronavirus Is Affecting Underprivileged Children in India | Asia | An In-Depth Look at News from across the Continent | DW | 10.07.2020, n.d.

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/20/covid-causes-orphan-crisis-in-india-experts-fear-neglect-abuse>

¹⁰ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/9300-indian-children-orphaned-abandoned-in-covid-pandemic-1809427-2021-06-01>

used to reduce the involvement of others and build rapport with the children, such as calling out the name of the child frequently when asking a question. The questionnaire contained sections on - Awareness of COVID-19, socio-demographic profile, food, livelihood, housing, health issues and abuse.

Data analysis - Collected data were coded, tabulated and analysed using IBM SPSS software version 16.0.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

In absence of any sampling frame, probability sampling was not possible to use. Street children's population is also rare due to their small proportion of the total child population and difficult to access due to their mobility. But due to movement restrictions during the pandemic, it was not difficult to find them in or near their shelters. Peer group leaders also aided the researcher in recognizing other street children. So, a blend of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling was used for selecting the respondents. From March 2021 to June 2021, a total of fifty respondents were contacted at their shelters under the flyovers, slums, and squatter settlements. For the present study, any child for whom the street plays a vital role in his/her daily life and identity has been considered a street child. More specifically, the study adopted the following inclusion criteria to identify a street child.

1. Unaccompanied minors in public places.
2. Living on the streets with or without family.
3. Working/begging on the streets to get food/money.
4. Children coming from nearby slums and socialising on the streets.
5. Children found on the roads without adult protection.

Area and duration of study- The study was conducted in Lucknow from March 2021 to June 2021.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research involving children is a sensitive issue. Ethical guidelines developed by UNICEF were

followed by the researcher for interviewing the children.¹¹ Efforts were undertaken to affect their lives positively and not otherwise. Confidentiality was maintained and the freedom of the children to not answer any questions or to stop interacting with the researcher was taken care of. It was informed to their parents or caregivers why the researcher wanted to conduct interviews with children and what would be done with the information and photographs. Inducement in the form of money, food, or any other article was never used and the researcher tried to ensure that children talked to them because they wished to do so. Due to initial rapport building with the children and/or their families, they were happy to get their photographs clicked and share the information. It was difficult to interview the children belonging to the younger age group of six to eight years due to their shy nature and inability in understanding certain questions, peer group leaders/parents/caregivers aided the researcher in interviewing these children.

Brief Profile of Study Area

Lucknow is the capital of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. According to Census 2011, it has a population of 4,589,838 out of which 52% are males and 48% are females. The majority (71.71%) of people in Lucknow are Hindus followed by (26.36% of) the Muslim population.¹² The city attracts poor people from nearby areas who migrate there in search of livelihood, and many of them end up living under flyovers, in squatter settlements, on pavements, and in other such settlements unfit for human habitation. There is an estimation of 10,000 homeless people in Lucknow and more than 1,00,000 people living in thirty-eight slums.¹³ The Department of Women and Child Development (2017) estimated the presence of 40,000 children living on the streets, the majority of them being either runaway kids or belonging to families living on the streets. The highest concentration of street children is mainly around the Charbagh railway station¹⁴. Another study (Life on the Street: Street Children Survey in 5 Cities: Lucknow, Mughalsarai, Hyderabad, Patna and Kolkata-Howrah

¹¹ For details of ethical guidelines developed by UNICEF, visit <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/eric-compendium-approved-digital-web.pdf>

¹² https://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB_A/09/0926_PART_A_DCHB_LUCKNOW.pdf

¹³ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/two-new-shelter-homes-to-be-built-for-homeless/articleshow/72789240.cms>

¹⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/lucknow-home-to-40000-street-kids-charbagh-peaks-in-child-labour/articleshow/61015482.cms>

[Resource Centre, 2016) by an NGO found 10,771 street children in Lucknow.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Profile of Street Children

Variable	Gender	
	Male	Female
Age Group		
6-8	6 (12%)	2 (4%)
9-11	17 (34%)	4 (8%)
12-14	14 (28%)	1 (2%)
15-17	0	6 (12%)
Religion		
Hindu	34 (68%)	5 (10%)
Muslim	9 (18%)	2 (4%)
Status of Parent		
Both alive	33 (66%)	4 (8%)
Single Orphan	10 (20%)	3 (6%)
Double Orphan	0	0
Currently lives in		
Nuclear Family	22 (44%)	3 (6%)
Broken Family	3 (6%)	1 (2%)
Joint Family	16 (32%)	3 (6%)
Step Family	2 (4%)	0
Severed Ties with Family	6-8	6-8
Attended School		
Yes	7 (14%)	1 (2%)
No	36 (72%)	6 (12%)

Source: Field survey

Results

Socio-Demographic Profile of Street Children

Table 1 reveals the socio-demographic profile of street children in the study area. Out of the total sample, 86% were males, 78% were Hindus and 22% Muslims. 74% children had both parents, and 26% had only one parent. The sample did not consist of any orphaned child. None of the children with one parent reported the death of a parent in the pandemic period from March 2021 to May 2021. 16% children had a history of some school attendance and 84% had never been enrolled in school. There is a vicious circle, children who miss out on education and are not in schools are vulnerable to being driven to the streets. Those who are already exposed to the street environment are very less likely to go to school. Out of the total sample, 38% of street children were living in joint families, 50% in nuclear families, 8% in broken families, and 4% were found to be living in stepfamilies. There were two children, one in the age group of 12-14 years and another in the age group of 15-17 years, who abandoned their stepfamilies and lived alone most of the time. No other child was found to have severed all the family ties.

Awareness of Street Children of COVID-19

The researcher first touched on the awareness of street children about COVID-19. For this purpose, questions were designed following the published literature. The proportion of children who gave correct answers regarding risk knowledge and prevention knowledge has been shown in Table 2. Mean scores for each section were calculated by dividing the total number of correct answers by the total number of questions. Low values of risk score (40.33) and prevention score (47.3) reveal poor awareness of street children of COVID-19. They are highly vulnerable to the risk of infection and they lacked preventive knowledge to protect themselves from infection.

Food

With 94th rank out of 104 countries in the 2020 Global Hunger Index,¹⁵ and a score of 27.2, India has a serious

¹⁵ Global Hunger Index is a tool designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at global, regional, and national levels. <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/about.html>

Table 2: COVID-19 Awareness (risk and prevention) among Street Children

Variables	Correct responses out of all Cases
Risk Knowledge	
1. Know the cause of COVID-19	32 (64%)
2. Transmission of virus through cough and sneezing	34 (68%)
3. Transmission via droplets through speaking	12 (24%)
4. Transmission through contaminated surfaces	18 (36%)
5. Currency notes and carry bags are source of transmission	10 (20%)
6. Transmission via cooked food	15 (30%)
Risk Score (Mean)	40.33
Prevention Knowledge	
1. Frequent hand washing with soap for 40 seconds	42 (84%)
2. Use of alcohol-based sanitizer	34 (68%)
3. Wearing of mask	44 (88%)
4. Physical distancing	32 (64%)
5. Avoid touching the face without cleaning hands	24 (48%)
6. Keep surface sterilised with sanitizers	18 (36%)
7. Good ventilation at home	10 (20%)
8. Regular physical exercise	9 (18%)
9. Healthy food rich in vitamin C	0 (0%)
Prevention Score (Mean)	47.3

Source: Field survey

level of hunger. Hunger is the most immediate threat for street children and not the virus. Confronted with a situation in which the prospect of street earnings is grim, and cash draining out, out of the total sample, thirteen (43%) reported experiencing hunger like never before. Even chances of starvation have also become very real to them post-pandemic. A decline in nutritional quantity and quality was also reported by all the surveyed children. Around 70% street children reported a decline in the number of meals in a day, and the quantity of food reduced for 80% of them; when compared with what they were getting before the

pandemic. There were reports in media where hungry street children from Lucknow and other places in Uttar Pradesh sent messages to NGOs to provide them food.¹⁶ In just 21 days of the lockdown which was imposed in March 2020, Childline received 4.6 lakh calls, out of which over 90% were for food.¹⁷ Though the distribution of food grains via PDS had provided a cushion to the poor from the blow of pandemic-driven economic disruption, the urban poor's access to ration was minimal. 80% of street children do not have any legal identity document, denying them access to social entitlements.¹⁸

Table 3: Post Pandemic Food Quantity and Quality of Street Children

	Number of respondents
Decline in quantity/variety of food in platter than what the child usually used to get before pandemic	24 (80%)
Reduction in number of meals in a day	21 (70%)
Not getting or rarely getting food items such as any fruit, egg which the child sometimes managed to get before pandemic	26 (86.7%)
Total	71

Source: Field survey

Table 4: Street Activities which provide Livelihood to Street

Economic Activity on the Streets	Number of children engaged
Begging (parttime/ full time)	10 (20%)
Rag picking	6 (12%)
Selling petty articles	32 (64%)
Others	2 (4%)
Total	50

Source: Field survey

Loss of Livelihood

Research studies reveal that economic activities of street children are - begging, rag picking, street vending, and wiping cars at traffic signals (Alem & Laha, 2016, Srivastava & Shareef, 2016, Ayub,

¹⁶ <https://thefederal.com/news/hungry-living-on-streets-children-send-videos-seeking-help-amid-lockdown/>

¹⁷ <https://thewire.in/society/covid-19-lockdown-children-beggars-workers>

¹⁸ <https://www.businessinsider.in/india/news/covid-19-lockdown-ncpr-to-focus-on-creating-database-of-street-children/articleshow/75554936.cms>

Kumar, & Shora, 2016, Rana & Singh, 2020, Rana, 2020a). During the pandemic these activities were affected severely.

Table 4 shows the types of activities surveyed street children are engaged in. Engagement of street children in above activities is clearly exploitative but at the same time their work is a source of supplementing their families' income and for them, it is also an important part of their social living and community network. They and their families usually earn on the streets, and they do not have any other source of income or savings to fall back on. Measures taken by the government to minimise transmission of the virus have resulted in a loss of livelihood for street children. As found by the researcher in this study, pre-pandemic levels of family income of these children ranged between ₹3,000 to ₹7,000 which was reduced to just ₹2,000 to ₹5,500 post-pandemic. It is not just the lockdown of the streets; it is the lockdown of their source of livelihood. With few people on the streets usually crowded otherwise, street children faced significant livelihood challenges. Many families have returned to their villages or hometowns for whom the situation had become untenable.

Conditions of Housing, Health Issues and Risk of Infection

Across the globe, the rate of urbanization is highest in Asia and Africa.¹⁹ There are estimations that the urban population in Uttar Pradesh has reached the level of 5.83 crores in the year 2021²⁰. Both the pull factors (for example employment opportunities in the cities) and push factors (for example natural calamities, and pressures on rural livelihood) drive a large number of poor people to the urban areas and many of them along with children ultimately land up on the streets. Children either work on the streets and return to their families at night, or they work and live on the streets with families or all alone. Table 5 depicts the pathetic conditions in which street children are used to living.

Except for pucca houses, their shelters are just temporary arrangements under flyovers, on pavements, or in squatter settlements where they do not have access to basic amenities.

Table 5: Places where Street Children live

Shelters of Street children	Number of children
Pavement/roadside/foot path	12 (24%)
Squatter settlements	17 (34%)
Under a bridge or flyover	14 (28%)
Pucca house	7 (14%)
Total	50

Source: Field survey

Most of the urban poor live in congested and overcrowded unregularised slums, they are located near open sewers, and restricted to geographically dangerous areas such as hillsides, riverbanks, and water basins subject to landslides, flooding, or industrial hazards.²¹ Due to their living and working conditions, street children are already vulnerable to several health problems. Table 6 reveals that out of the total sample, 52% reported experiencing fever, 50% suffered from cold/running nose, 46% loose motion, and 44% skin disease along with cough and loose motion. Though these are general health vulnerabilities of street children, the probability of children suffering from these ailments for a comparatively longer time due to the pandemic cannot be ruled out.

Though according to UNICEF, children are not the face of this pandemic, street children due to their pre-

Table 6: Types of Ailments Street Children Suffered since the Onset of Pandemic

Health issue	Number of children
Cold/running nose	25 (50%)
Cough	21 (42%)
Fever	26 (52%)
Loose motion	23 (46%)
Skin disease/rashes	22 (44%)
Others	14 (28%)

Source: Field survey

¹⁹ <https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=79940&printable=1>

²⁰ <http://www.uptownplanning.gov.in/page/en/urbanization-in-uttar-pradesh#:~:text=Uttar%20Pradesh%20is%20the%20most,4.45%20crore%20in%20urban%20areas.&text=However%2C%20the%20level%20of%20urbanization,all%20India%20figure%20of%2031.16%25>

²¹ (Kuddus, Tynan, & McBryde, 2020)

existing health conditions and living conditions are prone to COVID-19. There is already a prediction of the third wave and experts have warned that it is expected to impact children the most (Third Wave of Covid-19 and Children: What You Need to Know about India's Strategy and Vaccines for Kids, 2021). Street children cannot stay home and stay safe, they cannot seek care if they fall ill, and they do not have the supervision and protection of responsible adults. For children in institutional care, state child rights body UPSCPCR can review the preparations for the anticipated third wave of COVID-19 but for street children, neither UPSCPCR nor NCPCR have any database. In such a scenario of an anticipated third wave hitting the country, its impact on street children may be catastrophic.

Abuse

Street children are vulnerable to abuse and violence not only on the streets from strangers but also in their homes. Abuse and violence are two of the many factors which drive children to the streets. With restricted mobility and staying confined with other abusive family members, street children are constantly exposed to abuse and interpersonal violence. Children are soft targets and the situation is aggravated due to parental job loss, reduction in incomes, pandemic stress, and declining hope for the future. Table 7 summarizes the responses of street children along the questions related to abuse. Interventions taken up by the Childline during just twenty-one days of lockdown from March 2021-April 2021 seems to validate this finding. Out of the total interventions Childline took up across 576 districts, 20% accounted for child protection aspects of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, trafficking, child labour, and child marriage (CHILDLINE 1098 Responded to 4.6 Lakh Calls in 21 Days of Coronavirus Lockdown- The New Indian Express, 2020).

Conclusion and Practice Implications

Children working and/or living on the streets are now quiet. Being an invisible population there is no database of street children with any government body.

Table 7: Street Children Abuse During Covid-19 Pandemic

Type of Abuse	Number of Children
Physical	
1. Hitting	26 (52%)
2. Beating	38(76%)
3. Shaking	20(40%)
4. Biting	02(4%)
6. Kicking	19 (38%)
7. Suffocating	8 (16%)
Psychological	
1. Shaming	23 (46%)
2. Rejection	32 (64%)
3. Withholding love	38 (76%)
4. Threatening	42 (84%)

Source: Field survey

The study found that street children are at immediate risk and require instant support to be able to protect themselves and survive during and after the pandemic. For protecting them against the vulnerability of abuse, hunger, diseases and loss of livelihood, there is an urgent need of providing food, financial assistance, shelter, and health services. Mobile healthcare services can be used for vaccinations of street families along with the engagement of multipurpose health workers. Moreover, children who survive on the streets either returned to their native places or they were in shelters; so, this time can be used as an opportunity in creating a database of street children and linking them to welfare schemes. NCPCR in May 2020 showed its intention also for creating such a database but no progress has been made so far. The longer-term economic recession is swiftly approaching and street children whose lives and livelihoods are already disrupted by the unprecedented pandemic, may be hit hardest. It is another aspect which is currently unexplored.

²² <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>

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Reading Disrupted Schooling in Children's Narratives:

A Study of Children's Experience of Technology in Education amid the Second Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic in India

Aparna Nandha

Abstract

This article talks about the disruption of schooling due to the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. The abrupt and prolonged closure of schools has instigated many a change in the system of education. Children had to get accustomed to technology in a short span and there has been an array of problems and experiences in learning scenarios amidst the pandemic. This study analyses the writings and experiences of children through an in-depth study and interrogates their experiences with adapting to online learning. The study then focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of technology use and the online learning experience. It examines the future of online learning and the much needed change in traditional schooling and stresses the need for equitable access to technological resources in a fast-changing world.

Keywords: *children's writings, disrupted schooling, online learning, technology*

Introduction

The pandemic caused by a viral strain named COVID-19 first emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019. Despite stringent lockdowns in China, the highly contagious virus soon spread across the world enabled by fast and convenient air connectivity and high rates of population mobility. In India, the virus first made its presence on 30th January 2020. Ever since early January 2020, the Government of India has taken several measures to prevent and control the disease outbreak. In spite of these mitigation measures, COVID-19 has impacted thousands of people's lives in India. Apart from the direct impact of the pandemic, the psychological and socio-economic repercussions triggered by the lockdown have impacted the lives of many in the country. One of the cardinal domains that floundered under the lockdown imposed in the multiple waves of the COVID-19 pandemic is the sector of education. Schools shut down indefinitely, forcing teachers and students alike to go online, thereby imposing a new normal in the teaching-learning experience.

In one of the articles published by UNICEF in the early days of lockdown, they document videos of how children spend their days in the absence of a regular school experience, and we see a young fifteen-year-old girl from the rural side of Assam spending her time by contributing to house chores while trying to acclimate with the experience of online learning (Children's Video Diaries about Life during COVID-19 | UNICEF India, 2020). Several countries encountered numerous challenges in getting accustomed to this rather abrupt and unprepared shift to online pedagogy, and India was no exception to this situation. This article concerns itself with interrogating this disruptive experience of schooling while abruptly moving towards the online pedagogy. This study investigates the experience of technology in imparting education as well as the pros and cons. Also, the effect of limited societal exposure on school children is studied by analysing the narratives and stories put out by children on print and online platforms.

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In another UNICEF article published in late 2021, Ayushi Banerjee writes about her experience of online education. She raises many concerns around the notion of online education and writes: *"We cannot adhere to our studies properly. Though online classes are going on, there are a number of students who cannot afford smartphones. As a result, they are deprived of education. During the lockdown, many men lost their jobs and could not afford their children's education. Child marriage is also increasing."* (Banerjee, 2021). She also writes about the advantages of online education and states that there has been more time to spend with family and to cultivate hobbies. Hence, Banerjee points out that the experience of online pedagogy differs from child to child and is reliant on other factors such as family structure, job security, socio-economic status, and community support.

On the other hand, Diya Khanna writes about the flexible thinking facilitated by the adverse lockdown situation and the measures taken by independent trainers who participate in Odisha's Alternative Internship program aimed at helping young students to gain their motivation to go back to school. These programmes are aimed at facilitating the ease of learning and improving the activity-based learning environment while maintaining safety measures. Talking about the significance of such programmes, the UNICEF field officer in Odisha states: *"The programme took lessons to the poorest and most vulnerable students, bringing back the joy of learning to both students and trainee teachers"* (Khanna, 2021). These programmes attempt to fix the problem of inequitable distribution of access to technology in the rural areas of India. It is in this varied context that this article engages with the question of the disrupted schooling experience and the experience of technology-based learning through children's narratives that surfaced during the time of the global pandemic.

Literature Review

There are many works that explore the pandemic's multifaceted impact on society. Iyengar in her work talks about the sustainable change that the pandemic-driven school shutdown has initiated globally. She argues for community-driven schooling and

enhancing the use of technology in learning to strengthen the system of education and foster a much-needed healthy social change. She writes, *"Every village must have electricity, laptops, and trained teachers to ensure that every child can connect to the world of online knowledge. This is not just the future we want; it is the present our children urgently need. With a big enough alliance, every school today can be reached"* (Iyengar, 2020). This equitisation of resources and access to learning is a major concern in the narratives of children in the pandemic.

Tarkar also voices similar concerns in her article that addresses the impact of the pandemic on the education system. She takes her argument of COVID-19's impact on the education system forward and claims that this can cause a significant blow to the economy of the country. She claims that this abrupt shutdown of schools has resulted in restructuring the process of teaching and learning. She writes, *"Firstly, it affected the teaching and assessment methodologies. Online teaching methods are adopted by the few private schools that are handful in taking online classes. In those schools, children are taking classes online"* (Tarkar, 2020). She adds that while children who could afford private schooling had a more compassionate reality, this was not the case with children who were enrolled in rural schools. The haphazard connectivity and lack of resources compelled these schools to shut down completely, thereby coercing those who studied there to take a break from regular schooling and educational activities.

The pandemic also impacted the behaviour of children and many developed adverse effects of a prolonged period of isolation such as anxiety, fear and even depression. The first case of student suicide that resulted from the shutdown of schools occurred in Kerala on 2nd June 2020. When schools shut down, Devika Balakrishnan was one among the economically underprivileged who did not have access to television learning nor did she have access to gadgets such as mobile phones or computer devices to attend her online classes.

As a result of this, she succumbed to depression and committed suicide. Discussing this case, Lathabhavan writes, *"This case appears to be somewhat rare in that*

the girl in question was academically very intelligent and that missing online classes was an acute psychological stressor. Individuals of lesser academic ability might not have cared so much if they were missing school. Students need to be mentally prepared for problematic issues arising in such situations. Such initiatives could include mentorship programs, consisting of small groups of students under an educator whom they can contact via telephone. Such initiatives would likely relieve stress for students” (Lathabhavan & Griffiths, 2020). Although this was a rare incident, it is important to note that access to technology is not equitably distributed and this might be the cause of stress in students, and policymakers need to come up with policies that will help navigate students who are socio-economically weak to access technology-based education in times of crisis.

Reading a Bend in Time and Investigating Children's Experience of Education

It is in this context that this paper investigates the writings of children where they document their experiences of the lockdown. In a book edited by Bijal Vachharajani, many children pen down their experiences during the first lockdown and the subsequent shutdown of regular schooling. For the first time, children are bestowed with ample time to think about life and pursue their passions. The book is a compilation of the diverse experiences of children living across India. While some talk of their own journeys amidst the pandemic and the impending gloom that the COVID-19 spread brought on globally, some ruminate on the social conditions of underprivileged people. Either way, the book captures the essence of children's thought patterns amidst the health crisis raging in the country.

In the first story of this edited volume, Tishya Tara talks about Anaya's struggles with online education and the lack of dreams at night. Tara writes about the passing of time and the protagonist's inability to keep track of the days of the week. She writes, *“This Monday morning...no I think it's Tuesday. Or maybe Wednesday...uff I really can't keep track of days...went like any other morning,...”* (Vachharajani, 2020). In the story, she writes, there are worried adults talking about neighbours testing positive for the



Source: Photograph taken by Author

virus and the count of infected people increasing. The story documents the struggle to maintain a normal life in a fear-ridden society. Anaya, the child protagonist, is unable to dream for her life and seems to have come to a stand-still with schools closed and her friends worried. Ultimately, she decides to enjoy the present moment without being concerned about the past or future. She makes the best out of her day and goes to bed exhausted, hoping to dream.

In the next essay, Shiv Malik takes a more critical lens to look at the lockdown. He looks at the history of lockdowns and evaluates the efficiency of it in containing the spread of the disease. The next story by Shivani Sharma documents a wage labourer's life during the lockdown. It details the story of Sakina, a school-going girl and her father's troubles. A regular childhood invested with day-to-day problems like fear of exams gets complicated with the lockdown and soon the young girl and her family are faced with severe financial troubles which culminate in the demise of her father due to the COVID-19 virus. The story ends on a vague note as Sakina's schooling is now in deep trouble for she will soon have the responsibility of being the breadwinner of her family. The disruption of education caused by the loss of lives is brought to focus in this narrative.

The next story written by Mira Gupta is a personal narrative of her journey from Mussoorie to her home in Delhi amidst the lockdown. It narrates how the police goes out of their way to secure safe passage for a young child who is travelling to her hometown. While this is not a part of regular schooling, it changes the perspective of the young child towards the police and provides a learning experience thus, reiterating the importance of the health issue at hand. Shreya

Aiyer makes a cardinal point in her story about getting used to technology and reading books online. What seemed unthinkable before the lockdown became a reality with all libraries shutting down and movement being restricted. Shreya writes, *"The process of reading digitally may have its drawbacks, but the sheer vastness of content you have access to is more than enough to make up for it"* (Vachharajani, 2020). In an era of information explosion, the pandemic paved the way for youngsters to choose digital platforms for learning and experiencing new things.

In the second wave too, not much has changed for kids. As schools shut down, children's voices did not emerge focusing on education or schooling. The country was grappling with the fast spread of the virus and there were tales everywhere about losing parents and kin to the pandemic. While educational videos and news articles popped up daily, children and their narratives were concerned about the health crisis. Ironically, as seen in the above analysis of stories written by children, they did have a loss of time at school, but it would be an overstatement to say that they stopped learning together. They learnt about the societal needs during a time of national emergency, and they also learnt about ground realities and helping elders. Children, we see, have not been passive recipients of information during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have been agents of change and in their interaction with teachers and the school system, the trajectory of education is slowly and steadily changing.

To substantiate the secondary findings, an in-depth study with 30 respondents from higher secondary school students was conducted in the Rupnagar district in the state of Punjab, India. An in-depth study using a question guide on the daily online learning schedule during the second wave of COVID-19 was conducted. The aspects analyzed were availability of technological resources, preference for online/offline schooling, average time spent for self-study and attending online classes, and finally, the reasons for supporting the online or offline system of education. It took an average of thirty minutes to interview each respondent. The survey was carried out in an informed setup and consent from the individuals was obtained for their participation.

Results of the In-Depth Survey

Among the respondents, 16 (53.3%) were female and 14 (46.7%) were male. The respondents from rural and urban localities constituted 56.7% and 43.3% respectively. The students belonged to three income categories, that is, less than ₹1 lakh annual income (33.3%), between ₹1 and ₹5 lakhs annual income (36.7%) and above ₹5 lakhs annual income (30%). It was found that on an average 3.5 hours daily were spent on online classes and 1.7 hours daily were spent on self-study by each respondent. All 30 respondents had access to varying technological resources. Almost 28 respondents (93%) used mobile phones to access online learning and only 2 respondents (7%) had access to computers.

On a three-point Likert scale, the experience of the students of online classes was assessed and it was found that 7 female respondents (23.3%) had a poor learning experience, 16 respondents (53.3%) had an average learning experience and 7 respondents (23.3%) had good learning experience of online education. It was further observed that all respondents faced varying problems in accessing online classes and sustaining the motivation to learn throughout the second wave of COVID-19 in the online learning environment. The major issues reported were network issues which were faced by 16 respondents (53.3%), technological inefficiency by 6 respondents (20.0%), audibility issues by 3 respondents (10.0%), and gadget malfunction by 5 respondents (16.7%). All respondents preferred offline classes and the major reasons reported were better engagement with the learning environment, audible teaching, better venues for raising queries or doubts and finally, negligible distraction in the offline learning environment. A significant correlation between a good learning experience and economic status was observed in this study.

Findings

Hence, from the accounts provided by the children themselves and other miscellaneous sources, it is worth noting that one thing that stands out when we talk about the sustenance of schooling in this crisis is the inequity of technological resources. In the in-depth study conducted, it was found that while all had

access to smartphones which facilitated their online education, all the respondents faced technical and gadget-related problems while accessing the online classes. It was also observed that though all respondents preferred offline classes to online education, all of them had adapted to using technology to access education. The findings point to an agreement between the writings of children and the study conducted in terms of the economic background and access to technological resources and children's preference for offline education.

The final version of the National Education Policy (July 2020) states the importance of having shared common resources for online learning. In a report co-authored by Kalra and Jholad, they write, *"Surveys by the Azim Premji Foundation have found that a massive 92 percent of children between grades 2-6 have lost at least one language ability while 82 percent have lost at least one math ability from the previous year. If this loss in learning is not compensated for, it will have a domino effect on the future learning of children as they are promoted to higher grades. Truly, India is facing an education crisis, the symptoms of which predated COVID-19"* (Kalra & Jholad, 2021). While this is not articulated by individual students, the result of collective studies demonstrates a disruption in learning. This article also talks about the role of gender in facilitating/disrupting education via online mode. In most conventional households, the role played by females is disproportionately higher than their male peer group.

The rise of online learning platforms and digital content has been enormous during and after the two waves of the pandemic. An article in World Economic Forum reported a 200% increase in the enrolment and purchase of BYJU's, a learning app. The article details the benefits of online learning too, *"Many are already touting the benefits"* - Dr Amjad, a Professor at The University of Jordan who has been using Lark to teach his students says, *"It has changed the way of teaching. It enables me to reach out to my students more efficiently and effectively through chat groups, video meetings, voting and also document sharing, especially during this pandemic. My students also find it is easier to communicate on Lark. I will stick to Lark even after coronavirus, I believe traditional offline*

learning and e-learning can go hand by hand" (Li, 2020). Thus, there are positive aspects that educators and researchers are talking about while discussing online education. They do point out the problems but along with it, they document the benefits of educating people online.

In an online panel discussion, conducted by Impact and Policy Research Institute, Meeta Wadhva Sengupta talks about the necessity of online education and its benefits. She articulates her views while discussing the issue of reopening schools and argues that on a screen all students are equal and there is no concept of "front bench" or "last bench" (IMPRI, 2021). This argument is interesting because it seems to point out the errors of a schooling system we had unquestioningly accepted so far. This view is also echoed in a panel discussion conducted by the Nobel prize channel aired on YouTube. In this panel discussion where four eminent speakers - Cathy N. Davidson, Mary Beard, Martin Ingvar, Didier Queloz talk on the future of education including a Nobel laureate in Physics. They criticise the idea of traditional schooling and meritocracy and talk about facilitating the process of learning rather than merely focussing on rote learning.

Conclusion

Thus, it is evident from the article that the pandemic has disrupted traditional schooling as we know it. The challenges to being in an equitable system replacing traditional schooling and standardized testing of learning are all brought under the scanner once again with this prolonged and abrupt closure of schools. However, one aspect that is evident is the rise of an alternative and more flexible system of education facilitated by technology. While technology is not a substitute for face-to-face learning, it is important to initiate the discussion on providing access to technology and encouraging ethical use of it for the betterment of education. The use of technology in education could be a welcome change if monitored and facilitated by experts in the domain.

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Analysing the Shift in Aspirations among Adolescents during Covid-19 Pandemic:

Implications for Pedagogical Changes

Reena Merin Cherian | Yash Kohli

Abstract

The studies focusing on method education during the pandemic threw ample light on the gaps emerging due to the cessation of face-face classrooms. Despite secondary pedagogies, there were gaps concerning cognitive and socio-emotional learning which is otherwise strengthened through classroom culture and face-to-face pedagogies. Several studies indicate the link between emotional and social factors in addition to family and non-familial aspects connecting aspirations to both educational and occupational aspirations. Occupational aspirations among adolescents determine career decision-making, goal setting, self-awareness and management and relationship management. It was observed that in the absence of these agents, these competencies were under-developed. In the absence of a regular scaffolding during the COVID-19 pandemic, children across all age groups were either unable to develop their aspirations or shifted radically. The paper qualitatively examines the change in aspirations during the COVID-19 pandemic through content analysis of visual and oral narratives collected through interviews and focus group discussions with twenty-seven adolescents within the age group of 13-18 years from urban slum communities of Bengaluru, Karnataka. It shows a paradigm shift from fantasy and quasi-fantasy to realistic goals and aspirations to those aligning with parental occupation or low-skill work as a part of the compromise which is described through the conceptual lens of Goffredson. 'Lack of confidence', 'inability to map' and 'develop skills', 'lower self-esteem', 'unclear' and 'easy money' were some of the emergent themes. The gaps emerging in the narratives can be bridged through strategic changes in the pedagogy.

Keywords: aspirations, COVID-19, confidence, pedagogy, self-awareness

Background

Aspiration is defined as a strong desire to achieve something strong or great. It is inspired by familial as well as non-familial determinants (Goffredson, 1981). Goffredson (1981) is of the view that aspirations are sedimented over four developmental stages spanning from childhood to adolescence. About Goffredson's explication of the developmental changes, filtering of aspiration is based on gender, power, and other social factors and finally the compromise characteristic of the early adulthood phase where individuals make a vocational adjustment.

For adolescents coming from poor socio-economic background, financial issues become an important factor in affecting their educational aspirations. The cultural capital of the parents and financial costs, both factors are considered by the adolescents while planning their educational aspirations further. For these adolescents, estimation of success and failure as well as the cost of study becomes very eminent which is accompanied by the values and expectations of the parents (Madara-sova, Tavel et al., 2010).

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Haller (1968) quoted Lewin (1935) to distinguish between two important concepts when studying aspirations, namely, the 'real' aspirations and 'ideal' aspirations. The former according to him can be described as the goal that can be achieved by the person while the latter refers to what a person might want to achieve but is limited by external factors. Between these two forms of aspirations, an individual assesses factors like socio-economic status, gender, power etc to find realistic levels of aspirations (Haller, 1968).

Review of Literature

Literature relating to major key themes such as 'Aspirations', 'Children', 'Adolescents', 'Compromise', 'COVID-19', 'Child development' were searched through the databases, and they were reviewed using the Boolean logic of 'AND' and 'OR'. Over 200 research articles were identified and reviewed to study the factors, determinants, and impact of COVID-19 on aspirations and child development. PubMed, CINAHL, PsycNet, and Cochrane Collaboration were thoroughly searched to explore the outcomes of the interventions across all developmental groups. The studies on psycho-social development, mental health, schooling, and virtual education were able to throw light on the inadequacy of the educational system during the pandemic. There is also a vast amount of literature on aspirations and motivations however, its impact on vocational adjustment and compromise displays a lack of ample empirical studies in this direction. The review throws light on the paucity of literature in the global south highlighting the direct impact of the pandemic and virtual schooling on the aspiration. Some of the broad thematic areas in which literature was reviewed are as given below.

COVID-19 and Children's Aspirations

Most of the literature was focused on the COVID-19 pandemic as an indicator, hence it is classified as sub-themes under the broader context of the pandemic. The UNESCO (2020b) report indicated that almost 87% of the world's child population was impacted by the pandemic. The pandemic lay bare the socio-economic distinctiveness (Cherian, 2021) where students from lower socio-economic strata suffered a severe blow due to a lack of digital infrastructure. The

COVID-19 pandemic is seen as the determinant that 'changed' pedagogical practices and initiated a drive to re-look the education policy and structures. It led to 'compromise' concerning goals owing to significant learning gaps and educational uncertainties. Masonbrick (2020) advocated for enhanced child rights measures and policy changes considering these impediments.

Low Motivation and Determination

The studies by Suarsi and Wibawa (2021) assert the decrease in motivation levels of students in elementary education through a study conducted with 186 learners. This was owing to school closure, lack of peer support, and inability to cope with mental and physical level issues.

Issues with forming Self-Concept

González-Valero (2020) appealed to the critical mass of researchers and educators and policymakers to drive changes in the pedagogical structure. The structure of the study involving 366 adolescents revealed that during the pandemic, adolescents suffered a crisis related to the formation of self-concept which is a key determinant of goal setting, aspiration, and motivation. This is a result of inadequacy in mental and physical well-being and emotional well-being with family and peers.

The Absence of the 'Mentor' Teacher

Despite massive open online courses (MOOC), and self-directed pedagogical support, the existing learning gaps reiterate the vehement need for the physical presence of the traditional mentor teacher who was the facilitator by the side. The mentoring process, whether structured or unstructured, embedded in the culture of a classroom was crucial to the emotional as well as academic well-being of the students who suffered from inadequacy due to shifting towards a virtual mode of education (UNESCO, 2020). The UNESCO report lists the issues facilitators faced in establishing a connection with the students which discouraged them and Zhou (2020) asserted the need for strengthening the psychological support of the children owing to inadequate teacher-student interaction.

Inadequacy of Support during School Closure

Minimal or no exposure to schooling and socio-emotional learning played a huge role in weakening the high aspirations, lowering motivation, and considerable learning gaps. Several researchers Nikiforos, Tzanavaris, et. al (2020) and Cherian (2021) indicated that the alternative pedagogy during COVID-19 placed parents at the centre of its implementation. However, with parental domain, Agostinelli et. al (2022) viewed that several parents were either uneducated or did not possess the skills for remediation for their children's academic process or underwent a change in their parenting styles which further proved detrimental to children's trust at home and family environment.

“Many poor working parents cannot respond to the lack of in-class teaching because they cannot work from home. In addition, parents turn more authoritarian, which imposes a negative externality on the local environment that hits the most disadvantaged children especially hard.” (Agostinelli et. al, 2022: pp 31)

In this regard, the formation and sedimentation of aspiration and adjusting the gap between the 'real' and the 'ideal' aspirations became challenging for the children.

Aim of the Study

Intending to capture the shift in the aspirations of the youths from lower socio-economic contexts, the objective of the study is to study the shift in the aspirations of the youths from lower socio-economic contexts in Bengaluru during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following are the research questions of this study:

- What are the aspirations of the young adolescents from lower-socio-economic strata?
- Are the changes or shifts in the aspiration brought by COVID-19?
- What are the contributing factors during COVID-19 that led to the changes?
- What are the transitions brought in the aspiration?

Methodology

The study emerges from an interpretive epistemological stance and can be ontologically located as social constructivist as well as pragmatic in nature. It is qualitative in nature with the use of focus group discussion (FGDs) analysed through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and their representations were analysed through content analysis. The discussion groups consisted of six to eight students each and four such FGDs were conducted. The four groups included a mix of both genders and a total of 27 adolescents were included, including 12 girls and 15 boys, all were from poor socio-economic backgrounds and have been studying in government schools and are currently attending virtual classes. All twenty-seven adolescents were encouraged to share their visual narratives by sketching/drawing the aspirations of the person they wish to become in their professional selves.

The youths were interviewed on their aspirations and how they changed with a focus on causality in specific reference to the pandemic. The interviews were held in Kannada, Hindi and English and were transcribed and translated to English with grammatical corrections. The data collection spanned seven months from May 2021 to October 2021, these students were attending virtual classes since February 2020.

Analysis

1. Loss of Continuity and Track of Classroom Content

The children shared to have undergone a break from academics, they mentioned a continuity which existed when they were attending classes, going to school and tuition also, but the '*harivannu muriyitu*' which in Kannada means broke the flow also symbolises a halt in a process they saw contributing for their future. Dutta and Smitha (2020) also referred to the pandemic and virtual education as 'breaking the flow' in the context of Bangladesh. The youth also shared during the group discussion that this stalled an existing system of note sharing and classwork and most importantly, a routine was disturbed which helped them in achieving the goals. This points toward the

determinants which led to Goffredson's (1981) compromise component of her theory.

2. Learning Gaps

Connecting to the discussion on academic loss in the above section, the children shared to have developed significant learning gaps in their perception, which led to the erosion of the existing confidence also among the students. This led to them deciding to shift to occupations which do not engage them academically. Banerji (2021) refers to the ASER Report which refers to the learning gaps, conceptual clarity, and resultant lack of confidence and this explains the movement towards sacrifice termed by Goffredson (1981), where the individuals assume newer roles based on their social conditions and capacity.

3. Lack of Peer Interaction and Support

Cherian (2021) has focussed on the altered relationship with the peer, due to social distancing and lockdown, a girl mentioned in the group discussion that she and her friend together wished to start a beauty parlour and they used to have their dream mentioned at least once a day in their conversation. She shared that *'I have not met Siri since two years now as she went to her native place, I had almost forgotten about my dream because I stopped talking about it to my friends.'* Lee's work (2020) was phenomenal in identifying mental health issues among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic and the study lists loss of peer interaction as a key criterion for mental health disruption. Gándara & Gutiérrez (2004) assert that aspirations are shaped by the immediate environment and the peer's role in scaffolding and shaping those aspirations is crucial.

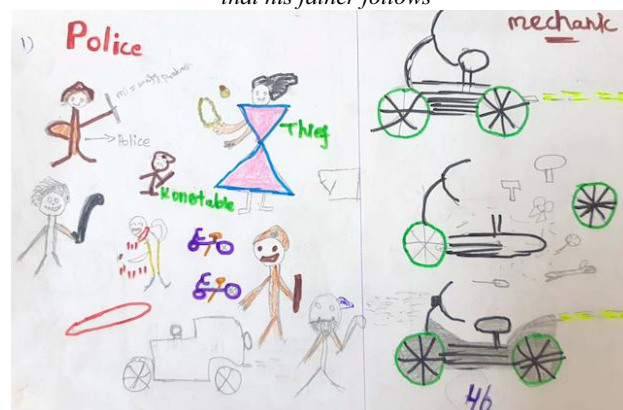
In this context, several participants' representations through drawings reflected the support of their peers. Practices focus on the instruction in the online mode and completion of the syllabus but pedagogical restructuring including remediation, tutorial, and mentoring to scaffold the virtual class's instruction could bridge this gap.

4. Economics and Sharing of the Financial Burden

All the youths were from poor socio-economic

backgrounds, but some were in more precarious conditions than others due to the nature of the work of the parents, single parenting, loss of parents etc. This led to the sharing of an economic burden on the household. A youth remarked, *'I am becoming my father, started doing things he does and in the due course became him, he used to work in the tyre shop and that has at least helped us in securing a meal per day, and I have seen that happening, my dream of sailing as a navy officer is distant and unrealistic, it may never happen. So for safety, I should do what my father did.'* All participants shared that financial burden and the impending need to support their families was the key determinant of their decision to shift to occupations which demands less time, investment, and academic skills and they role modelled their older family member or community members. Goffredson (1981) believed that when individuals compromise their careers, the first

Figure 1: A visual representation of a 19-year-old boy shifting his occupational aspiration from Police to an occupation that his father follows

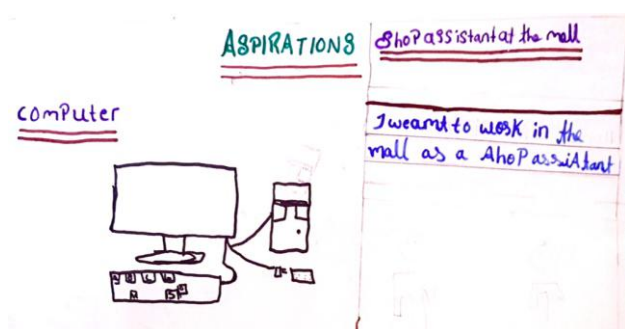


dimension to get affected is the field of work, in the given narrative the field of work is shifted to what his father would expect.

5. Easy Money

The above narrative indicating the need for economic stability closely relates to the need for financial resources and this reflects that social level is a contributor toward career compromise (Goffredson, 1981). Several participants listed 'easy money in small chunks' through predictable sources as a key determinant for change in aspirations. For instance, the youths assumed that working as a software professional is a difficult goal and hence difficult

Figure 2: A visual narrative representing the change in the occupational aspiration of a 17-year-old girl prior and after the Covid-19 pandemic



money, while working as a security guard is easy money which was the dire need for the participants during contingencies. The social learning theories of career selection lend a clear picture to these deductions that youth make (Krumboltz, Mitchell et al., 1976).

6. Feeling uncertain powerless and anxious

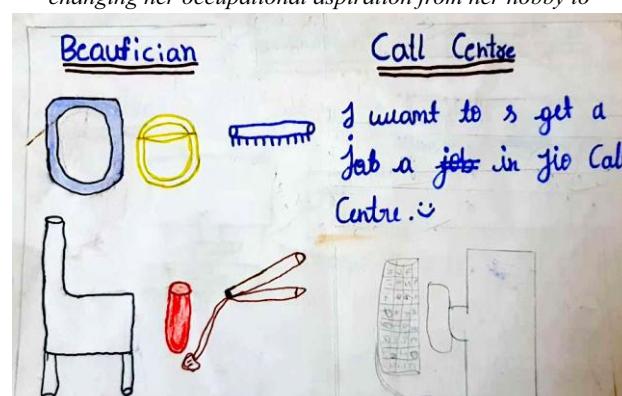
On losing parents and lacking control of life, many studies indicate individuals experience a loss of power and control, Korte, Friedberg et. al. (2021). This illustrates heightened insecurity, uncertainty and the frantic need to gain control over life. Rettie and Daniels (2021) highlight the intolerance of uncertainty and the resultant anxiety. This anxiety is also reflected in the artwork of the youth, which is seemingly the only explanation for the sudden shift in career decision-making. This explains challenges in coping mechanisms and is attributed to the need for mental health support. A participant in this regard shared that, she would rather be a shop assistant than pursue her dream to be a software operator which requires a lot of money as fees, and she said she is not sure about the continuance of income from her father's cart. It is also to be noted that lack of social connections which was discussed in lack of peer support is also a key determinant in feeling powerless and anxious. This further necessitates the need for a mentor teacher.

7. A Transition from Creative Engagement to Repetitive

Preference for a mechanical job is exhibited by several youths, and this is explained by parental occupation and gendered roles (Polavieja & Platt, 2014). Studies

(Walberg, 1989; Breen and Quaglia, 1991) assert that rural youths have lower aspirations owing to conservative educational exposure and low self-confidence. Although the current study focuses on youths from urban Bengaluru, the determinant of lower self-confidence is operational here and as (Haller & Virkler, 1993) studies the pressure towards uniformity, the youths from underprivileged contexts do not receive adequate support to push the threshold and during the COVID-19, it was much less than the adequate.

Figure 3: A visual representation of a 17-year-old girl changing her occupational aspiration from her hobby to



8. Technology

In the visual narratives, the participant who wanted to initially learn computers and create a career in information technology (IT) can be seen opting for a job as a shop assistant in a mall, and the respondent aiming to be a beautician opted for call centre representative, the respondent who aspired to be a police officer changed it to wanting to be a mechanic and the respondent who wanted to become a teacher changed it to become a singer.

The first three visual narratives as displayed above demonstrate how the respondents accepted the reality about them coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds and adjusted their aspirations accordingly to take up work that was easily available to them. A theme of hopelessness also emerges here from the narratives shifting from quasi-fantasy to fantasy. During verbal discussions, it was also pointed out that finding an easily available job is preferable since they need to take some responsibility to run the household. A few respondents also reported losing family members and/or parents due to which they had to take up the earning role in the family. This category

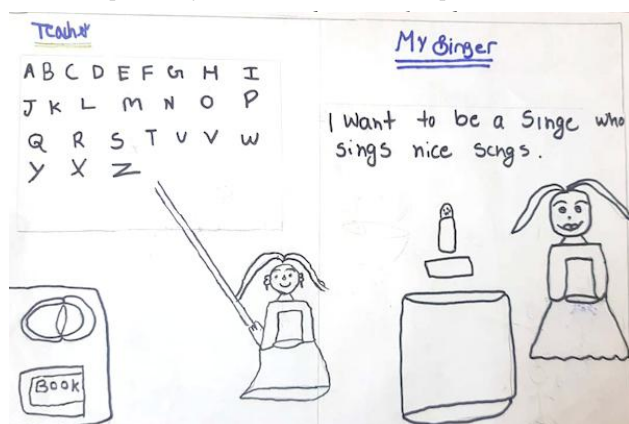
demonstrated how themes like hopelessness, the responsibility of taking care of the family, and low socio-economic background have a major effect on the aspirations of adolescents and often change what they aspire to be into a more realistic goal.

While discussion of the above category brings to light the themes that affected the aspirations of the respondents, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual classrooms is another element that needs to be explored.

9. Popularity

Several narratives point to the need for popularity and being khyata or tilidide (famous or known), the depiction of a pop singer, lawyer, and even a teacher who has the attention of the students reflects the same need. This is not a shift characterised by contingencies directly, but it focuses on the need for resultant earnings and respect in the community. The participant who represented her wish to become a

Figure 4: Visual representation of change in 18-year-old girl's aspiration from a teacher to an occupation that



singer shared popularity, easy money, and power more in being a singer while it is also closely related to her skills.

10. Power

On being probed about their aspirations for being a lawyer and a police officer, the youths reflected on the want for power. Very close and evident was the want for power which is reflected in most of the artworks and narratives. The ability to control the job role, according to a youth, emanates from the *gambhiryam* (power, literal meaning seriousness). The youth shared that the lawyer's role is seen as that of being

able to manipulate and decide on the law and order of the society, hence drawing power, here they exhibit a desire to push the tolerable effort boundary mentioned by Goffredson (1981).

11. Implication for Pedagogical Changes

The above textual narratives and their visuality explain the need for pedagogical inclusion in and restructuring of virtual classrooms. Although the pandemic is subsiding, virtual classrooms and online teaching and learning will remain. Therefore, it is exigent for educators and administrators to incorporate these transitions into pedagogical planning.

Carlana and La Ferrara (2021) are of the view that pedagogical changes such as tutoring in online mode as scaffolding will garner peer and educator support and as revealed in their study there was a steady increase in the student motivation level. The model proposed by them is effective for students from lower-socioeconomic strata and it involves the mobilisation of youth volunteers from higher education institutions. Cherian and Francis (2021) assert the need for cultivating a growth mindset among children and youth through a mentoring process that is to be structured and channelised by institutions. Several students shared that their teacher was virtually present but physically and mentally absent. A student remarked, 'what if she was a *chitram* or *gombe* with a sound (picture or a doll)?' This reflects the uneasiness and frustration of each support from the educator.

Agostinelli (2022) is of the view that parents' ability and time to work towards the gap in skill-building cannot be accounted for as a reliable solution as those from poor socio-economic backgrounds are unable to provide scaffolding for cognitive or non-cognitive skills. This calls for strengthening the peer environment and using school resources effectively. This can focus on micro-practices such as discussions, whole school circle time, innovative asynchronous activities, usage of Web 3.0 Tools to facilitate classes and hybrid learning methods to help learners forge their skills

Pedagogical restructuring is important in virtual pedagogies to accommodate scaffolding for socialemotional learning and lend support to the

learners. Outcome-based learning (OBL) and pedagogical aspects focus on OBL to ensure that the learner's acquisition of skills is in line with the demands of the job role they aspire for.

Findings

The research, through various FGDs and visual narratives, points towards the changes that have taken place in the aspirations of adolescents from low socioeconomic families and the factors that contributed to the changes, following are the findings synthesised from the analysis.

1. Themes like the uncertainty of the future, hopelessness, isolation, and the feeling of powerlessness emerged which reflect the issues concerning the mental health of the youth during the pandemic. These verbal narratives were then supplemented by visual narratives to delve deeper into how the aspirations have changed.
2. The emergent themes from both the visual and verbal narratives were quantified into five broad categories namely, need for power, need for socialisation, self-image deprivation from occupational aspiration, non-cognitive skills, financial aspirations, and familial determinants. The various categories summarise the factors that have a direct impact on the determination of aspirations in adolescents.
- 2.1. Under the first category, sub-themes like the need for power, following the trend, need for popularity and recognition, need to be liked and appreciated, reputation, and need for networking to avoid isolation emerged which was a direct commentary on how aspirations are greatly influenced by how a person perceives themselves or wants to be perceived. The visual narratives included mentions of professions like teaching and police officers who have an inherent component of authority, control and power attached to them. An 18 year-old girl remarked:

'Being a teacher will ensure I get respect and power which I was unable to secure throughout my life due to being a girl from a lower caste. I am the first person to be educated in the family and I am eager to get a job as a teacher.'

2.2. Also, all the visuals include professions that need interaction and networking with multiple people during the day pointing towards their need for network and socialisation to avoid isolation which they faced during COVID-19. Professions like singing and call centre jobs indicate occupational aspirations that are considered to be the current trend and have a component of popularity, recognition, and appreciation from others attached to them. This shows the clear distinction highlighted by Lewin (1935) between the 'real' and the 'ideal' aspirations. Also, all the professions that were mentioned during the discussions that adolescents aspire to be, are considered reputable in society. This demonstrates the selection of professions by adolescents that fulfilled their need for power, socialisation, appreciation, recognition and living a reputable life.

The second category that emerged during the study was non-cognitive skills and their importance in their career. Themes like loss of previously learned skills, preference for a job that is easily available, low-skills requirements, and easy job training were prominent in the category. The participants asserted the lack of time or resources for cognitive skill realisation regardless of their ability to do the same.

In this regard, a 17-year-old boy shared:

'...being a mechanic is easy and I like to assemble things, while other professions need more studying and skill-training.'

- 2.3. The adolescents reported that there was a significant loss of content that they had learnt previously due to the sudden shut down of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even for students who attended online classes, the scenario was not much better since the teacher as well as students were both new to online learning as well as lacked the required training and resources to make online learning fruitful.
- 2.4. All the professions like shop assistant in the mall, call centre representative, mechanic, and singer that the adolescents reported as their aspirations for the post COVID-19 pandemic period demonstrates how they preferred jobs that required low cognitive skills, were repetitive and easy to learn, did not require any

specialised skills training or certification and were easily available. Jobs like shop assistant, call centre representative, and mechanic are all jobs that adolescents can easily get even if they have low cognitive skills and require basic training for mastery in these professions. Singing is viewed as a profession and manifestation of the fantasy aspiration, although it requires specific skills and training, it also does not require high cognitive skills. Thus, a trend of shift or compromise as Goffredson (1981) described, emerged where adolescents moved away from careers that required a lot of learning or use of complicated skills and aspired to do things that were easily available and could be easily mastered.

- 2.5. The third category that emerged from the discussions and interactions was financial aspirations. The adolescents demonstrated an inclination toward careers and futures where they can earn money easily and quickly, they can have financial security and don't have to take a lot of risks. The themes demonstrated how the adolescents aspired for security and certainty in their life because of the tough times they faced during COVID-19 when the uncertainty in terms of finance and the future were both high. The professions mentioned in the visual narratives all point towards an aspiration of stability, security, and a risk-free future. Several codes from the visual narratives focus on money and financial well-being. This calls for pedagogical restructuring to include learners from diverse demographics and to focus on skill acquisitions.
- 2.6. Professions like shop assistant, call centre representative, and the mechanic are salaried jobs so there's minimal risk involved in terms of financial investments. The job of a call centre representative is heavily incentive based, while singing being a popular profession has also become a highly profitable profession. This further points toward the theme of incentive

focused work and quick money as an important factor that affects the adolescent's aspirations. Also, none of the participants showed any interest in entrepreneurship as a profession.

- 2.7. The final category, familial determinants, consisted of themes related to the adolescents' backgrounds like poor socio-economic status, acceptance of reality, taking care of family, hopelessness, loss of parents or family members and caste. The themes that emerged demonstrated how during the COVID-19 pandemic the aspirations of the adolescents had become more realistic in terms of their economic status and their available resources (Liu, 2013).

Conclusion

The occupational aspirations of adolescents are reflected by factors like power, familial determinants, and socio-economic as well as socioemotional factors. As per Goffredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise, the participants have compromised on the roles due to lack of support, lack of self-determination, and contextual factors. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to virtual classrooms was a major contextual determinant responsible for the compromise. Other factors that majorly affected the aspirations of the adolescents were lack of peer, pedagogical support and parental support. There was a significant shift in the aspirations of the respondents from careers that required cognitive skills to careers or occupations that did not require significant cognitive skills, and were more financially rewarding. The pedagogical gap in virtual teaching was also quite evident as several respondents pointed toward a lack of resources and a learning gap. The bridging of this gap could support the students in utilising the virtual classrooms to the greatest extent and could also change their inclination from only focusing on occupational aspirations that require low cognitive skills to careers that are highly cognitive through support in the form of pedagogical re-structuring and psycho-social scaffolding.

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02

Interview

Painting by: Aaditya Singh, Age 8

Interview with Former Supreme Court Judge Justice (Retd.) Madan B. Lokur

Ques. What will you frame as two key challenges in ensuring children's access to legal rights?

All children have an inalienable right to grow up in a safe environment with dignity.

The primary challenge, in my view, is that society and every individual must accept and acknowledge that children are entitled to and have basic human rights. Sometimes, we tend to forget that. For example, many still seem to believe that corporal punishment at home or in school is an acceptable form of disciplining a child. It's a 'spare the rod and spoil the child' syndrome coupled with 'the parents or teachers know the best' attitude. This is wrong and everybody should be made aware of this.

The second challenge is our inability to provide a home away from home for children who are rescued from child labour or trafficking or otherwise need care and protection. Many child care institutions are so mismanaged that there is overcrowding, a lack of basic educational activities in these institutions, sanitation and hygiene are not on the agenda of the caregivers. Moreover, a healthy diet and nutrition are not even thought of. Similarly, avenues for recreation and entertainment are missing. It should be appreciated that children are in these child care institutions, not of their own volition, but because of circumstances that are not within their control. The same situation prevails in most observation homes for children in conflict with the law. They too are children in need of care and protection, though for a different reason. They need to be rehabilitated, restored to society and reintegrated holistically. All of us, particularly policy and decision-makers, must appreciate this reality.

It is only when we focus on these twin challenges, among others, that we will be able to make a difference and provide access to basic human rights to children as well.

Ques. What do you think may be done to prevent violation of children's legislative rights in the first instance?

It is necessary to not only make people aware but also to educate them on children's rights. A massive campaign is necessary both in urban and rural India. Unless we reach out to everybody - parents, caregivers, bureaucrats, elected representatives, policymakers and so on, we will be found wanting. The task is difficult but achievable. Statutory bodies like the National and State Commissions for the Protection of Child Rights must aggressively get into the act and actively involve Child Welfare Committees and NGOs that are spending their time and energy in helping children in many different ways. In other words, a concerted effort must be made by all duty holders.

Ques. In the past 2 years, thousands of children have lost both parents, and lakhs of children have lost at least one parent. What would you recommend is done to address the vulnerability children are experiencing in these times?

The pandemic has been a disaster in more ways than one. We still do not know the extent to which children have been traumatised. Unless we know the extent and nature of the problem, finding solutions will not be easy, but none of these solutions can bring relief to the children overnight. It's always going to be a long process.

Since ours is a welfare state, there is a huge responsibility on state machinery and functionaries to take proactive steps to mitigate the tragedy staring in the faces of these children. Expecting relatives and friends of these children to assist them is not a long-term solution. The resources of the State have to be utilised to firstly, identify vulnerable children, then identify the problems they are facing, and seek expert advice on how to make them feel loved and wanted.

Society has a great role to play in this rehabilitation process and must instil belief in children that a full life can be lived even with the loss of one or both parents.

Ques. The past two years have brought to the fore a very important, but often neglected issue: the adoption of children. On one hand, India has thousands of children in adoption agencies, and on the other, thousands of prospective parents wait endlessly to have a child in their life. Why do you think that is the situation and how can it be remedied?

You are right that adoption has been neglected considerably. A recent reply by the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) to an RTI query reveals that the home study reports of more than 16,000 prospective parents have been approved three years ago. However, they are still in the queue for adoption. There are thousands of other prospective parents whose home studies are yet to be conducted or approved. However, at the end of June 2022, about 4,000 children are legally free for adoption out of which about 1,400 are children with special needs.

It is time for the State to review the adoption procedure without compromising the safety and security of the adopted child. The change in procedure introduced recently may not be achieving its purpose. Follow-up action by adoption agencies is necessary so that adopted children are protected from exploitation. There must be an open and in-depth discussion about adoption and the procedures among the stakeholders, that is the State, adoption agencies, prospective parents or parents who have adopted children.

Ques. Different studies including the 2018-19 report of the Ministry of Women & Child Development, Govt of India paint a sorry picture of the management of children's homes in the country. What role do you see State Commissions For Protection of Child Rights play in that regard?

Management of child care institutions is very high on my list of priorities. If a welfare state like ours is not able to look after our children, we may be in trouble. There is no point in saying that children are the future of the country and then doing very little for them. It would mean that we are doing very little for the future

of our country and that is definitely not acceptable. We have to strive to ensure that children in our country grow up living a life of dignity, free from want, and grow up to be responsible citizens.

Ques. In the past 2 years, have you seen any good practice or intervention by any government body and if yes, would you like to share a few for others to learn from?

There have undoubtedly been some positive and noteworthy steps taken by the government for the benefit of children. The most important is that of encouraging education, particularly for the girl child. This initiative can actually be transformational and I hope it succeeds. The government has also made significant legislative changes to expedite adoption, but I am not aware of the success (or failure) of this initiative. The government has woken up to the horrendous crime of trafficking and has taken some legislative steps. All this is very good, but the proof of success lies in the aggressive implementation of policies and schemes. The scheme for providing compensation for rehabilitation and medical expenses of POCSO victims is good. Unfortunately, even though there is some urgency in the release of cash by way of compensation, children and their parents have to wait for several months before the amount is released. Eventually, I believe that a social audit must be conducted of all such schemes to know the successes and failures.

Ques. According to the MWCD's Audit Report (2018-19) of CCIs, 33% of Child Care Institutions are not even registered even after the Juvenile Justice Act 2015. The Report further states that with respect to 'mental health services' only 33.2% of CCIs/Homes have the necessary linkages; 38.3% for 'educational services'; 27% for 'vocational training'; 49.4% for 'recreational services'; 22.4% for 'health services'; 16.7% for 'legal services'; while only 8.3% of CCIs/Homes have for necessary linkages 'de-addiction services'. With such implementation gaps, do you think the current Juvenile Justice Care and Protection Act has the potential today to provide Justice, Care & Protection to a child?

The Audit Report is quite shocking. Two things stand

out: First, the need for a social audit. It is only when a social audit is conducted, in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, that we will know the truth and can make an assessment of the successes and failures. The Audit Report of the MWCD is a clear indication that while some initiative has been undertaken, a lot more needs to be done by the concerned authorities. The second thing that stands out is the need to effectively implement the JJ Act. Unless all the concerned authorities are serious about implementing a law enacted by Parliament, we will continue to get the kind of results that are apparent from the MWCD Audit Report. This is hardly a way to implement any legislation let alone legislation that directly impacts children across the country.

Failure of effective implementation and the absence of a social audit can have adverse effects. If child care institutions are not registered, and there is no check on the activities going on in these institutions, it is possible that they could be used for trafficking purposes. Similarly, if issues of mental health, education, vocational training and so on are kept on the backburner, a large number of children will be deprived of a life of dignity and we will, in due course of time, see many such children growing up as young adults perhaps lacking a sense of responsibility for society and the country. The possible scenario is bleak. It is extremely important to highlight the need for social audits and the effective implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act 2015.

Ques. The recent increase in cyber-crimes against children during the pandemic is alarming. The fine line between cyber-crimes and POCSO cases is getting thinner every day. In the increased use of social network spaces without any regulations and constant developments, how can one ensure the safety of children?

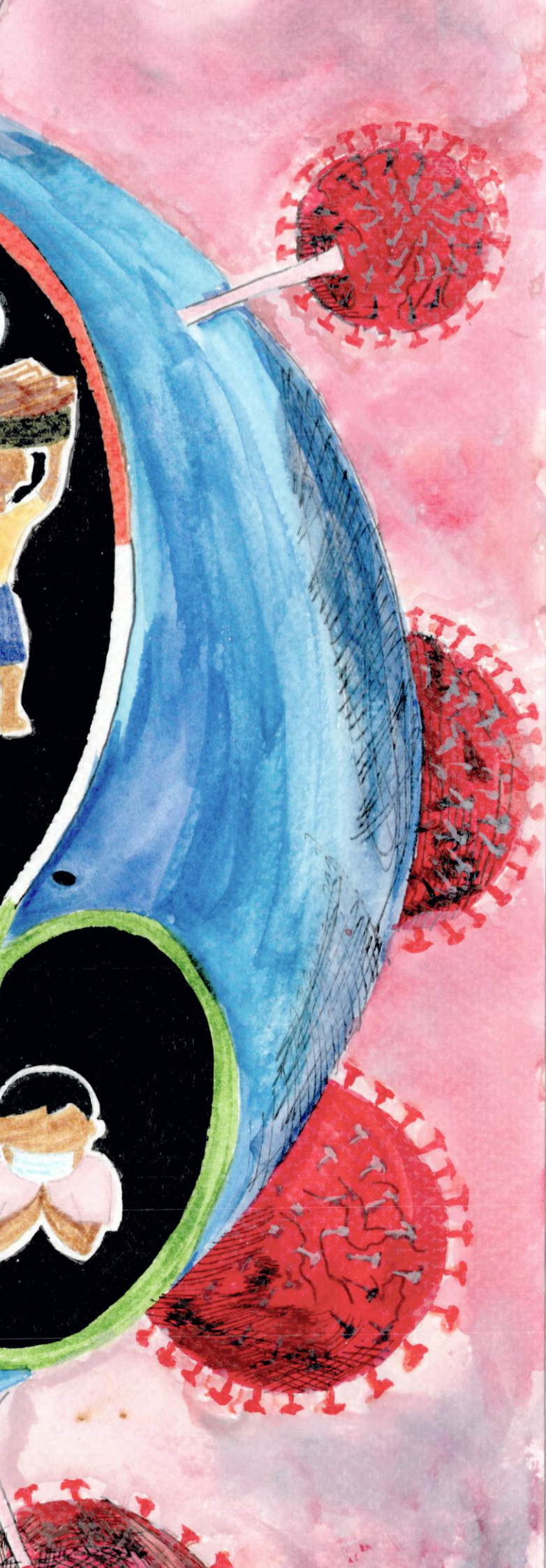
This is a very difficult question to answer. The Dark Net is difficult to crack making it absolutely necessary for governments to collaborate and ensure that there is a check on material that is put out on the Internet. Of course, this is easier said than done but it is necessary. I might add that there are different countries which have ideological or political differences, but on the issue of child pornography, all countries have the same point of view. It is an evil that should be checked and prohibited irrespective of the expense involved.

If this commitment is actually put into practice in all countries, including ours, some headway can certainly be made to ensure that cyber-crimes against children are reduced. It may not be possible to eliminate them, but checking them is possible. There are a large number of different types of cyber-crimes and methods employed to grab the attention of children. Our law enforcement agencies must set up a small army to check these crimes which can infiltrate our homes and play havoc in our daily life. Ransomware is one such example. It is necessary for all of us to be alert and ensure that children stay away from the Dark Net.

Ques. There is a provision for the death penalty in the POCSO Act 2012, in cases of aggravated sexual assault. Do you think this can be considered a solution or a deterrent for POCSO cases?

The death penalty has been in our statute books for decades, but it hasn't prevented heinous crimes. It has ceased to be a deterrent and I wonder if it can even be described as a solution to prevent or dissuade people from committing heinous crimes. The debate between deterrence and reformation, between retribution and rehabilitation, has been going on for many years, but not in a focussed or sustained manner. Experts outside the discipline of law must contribute to this debate and I am sure they will enlighten our policymakers and our judges, in one way or the other.





03

Critique & Commentary

Painting by: **Shiven Sidharth**, Age 9

Understanding Policy Focus on Child Protection

Avani Kapur | Mridusmita Bordoloi

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted the implementation of government programmes related to children's welfare and protection, but has also undone to a great extent, the progress achieved so far in education, nutrition, immunisation, and reduction in child labour. Global evidence shows a high correlation between poverty and child labour - a 1% increase in poverty can increase child labour by 0.7%, as families need to find alternative avenues for income (International Labour Organisation and United Nations Children's Fund, 2020).

India is no different – estimates project that the crisis could push further 354 million people into poverty (Saini, 2020). With relatively higher unemployment levels (CMIE, 2020) during the last two years, closure of schools (UNICEF, 2021), increase in dropouts (ASER, 2021), and the burden of deaths and health crises among households, certain categories of children are now at a higher risk of vulnerability. This includes girls, children of Dalit and tribal families, those below the poverty line, migrant labourers, homeless children, children in contact with the law, institutionalised children, and children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2020). The national helpline for children - Childline, reported a sharp increase in child marriage and child trafficking (Ghose, 2020). Bachpan Bachao Andolan, a child rights organisation, reported nearly double the number of children rescued between April and September 2020, compared to the same period in 2019; 1,197 children versus 613 (Bhaduri, 2020).

Currently, the Government of India's (GoI) primary

policy to deal with child protection systems stems from the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act or (JJ Act), enacted in 2000, and subsequently amended in 2015, and again in 2018. The Act emphasises rehabilitation and reintegration of children through non-institutional and institutional measures, with priority given to the role of family care. A key vehicle for implementing the provision of the Act was the Child Protection Services (CPS) scheme, which aimed at providing preventive and statutory care, and rehabilitation services to children in need of protection. This is done through three types of services: Institutional care through Child Care Institutions (CCIs), such as Open Shelters, Children Homes, and Specialised Adoption Agencies (SAAs); family-based non-institutional care through sponsorship, foster care, and adoption; and after-care services provided to children in 18 to 21 years age-group, to help them transition from institutional care to an independent life.

Union budget 2022-23, announced the renaming and restructuring of the CPS scheme to 'Mission Vatsalya' to address both child protection and child welfare. This piece critically looks at the extent to which the new guidelines are able to move towards a more holistic understanding of child protection and welfare and address shortcomings of the erstwhile CPS scheme.

1. Increase in Overall Child Welfare Allocations and Per-Child Costs for CCIs

Over the years, GoI budgets for child welfare including

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¹ Guidelines available online at: <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/GUIDELINES%20OF%20MISSION%20VATSALYA%20DATED%2005%20JULY%202022.pdf>

the CPS scheme have remained abysmally low. In absolute terms, during the peak COVID-19 period of Financial Year (FY) 2021-22, allocations were lower than those even in FY 2018-19. According to Union budget 2022-23², while allocations for newly structured Mission Vatsalya in FY 2022-23 saw a 77% increase compared to CPS scheme the previous year and stood at ₹1,472 crore, the scope of the scheme has also broadened considerably and not confining to child protection only. Moreover, the revised estimates of budgets and actual spending at the end of the year, are likely to be lower as has usually been the case in the past.

Low allocations in the past have resulted in difficulties in delivering multiple services envisaged under the scheme in terms of quality as benchmarked by the JJ Act.

The dismal condition of CCIs was even recognised in the survey of 9,589 CCIs conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) across the country (MWCD, 2018). The survey found that while Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) ran 91% of CCIs, only around one-third (32%) were registered under the JJ Act, implying that most of them were outside government supervision. The survey also found the sub-standard condition of nutrition, maintenance, and education for children.

Recognising this, the new guidelines have increased the maintenance cost per child in CCIs from ₹2,160 per child per month to ₹3,000 per month. This money is to be used for food, clothing, medicine, toiletries, oil etc, along with a newly added component of providing supplementary education. Similarly, monthly grant for family-based sponsorship or foster-care has been proposed to be doubled from ₹2,000 to ₹4,000.

This is indeed a positive step. Public investment to ensure the protection of children and their rights is important as a moral responsibility and for economic development towards a more equitable society (Jha et al., 2019). However, it will be important that this revision is not just a one-time exercise but instead follows an annual inflation indexation to ensure that the children rescued receive the proper medical care

and professional socio-emotional support they require.

2. Strengthen Fund-Flows

Currently, the financial planning process for many schemes including the erstwhile CPS, has three steps. First, states prepare and submit annual financial plans to the Project Approval Board (PAB) at MWCD, which are to be approved by the Union government. Once approved, the Union government releases the funds to the states in two or three instalments. Finally, the states contribute their shares and then release the funds to different implementing bodies at district-level and below, including the private CCIs run by NGOs.

In the past, delays have been found at every step in the process. States usually receive the final sanction letter towards the latter half or the last quarter of a financial year. This makes it difficult to plan resources and results in lower utilisation of funds. Recent data shows that the funds released to states as a percentage of total GoI allocations have been declining. In FY 2017-18 and FY 2018-19, share of funds released to states were 81 % and 79 %, respectively³. During FY 2019-20 (latest year with publicly available data), release of CPS funds to states in absolute terms declined compared to the previous year by 5 %, despite a 46 % increase in allocations. As a result, releases as a share of allocations went down considerably to 51 %. Specifically, the NGO-run CCIs face significant delays in payment released from the government. States do not start releasing funds to NGO-run CCIs unless they receive the final sanction letter from GoI for a particular financial year. Interactions with the CPS scheme officials in Rajasthan revealed that the state was unaware of the final approved amount till they receive the sanction letter.

The delay in releases exacerbates the issue. A large share of releases happens during the last 2 to 3 months of a financial year. For instance, in FY 2019-20, nearly 40% of the funds were still to be released between the 2nd week of February and the end of March 2020 (Bordoloi et al., 2021).

Such huge delays have an adverse impact on expenditures that states eventually have to incur. The situation is an ironic one; despite lower than needed

² Union Expenditure Budget, Vol. 2, MWCD. Available online at: www.indiabudget.gov.in

³ GoI releases of funds under CPS scheme to states from FY 2016-17 to FY 2019-20 from Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2869 answered on 12 December 2019. Available online at: <https://pqars.nic.in/annex/250/AU2869.docx>. Last accessed on 10 January 2020.

allocations, states are left with unspent balances that only get spent in the subsequent year. Until 31 January 2020, expenditure under most MWCD schemes including CPS was under 70% as noted by the Parliamentary Standing Committee.

The pandemic has led to a significant contraction of resources. Critical in this time is going to be ensuring that even the limited resources reach the last mile on time.

The new guidelines do provide recommendations of timelines for fund flows. However, the extent to which this will be operationalised and tracked will be key. One way to do this is to create an online and publicly accessible Management Information System (MIS) to track the performance and flow of funds from the Union government to states and districts to ensure funds reach the last mile on time. With Single Nodal Accounts now mandatory, we hope that this can be one step in creating a transparent and accountable system and reducing fund flow delays under the scheme.

3. Activate Local Child Welfare and Protection Committees (CWPCs)

The lack of adequate data on children facing different vulnerabilities was a hindrance even before the pandemic. However, the adverse effects of the pandemic including a rise in child labour, make it imperative to track children in vulnerable situations and help them avail government child protection services. As part of the erstwhile CPS scheme, the Child Protection Committees (CPCs) were envisaged to play this role in rural and semi-urban areas. However, discussions conducted by us before the pandemic with CPS scheme officials across Assam, Bihar, and Rajasthan, found that CPCs are mostly non-functional at the village or Gram Panchayat level. This was partly attributed to the fact that these committees did not receive any financial assistance to perform this role. As a result, members had no incentive to dedicate any effort to such services, which are advisory (Bordoloi et al, 2021). Thus, it has been a long-standing requirement for the Union and state governments to take immediate steps to activate the CPCs at the local level.

The new Mission Vatsalya guidelines are interesting in this regard for two reasons. First, it has suggested restructuring CPCs into CWPCs by expanding their role to overall child welfare including protection. Second, instead of forming new committees, it proposes to assign this role to the existing committee of the urban local body (ULB) or Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), which deals with issues of social justice/welfare of women and children. As the third tier of government, local bodies typically have both the mandate, visibility on the ground, as well as more access to resources which would allow them to play a far more comprehensive role with respect to children's welfare. The guidelines for instance suggest earmarking 5% of the untied grant available to local bodies for women and child related activities.

With adequate attention to trainings and capacity-building at the local level, this step could go a long way in moving towards a more preventative approach with a focus on family-based non-institutional care. In parallel, the state governments should create awareness among communities about family-based, preventive-care services and invest resources in facilitating them.

4. Strengthen the Number of CCIs

There is an unmet need for CCIs, evidenced in the high child to children home ratio in several states. As per the guidelines, there should be a maximum of 50 children per children home. Several states, however, have much higher numbers. As of February 2020, Odisha had as many as 76 children per home; followed by Tamil Nadu (67), and West Bengal (59)⁴. In other instances, many CCIs cannot accommodate even 50 children. Recognising the need to invest in adequate infrastructure for safely accommodating the current requirements and planning for the repercussions of the pandemic, Mission Vatsalya aims to “provide infrastructure and financial support to the States/UTs for facilitating setting up of CWC in every district and to ensure their effective functioning” (MWCD, 2022).

5. Child Protection Initiatives Should take an Allied-Sector Approach

Last but probably the most important, enabling

⁴ Source: Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 3025 answered on 19 March 2020. Available online at: <https://pqars.nic.in/annex/251/AU3025.docx>

children from falling into exploitative or vulnerable situations cannot be effectively implemented only through Mission Vatsalaya as children face several intersectional issues from learning deficits, malnutrition, and protection from violence and exploitation. These need to be addressed adequately.

Multiple government departments are running children-related programmes, some of which have components designed to safeguard the basic rights of children and protect them from exploitation of different kinds. It is important to identify such interventions or components under different schemes and thereafter, develop an allied-sector approach for ensuring child protection. For instance, a component under the Samagra Shiksha scheme allocates funds to bring out-of-school children back into schools and provide them with initial educational training. This is an important step to ensure that these children do not fall into exploitative situations such as child labour. Effective and true convergence is the only way to ensure that we can safeguard the needs of children in vulnerable situations more effectively. While the new guidelines propose a convergence matrix by involving

multiple departments to efficiently realise the desired outcome for child protection as well as welfare, past experience with convergence has been mixed, especially as guidelines remain unclear on how the planning and budgeting converges across schemes.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit India, several children were in vulnerable situations with a rising number of crimes and rampant child labour cases. The economic and fiscal contraction following the pandemic means that there is a greater need to ensure the care and protection of children. This is an important opportunity to not just tinker around the edges but also strengthen our approach in ensuring the welfare of our children. The recently released guidelines under Mission Vatsalaya, has made progress towards this direction by suggesting some positive changes to ensure children's right to survival, development, participation and protection. However, they are still to be operationalised and it will take sometime before the extent of implementation by the states can be assessed.

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Early Childhood Within and Beyond the First 1,000 Days:

Supporting Responsive Care and Parenting in the Indian Context

Sayantana Chowdhury

Introduction

The first 1000 days (ages 0-3) are the most critical, and crucial period in a child's life. Neuroscience shows how the brain forms more than 1 million neural connections per second, and how sensitive this development is to environmental stressors. The extensive work of Nobel Laureate James J. Heckman (2011) also highlighted how policy interventions, targeted towards the early years, have the greatest returns on investment as well as progressively benefit those from disadvantaged sections of society. This growing body of evidence suggests the importance and the efficacy of Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) in the first 1000 days, and beyond.

Background

While ECCE has been an active domain in research and academia for a long time, it is only in recent years that it has gained relevance and acceptance worldwide, in the wider realms of education, technology, and policy. The year 2020 saw India come out with its National Education Policy (NEP) after almost 34 years, where a great emphasis has been laid on ECCE and foundational learning. The year 2020 also saw the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, where according to a World Economic Forum report, global lockdowns forced billions of children out of school for almost two years. This stimulated an incredible surge in innovation and technology adoption in education (ed-tech), worldwide. Likewise, India saw a similar boom in apps and platforms for ECCE.

There is little doubt that both the policy and the start-up space have recognized the importance of ECCE in a

child's life. This is also in anticipation of a huge surge in demand for these services in the next decade, according to a Business Wire report. The major principles of ECCE that involve play-based learning and multi-sensory stimulation are becoming more accessible and mainstream, thanks to a thriving community of mom bloggers or influencers on social media. This, in turn, can influence parents to demand better technology or policy interventions from the public and the private sector.

However, this can still fall short of ensuring a safe and stimulating environment for children, and a meaningful experience for parents. This paper focuses on three major themes around ECCE: daycare centres, online programs, and parental well-being. The paper considers the pros and cons of each theme within the Indian context. Finally, the paper ends with recommendations on creating an inclusive and equitable intervention for Indian parents in and beyond the first 1000 days of the child.

1. Daycare Centres

In India, daycare services are differentiated between the public and the private sector, with the former primarily serving the economically weaker sections of society. This is done through the government's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme via more than 13 lakh anganwadi centres across India. These anganwadi centres primarily focus on nutrition and foundational preschool skills for 3 to 6 year olds. In contrast, private daycare centres or corporate crèches take in younger children and focus on foundational skills since nutritional needs are more than adequately met by their relatively affluent parents.

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With stricter regulations and quality control for anganwadis (under the NEP), and more corporate daycares/crèches entering the market (International Finance Corporation, 2019), one can only expect access and quality of daycare services to improve. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of double-working parents living in nuclear families suggests that in-house caregiving will be a less preferred option for new parents (Pew Research Center, 2015). In India, such estimates would be higher, since most of the economically marginalised families living in urban slums need both parents working full-time to make ends meet, but are often omitted from the data because they are predominantly employed within the informal sector.

However, childcare/daycare services remain one of the most heated and politically charged controversies in modern society. On the surface, private crèches and anganwadi centres alike, are run like institutions, where low caregiver-child ratios, mixed-age group settings, and a corporatized/bureaucratic work culture contribute to several behavioural problems in children who attend daycare during the formative years (National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), 2007). At a deeper, political level, mainstream media and developmental psychology often endorse daycare in a bid to normalise the guilt of working mothers choosing their careers over their children (Steven E. Rhoads & Carrie Lukas, 2006). Despite the clear gender angle, research shows how such a narrative can negatively impact children, who are left completely out of the debate. Finally, there is a lack of uniformity and enforcement of daycare regulations across India, on a broader policy level. As per a scroll in report, highly resourced and well-staffed corporations/crèches continue to exploit loopholes in critical policies like the Maternity Benefits Act (1961), despite its 2017 amendments. So, one can easily imagine how under-paid, under-trained, and under-staffed workers and anganwadis might be tempted to exploit the loopholes in the National Education Policy (NEP 2020).

2. Online Childcare Programs

Global lockdowns following the pandemic accelerated an unprecedented adoption and consumption of digital media. Easy access to high-quality apps and personalised caregiving services

(like Zoom nannies) through professionals and startups has helped parents focus on work-from-home while their children are engaged online. Research also documents how screen time is not as harmful to children (Daniel Kardefelt Winther & Jasmina Byrne, 2020). Moreover, many apps and online parenting communities provide free and paid activity videos, easy-to-use trackers, and online support groups for parents. This makes modern day parenting more scientific and less lonely. Hence, parents living in nuclear households needn't spend time leveraging their family or neighbours for support.

However, over-reliance on online programs seldom leads to a meaningful experience for children. Adding more nuance to the screen-time debate, a Nemours report highlights the importance of high-quality parental interaction during screen time, alongside a careful selection of educational content that goes beyond mere stimulation of the senses. With the rising work-from-home pressures, and unchecked content claiming to be developmentally appropriate for children, the chances of a 'good' screen time for children dramatically decreases. Furthermore, long hours away from the parent also hamper a child's secure attachment with their primary caregiver, and may lead to emotional disassociation from real life (Janet Courtney & Eva Nowakowski-Sims, 2018). Additionally, most early childhood programs and online communities end up propagating a perverse outlook in parents that prefer learning and progression on developmental milestones over an authentic connection with their children. Such overemphasis on learning outcomes can lead to anxiety disorders or a 'fear of failure' in children, even before they enter school. Finally, such apps, online communities, and activity kits exclude by design, delivery and prices alone, an overwhelmingly large proportion of economically marginalised parents in India, who nearly contribute to one-sixth of global childbirths per day, as per UNICEF data.

3. Parental Well Being

Modern-day parenting can be a challenging and stressful experience for first-time parents, especially double-working ones in a nuclear household. While self-care may be important, it is seldom prioritised amidst mounting pressure from household chores and professional commitments.

Moreover, socio-economic and cultural context introduces a great degree of variability within families, and tailor-made solutions are often costly to implement and require a lot of engagement from parents who are already spread thin in caring for their children. Therefore, parental well-being is best left in their own hands, since it's also a more private part of their lives that they may not wish to disclose to an external program.

Targeting parental well-being may require more effort and resources, but the costs of not doing so are far greater. An overwhelming body of evidence shows how closely parental stress is correlated to stress in their children. Perception of stress and a child's biological response to that stress is unique for each child and is mostly independent of parental attributes or the child's environment. In such circumstances, the parents' main role is the correct diagnosis of their children's stress levels and their timely resolution. Parental stress impedes this crucial ability (Gwen Dewar, 2020) and is further aggravated by the parent's exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Research shows how a parent's childhood trauma (accumulated through exposure to ACEs when they were children) negatively affects their parenting style and their children's well-being (Alonzo T. Folger et al, 2018). Data also reflects how the correlation between parental ACEs and toxic stress in their children and its subsequent consequences on long-term health, is largely ignored by most paediatric care, let alone early childhood programs. While such grave statistics might tempt one to consider trauma-informed care in early childhood, such behavioural-therapy programs are costly to implement at scale and have their drawbacks in terms of how they view the beneficiaries as 'victims of trauma', instead of 'empowered human beings' capable of healing, and change (Shawn Ginwright, 2019). Alternatively, healing-centred community-based approaches rooted in respective cultural contexts are not only more authentic but can empower marginalised communities at scale. While it's obvious that such programs require more effort (in addition to authenticity and vulnerability from both the facilitators' as well as the participants' side), the long-run impact on local communities, and society at large is ubiquitous (Healing Foundation, 2018). This also becomes important from a social justice perspective to

healing intergenerational trauma in our most marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Despite the advances in neuroscience, technology, and policy, modern-day nuclear families are seldom equipped to balance their personal and professional needs, while providing a safe and stimulating environment for children. As a result, parents are often left physically, mentally, and emotionally burnt out, and this is often transmitted unconsciously to children, the effects of which last beyond their childhood. Since there is such a strong correlation between parental stress and behavioural problems in their children, ECCE programs must first focus on the parent's well-being before they turn their attention toward the children. Practices such as mindfulness and safe spaces for sharing and reflecting can go a long way in making the parents more self-aware while interacting with their children. Only then can the more scientific and technical aspects of ECCE be integrated to provide a safe and stimulating environment for children to thrive. Otherwise, Modern families, however, live in an increasingly complex, uncertain, and violent world. Even if parents are equipped with the art of mindfulness, and the science of ECCE, there is little to ensure that tensions won't surface during their interactions with their immediate family or colleagues. Unchecked, this would quickly deride any gains from mindfulness, so parents also need to be equipped with skills that aid in conflict resolution. Non-violent communication is one such practice that equips parents to resolve conflict through dialogue and leads to a shift in their mindset toward children (Joshua Schultz, 2022). Especially with regards to assumed power dynamics between parent and child, and how to 'parent with' and not 'parent over' children.

Last but not least, families need to be supported by their community, and the public sector at large. Not only because the Constitution of India directs the government toward becoming a welfare state, but also because this shall align with India's rich history of communitarianism for thousands of years. Unless families have a community to belong to, where there is a sense of shared responsibility towards the child, any program will fall short of providing a holistic, and nurturing experience for both the parent and the child.

So, it's no wonder they say, "It takes a village to raise a child". Building such a community through spaces like a *Koodam* (in and around anganwadis or community centres) ensures there is true consensus-building on key issues concerning children, including dialogue with institutions, and policy-makers on supporting them from a bottom-up perspective (V Suresh & Pradip Prabhu, 2011).

Thus, in essence, ECCE is not just about imparting the best formative care for our children, but rather, opening a doorway for parents to reconnect with their kinder, more playful, and authentic selves. Therefore, given the right intervention, ECCE can not only nurture the citizens of tomorrow but can also heal and strengthen the communities of today.

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Decoding the 2022-23 Education Budget

Mridhula Raghavan

Introduction

Faced with the pandemic, India's school education system has had to adapt to new methods of teaching and learning in the last two years. During this time, the central and state governments have responded with a number of initiatives to ensure learning continuity for students. On the budgetary front, the central government prioritised allocation to the mid-day meal program and autonomous bodies such as Kendriya Vidyalayas in the first year of the pandemic. Now, as students return back to classroom learning, we examine the central government's budgetary spending in the second year of the pandemic, the policy response of the Ministry of Education to address the impact of school closures, and the rise of public investment in digital learning.

India spends 4% of its GDP on education with the states driving much of the expenditure (roughly 3% of the GDP) (Ministry of Education, 2020). In the 2022-23 budget, the Ministry of Education received the tenth highest allocation of Rs 1.04 lakh crore (PRS Legislative Research, 2022). This represents 3% of the central government's overall expenditure for the year. Of the Rs 1.04 lakh crore budget, 61% has been allocated to the Department of School Education and 39% to the Department of Higher Education.

Underutilisation in Flagship Schemes of the School Education Department

The Department of School Education and Literacy is responsible for programs related to school, adult, and digital education. The Department runs two main central schemes — Samagra Shiksha and PM

POSHAN — which account for 75% of the Department's total expenditure.

Data for the last seven years between 2015-16 and 2021-22 shows that the School Education Department's spending has increased at an annual average rate of 3.7%. The utilisation of funds in the five years before the pandemic has been over 93% of the budget estimate. However, in the first year of the pandemic, the Department's utilisation slipped to 87% (PRS Legislative Research, 2022). The trend is likely to have continued in 2021-22.

While examining the spending for the Samagra Shiksha scheme in 2021-22, the Standing Committee on Education (2022) observed that the revised estimate of expenditure had only been Rs 16,822 crore at the end of January 2022 against the budgeted Rs 31,050 crore, indicating utilisation of only 54%. The Samagra Shiksha program encompasses schemes for early childhood education, secondary education, and teacher education.

Table 1: Expenditure trends of Samagra Shiksha Scheme and PM POSHAN (2020-21 to 2022-23) (in Rs. Crore)

	Actual Expenditure 2020-21	BE (2021-22)	RE (2021-22)	BE (2022-23)	Actual Expenditure as on 31.01.22
Samagra Shiksha	27,835	31,050	30,000	37,383	16,822
PM POSHAN	12,878	11,500	10,234	10,234	6,661

Sources: Standing Committee Report on Demand for Grants for Education 2022; PRS.

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¹The number for 2021-22 is the revised estimate.

Some of the reasons for the underutilisation cited in the Committee report have been receipt of fewer proposals from the states and UTs, delays in the transfer of central and state shares to the State Implementation Societies, and slow pace of expenditure in states due to administrative reasons. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the release of funds.

Underutilisation of funds was also observed in the Department's other flagship program — the mid-day meal scheme at schools. In 2021, the government expanded the coverage of the program and recast the National Programme of the Mid-Day Meals in Schools as the Pradhan Mantri POSHAN Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) scheme. It extended the provision of providing a hot cooked meal to preschool children of government and government-aided schools in addition to the 11.8 crore children of classes I to VIII already covered under the program. However, in 2021-22, the Standing Committee (2022) noted that only Rs 6,661 crore have been utilised under the program against the budgeted Rs 11,500 crore.

State and UT administrations bear the responsibility of providing midday meals to the children. During school closures, children covered under the program were eligible for a 'Food Security Allowance' equal to the food grains and cooking cost. Some states and UTs provided food grains along with payment of cooking cost into the beneficiary's bank account during the pandemic while some others provided food grains and dry rations equal to the cooking cost (Rajya Sabha, 2022). The actual expenditure on the mid-day meal program in the first year of the pandemic (2020-21) increased to Rs 12,878 crore from Rs 9,699 crore in 2019-20.

COVID-19: The Rise of Public Sector Ed-Tech and Learning Outcomes

Online learning and TV-based instruction became the dominant form of education during the pandemic. Following the nationwide lockdown, the school curriculum was made available on the central government's e-learning platform DIKSHA for students of all classes from I to XII and teachers. 12

Swayam Prabha TV channels broadcasting educational programs throughout the day for each grade were also launched.

However, the sudden shift to virtual education came with its challenges. The Economic Survey (2022) noted that issues related to the availability of devices and internet access remained despite an increase in the availability of smartphones (Economic Survey, 2022). This particularly impacted the access to education in rural areas. Further, students in lower grades found it difficult to do online activities compared to students in higher grades. Such problems have constrained children's ability to keep learning.

The quality of virtual education that the students received has been difficult to assess in the absence of official government data. The findings of the National Achievement Survey conducted in November 2021 would be the first assessment of the learning outcomes of students during the pandemic. The NAS 2021 test measured learning level outcomes in language, mathematics, and environmental studies (for Classes III and V), language, mathematics, sciences, and social sciences (for Class VIII), and language, mathematics, sciences, social sciences, and English (for Class X). 33 lakh students — 22 lakh from rural areas and 11 lakh areas have appeared for the NAS in 2021. This would also be the first time all the government, government-aided and private unaided schools across the country participated (Standing Committee Report, 2021).

The results of the 2021 Achievement Survey released in May 2022 show that the national average score of students on the tests in 2021 further declined from the previous assessment in 2017. With the exception of English and Modern Indian Language in Class X, students fared poorly across subjects and grades in 2021 compared to 2017 (NAS, 2021). This may be due to the pandemic's impact on learning.

While the pandemic propelled the government into ed-tech with the creation of learning resources for its online platforms, the digital infrastructure in schools remains poor. The latest available data for 2019-20 shows that while the availability of functional toilets

²The previous NAS assessment for Class X was conducted in February 2018.

and hand wash facilities was over 90%, the availability of electricity, computer, and internet facilities was far behind (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2020).

Table 2: Availability of infrastructure in schools (2012-13 and 2019-20) (in %)

Infrastructure Facility	Percentage of Schools	
	2012-13	2019-20
Hand Wash Facility	36.3	90.2
Boys' Toilet	67.8	95.9
Girls' Toilet	88.7	96.9
Electricity	54.6	83.4
Computer	22.2	38.5
Internet	6.2	22.3

Source: UDISE 2019-20; PRS.

Table 3: Number of government and government-aided schools having digital infrastructure (2019-20)

	Rural	Urban
Total number. of Schools	10,09,571	1,07,361
ICT Lab (in schools having Classes VI and above)	67,355	17,369
PCs with Integrated Teaching Learning Device	43,996	14,220
At least one Computer	1,91,286	45,865
Digital Board	26,746	9,553

Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 4022, Ministry of Education; PRS.

To ramp up the infrastructure, the central government provides funds to the state and UT administrations for setting up ICT labs and smart classrooms in schools under Samagra Shiksha. The approvals for ICT labs have increased from Rs 713 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 1,004 crore in 2021-22 and the approvals for smart classrooms have increased from Rs 286 crore to Rs 957 crore during the same period.

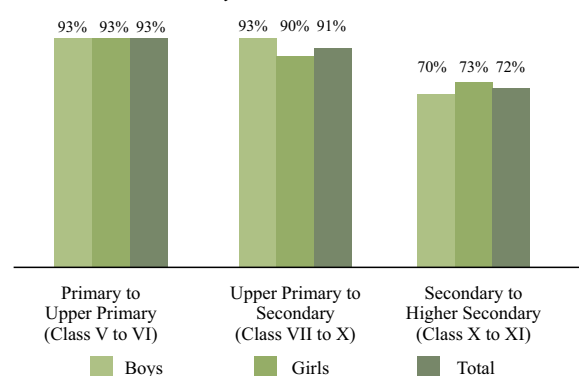
COVID-19: School Closures and Dropout Rates

The 2020 National Education Policy noted that more than three crore children in the age group of 6 to 17 remained out of school in 2017-18 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The school closures in 2020 and 2021 may have further had an effect on the school dropout rate. Citing past evidence, the Standing Committee on Education (2021) observed that short-term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among certain categories of students, particularly students from economically weaker sections and girls. "The pandemic-induced lockdown might have reduced the earning capacity of many households resulting in children being pushed to the labour market and young girls being pushed into marriage instead of education", the report said (Standing Committee Report, 2021).

In January 2021, the Ministry of Education directed states to identify out-of-school children through door-to-door surveys and prepare an action plan for their enrollment. The Ministry's guidelines also advised states to prepare and run school readiness modules/bridge courses to allow students to adjust to the school environment and relax the detention norms to prevent further dropouts (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The student dropout levels in the school education system can be understood through the measure of the transition rate. The transition rate is the percentage of students enrolled in the final grade of the current stage who proceed to the first grade of the next stage. Higher

Figure 1: Transition levels in the school education system in 2019-20



Source: UDISE Report 2019-20; PRS.

the transition rate, lower the dropout level. Data from before the pandemic shows that as of 2019-20 the transition rate from Class V to Class VI and from Class VIII and Class IX was more than 90%. However, the transition rate dropped to 72% from Class X to Class XI.

According to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey, the most prominent reason for dropping out of school for students was engagement in domestic activities for girls and engagement in economic activities for boys. The other reasons included financial constraints and a lack of interest in education (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2018).

To encourage retention in secondary-level education, the Department runs the National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship Scheme. The scheme provides scholarships of Rs 12,000 to selected students of Class IX every year to complete their education until Class XII. The scheme has been allocated Rs 350 crore in this year's budget, the same as the previous year. The revised expenditure estimate for the scheme in 2021-22 is Rs 284 crore.

Separately, the 2022-23 Budget contained allocations related to some of the recommendations of the 2020 National Education Policy. An allocation of Rs 1,800 crore has been made this year towards upgrading more than 15,000 schools to showcase the implementation of the 2020 National Education Policy. It is envisaged

that these upgraded exemplary schools over time will serve as a model for other schools in the area to emulate. In line with the Policy's emphasis on lifelong learning, the government also announced the New India Literacy Program to target 18 crore non-literate adult Indians.

Conclusion

The education budget for 2022-23 signals the government's efforts to expand virtual learning and implement some of the recommendations of the 2020 National Education Policy. At the same time, the budget allocation itself continues to remain low. India's share of public investment in education, as a percentage of GDP, has largely remained constant at about 4% in the last 20 years. This is below the recommended spending by the National Education Policy of 6% of GDP. Further, the slow release of funds towards the two main programs of the School Education Department in 2021-22 is an area of concern and needs attention.

The 2021 National Achievement Survey results quantitatively demonstrate the learning loss among students. Policymakers, parents, and educators alike have had to grapple with understanding the extent of learning loss during the pandemic and how to address them. As a first step, the NAS findings can offer guidance to educators and policymakers to support the learning recovery of students.

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Revisiting Hand Washing and Water as Basics during Pandemic and Beyond

Ivy Dhar

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the significance of hand washing, not as a choice, but as a rule. India has experienced several outbreaks of diseases throughout history and the severity is amplified among those living in poverty and poor hygiene conditions. In the last few decades, one of the crucial development agendas has been water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). However, we are nowhere close to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and its commitments to universal, affordable, and sustainable access. The community response has been slow and sizeable sections of children are yet to benefit from interventions.

It is time to review the targeted WASH components, and the related complexities as the rapid spread of coronavirus in India highlight persisting gaps. This article emphasises on an integrated approach towards hygiene goals as a way forward to ensure long-term impacts that will benefit children. The first section reflects on the gendered aspects of hand washing campaigns and why interventions may fall short of expected behavioural changes by focussing on accessibility and disparity. The second section discusses persisting hygiene and water limitations that add up to vulnerabilities during the pandemic.

Hand hygiene reveals attitudes and beliefs denoting a family and community activity and not only an individual habit. Therefore, in our focus on children, a larger picture cannot be overlooked. Hygiene is important for all children, and we are not attempting to restrict the discussion to a particular age group.

Insights are drawn from observing the national-level reports, research publications, and a few media coverage, mainly from Delhi.

Hand Hygiene First: What to make of it?

Hand hygiene is one of the simplest, effective, and low-cost preventive measures against transmission of infections. It is a significant aspect of children's well-being. A wide range of stakeholders through the public-private partnership are involved in the promotional mission for hand washing with soap and has attempted to integrate it with education. However, the initiatives in the area of hand hygiene will need frequent interventions, driving motivations, and constant persuasion for the expected behavioural change.

A study found that the transformation targeted to achieve regular hand washing practices among children will have a more lasting impact when along with the rational aspect of physical cleanliness, the mental make-up is strengthened. The emotional drivers like the desire of being a happy child and the desire to avoid contamination can trigger hand washing habits. Community health studies have stated that improving hand washing practices among mothers and caregivers can significantly impact children's health under 5 years. While critically analysing the promotion of hand hygiene, a few important observations cannot be missed. Who are projected as the agents of change and their preparedness? Whether there is the availability of non-

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negotiable elements, particularly adequate water facilities, along with soap?

The Lifebuoy campaign, targeted in many countries and India, focuses on teaching mothers the benefit of hand washing. Perceiving that domestic hygiene and child health rest as a responsibility of the mother, there is barely any conscious depiction of fathers as caregivers in most of the campaigns. Whereas, a more gender transformative approach that includes both parents and all caregivers in contrast to the framing of women in the hand washing campaigns may not only motivate behavioural change, rather challenge gender inequality norms. Campaigns also project children as change-makers in the community. Before we shoulder the responsibility on them, it is vital to observe the accessibility context more closely.

India is one of the major countries having a poor hand washing culture. While referring to the following sets of information, we find the challenges are both cultural and circumstantial. The National Sample Survey (NSS) 76th round report, 2019, reveals that hand washing with soap after all the critical moments is not largely practiced. 60.4% of Indian households use only water to wash hands before a meal, and the use of soaps or detergent along with water is very less in comparison (35.8%). The other 2.7% uses ash, mud, etc. and around 1% may not wash at all. It is further alarming to notice that 25.8% of households do not use water and soap, or detergent to hand wash after defecation. The habitual negligence in hygiene can be further explained by the following limitations.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4, 2015-16) of more than 6 lakh households states that 11.5% rural and 3.4% urban households experienced the absence of water, soap, or any other cleansing agent. The disparity is evident if we place the wealth component alongside hand washing facilities. Among the lowest income group in India, around 21% had no water, soap and other cleaning agents in comparison to the less than 1% of the highest income group who faced similar challenges. The households with absence of soap and water constituted a higher proportion of the SC (11.3%), ST (19.5%), and

illiterate (13.7%). We cannot ignore the fact that inequalities of caste, education, and income contribute to the existence of disparity in hand-hygiene levels.

It has been brought to notice that many schools cannot support the water and hygiene requirements. The CAG report of 15 states discusses that more than 50 % of the government school toilets built by Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) do not have even the basic hand washing facilities. About a third of the total anganwadis are in dire need of toilet and water provisions. Where taps do not have running water, children settle for meals without washing their hands. With poor availability of toilets, soap and running water, and inferior maintenance, the targeted behavioural change among children is yet to reach a required level of achievement. These have become intense subjects of discussion during the pandemic.

Pandemic Challenges: Unclean Hands and Water Divide

COVID-19 has further stepped-up the importance of hand-hygiene, adding more critical moments, including after sneezing or coughing, touching a contaminated surface, and so on. The WHO guidelines on hand washing with soap for 20 seconds was the most engaging intervention undertaken in recent times. We have already discussed hand washing culture and access issues. This section will further reflect on whether the pandemic scenario indicates changes in the hygiene attitude and the severity for the disadvantaged families.

A sample study conducted across rural and urban areas in six states discloses that exposure to the coronavirus and hand washing messages did not necessarily translate to knowledge for 60% of the respondents on how hand washing with soap works to protect against all types of infections. Hand washing culture has shown some positive changes, but the perceived benefits were higher for coronavirus than for other diseases. Caregivers' awareness is important for a child's health, and a few challenging aspects were noticed. 44 % of caregivers had limited understanding of hand washing before feeding children, and 38 %

were ignorant that hands must be cleaned after handling or disposing of child's faeces. The data reflects the shortcomings in expected behavioural changes. When people relate importance of hand-hygiene only with particular times and fail to connect it's benefits with overall health and well-being, it will require more than a pandemic threat to change the perspective.

Hand washing practices may further suffer due to persisting disadvantages to get water directly into homes. If we see NSS 76th round, we find that around 40% of Indian households have dependency on common or shared sources of water like neighbours, public or private community sources¹. NFHS-4 data states that only 18.4% of rural and around 52% of urban households receive potable water directly into dwellings or plots. The water collection burden disproportionately falls on women and children aged 15 years and above (80%)². The women also supplement their role as caregivers and undertake household chores. Therefore, they are a buttress of community hygiene.

The pandemic situation does create more difficulties for those depending on shared water sources as they can either maintain social distance or wash their hands, and it is difficult to maintain both. Facts collected from slums and informal settlements in Delhi reveal that poor income can dissuade hygiene matters. Loss of wages has aggravated the challenges of buying water, and whatever little is purchased as priority are set for cooking and drinking, whereas bathing and washing clothes are compromised. Exposure to risks is intensified among groups that face water insecurities.

The closure of school premises and compulsorily staying at home has led to a larger dependency of children on their families. Attention has to be paid to the fact that not all children have faced it alike. Drawing from our previous discussion, we can argue that those children living in families with greater vulnerabilities have been more acutely exposed to the challenges of the pandemic. This pandemic has taught a lesson that water and soap cannot remain as luxury items and an integrated approach will help in closing

the gaps. Most importantly, schools and anganwadis that cannot provide adequate hand washing and water facilities have to be fixed before children start going back to these locations.

Securing the Basics: An Integrated Approach

Experts have concluded that WASH and other key indicators like food safety and health regulations are significant determinants of children's health and nutrition. Chambers and Medeazza argue that negligence in sanitation and hygiene affects nutrition absorption, impairing growth, reducing resistance to diseases, and developing stunting among children. Humphrey and others have discussed that improved infant and young child feeding will have a shallow impact on children in the absence of WASH interventions.

Hand washing must become an important part of the mid-day meal scheme as nutrition cannot work without hygiene. Schools and anganwadis, where children interact publicly, are bound to have a role as carriers of infections and must be ensured to having all components of WASH programs. The focus should be on distributing hygiene kits to children for their daily use because homes, neighbourhoods, and communities cannot be missed out on, where children spend their time outside the school. Few drives were arranged during the lockdown. In Delhi, those affected by riots and migrant families were provided kits containing soap, sanitary pads, and food items. Special provision was taken to distribute the necessary items among the school-going children. By taking a few lessons from the pandemic, hygiene kits can become a regular feature in the mid-day meal scheme. Hygiene is as important as any other life skill. The activity-based hygiene curriculum that has been in the discussion must be implemented in the right earnest.

The claims of an integrated approach of interventions must be worked upon thoroughly. As an example, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan or the Clean India Mission does not have the promotion of hand washing as one of its prime objectives. While it aims to improve sanitation, the important element of constructing hand washing facilities is missing. Availability of the

¹"NSS 76th Round July 2018- December 2018", 21.

²"National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16", 14. '

functional tap water supply must be drawn into the mission because toilets without water and hand washing facilities will miserably fail the mission. Similarly, the Jal Jeevan Mission aims to provide individual households with piped water and must carry the promotional mission of hygiene in its agenda of improving the quality of life. Clean drinking water cannot help the human body without clean hands as it risks re-contamination of the water.

We have argued for universal support for hygiene in which hand washing facilities and water provisions must be ensured as basics. As children are particularly vulnerable to infections and diseases, the government cannot compromise this aspect. Children belonging to migrant families and economically disadvantaged families and in various community spaces must be made to feel that their clean hands will carry their future.

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Onlinisation of School Education and its Consequences: A Critical Analysis

Jyoti Raina

School education in India came to an unprecedented halt in March 2020 due to COVID-19 as all schools closed unexpectedly, affecting an estimated more than 270 million children. The closure took place without a time frame or a reopening plan. In the immediacy of the moment, there was an uncritical transition through educational technology (edtech) to online education in nearly all types of schools. Since then it is not a misnomer to say that 2020 has been the year of edtech using various synchronous and asynchronous technologies via online platforms, web applications, other software and digital tools. This has brought edtech not just under the spotlight but at the centre of contemporary educational debates. However, the debates have mainly focused on digital gaps while a more thorough analysis of the consequences of this near-complete shift to an online model has slipped under the radar.

The narrow posing of a homogenous policy-solution of onlinisation¹ was even indifferent to the existing social realities of our society, namely the latest available indicators of social consumption on the percentage of households with computer and internet facilities. The percentage of households with a computer is merely 10.7%. Further, there is an inequity with the percentage at 4.4 and 23.4% for rural and urban households, respectively. The internet penetration stands at only 23.8% with a whopping difference of 14.9 in rural and 42% in urban households (NSSO, 2019: 47). Moreover, influential

research in the international arena has already established that edtech does not foster learning. The enhancement of learning outcomes is very little even if teachers attempt to integrate technology and e-resources into the learning process (OECD, 2015) and 'the impact of digital technologies on education itself has been shallow' (OECD, 2016:3). This article undertakes a critical analysis of the worrying outcomes of the onlinisation of school education during the COVID-19 closure of schools.

Uncritical Onlinisation

Research found that almost all schools, government and private, switched to online education immediately on closure. Archival resources, radio, television and DTH could have been among the new touch points of 'content' that were relatively more accessible in rural areas but were sidelined in a wave of uncritical onlinisation. Teacher-reported data highlighted that mere availability of physical infrastructure did not constitute preparedness as 77 % of the government school teachers reported a lack of training to conduct online education while the figure was 11% for private schools (NABET, 2020:48) recommending to MHRD the need for better preparation of teachers in online pedagogies. This included 'desired professional development in the near future', 'support expressed for teaching through EdTech' and 'opinion regarding ease and difficulty of teaching topics online' (Singh et al, 2020: 18).

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¹The term onlinisation refers to shift of teaching from face-to-face teaching to various synchronous and asynchronous online modes like lectures using video conferencing platforms from Gsuite and similar apps after schools were closed due to Covid-19. The term was first used in a research report 'Lived Experience of Developing a Blended Learning Academic Programme in a Traditionally Presential University' available at http://oasis.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/3338/PCF9_Papers_paper_167.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y where it is defined 'as the process of programming instructionally designed course/module study guides in an institution's learning management system for activity-based interactive blended learning'

Digital infrastructure has inequalities between rural-urban regions as well as between government-private schools. The research also corroborates what news reports have indicated that during the closure period, it is only the better-off private schools that have been able to shift to online education; while state governments and other budget private schools struggled and have fallen behind (Oxfam, 2020; Iftikar, 2020; Kundu, 2020). The crucial upper primary and primary levels have been a particular arena of racking for government schools in making a shift to online teaching-learning (NABET, 2020:47). The indubitable trend of onlinisation exposed, to the fore, the government school-private school schism at a time when already the private school market was burgeoning exponentially (U-DISE 2019, CSF, 2020).

Worrying Outcomes

School education in India is already emaciated by a severe learning crisis, government-private binary, overheavy curriculum and graded hierarchies among various types of schools. An uncritical onlinisation leads to further worrying outcomes that are examined below.

1. Impoverished Pedagogic Calculus

Even if educators were to concede to technology-based solutions, the above options represent a very limited, impoverished pose. Online classes presented lessons much the same way as in the physical classroom replacing the chalkboard with analogous devices; adding interactivity in ways similar to those in the physical classroom because of which there was frazzling in teaching-learning processes. There is a need for research that can facilitate the leveraging of pedagogical and learning models for supporting a more intricate onlinisation process which comes across as more than a diluted version of the prescribed textbook material.

This includes developing appropriate courseware and software; evolving supporting pedagogies and capacity-building during teacher education. Be that as it may, there is no credible theory or research that indicates that technology-based solutions facilitate student learning. A seminal transnational review based on 800 meta-analyses of research over 30 years in computer-assisted teaching concluded that its net

effect on the enhancement of learning was probably zero (Hattie, 2013).

Technology-oriented solutions are not natural to learning. The connection between students and teachers during onlinisation is unnatural, superficial and decontextualized. Theory and research in developmental psychology, education discipline and learning theory have established that children learn best by making constructions of their own, (Piaget, 1974) something which is not possible in disembodied, context-neutral onlinisation processes. There is simply no opportunity for teachers to interact deeply with students nor for students to come together as peers during online classes, leading to a learning gap lucidly stated as follows.

So much in the classroom is driven by responses and reactions. That spontaneity is missing in online classes and teachers have to put in a lot more effort to teach — they have to decide where to pause, anticipate student reactions and sometimes keep the class on hold as they go through the chat messages to answer a student's query. (Sarangpani, P. cited in Singh, 2020).

Teachers have no systemic preparation in pre-service or in-service teacher education to introduce meaningful interactivity through 'spontaneity', 'responses' and 'reactions' during onlinisation. The author's own teaching experience reflected that these transformative imaginaries were not only adversely impacting the development of teacher agency but establishing a new private infrastructure of public education (Raina and Rathi, 2021). Another outcome of the hurried onlinisation was the foreclosure of possibilities for creative modes of remote teaching-learning (Raina, 2020) in which the limitations of online education came to the fore (Menon, 2020). Overall, there is a need for developing a more enriching pedagogic calculus of onlinisation.

2. Edumarkets: Accentuating Rule of Private Capital

Even if such kinds of enriched resources were to be included in an altered teaching-learning calculus; they are fraught with a shift towards the domination of a neoliberal edtech regime. The school education-electronic resources arena is largely outside the sphere of state provisioning. The development of edtech has

occurred largely outside the sphere of state activity, even though the present central government has undertaken some large-scale recent initiatives like Swayam, DIKSHA and National Digital Library of India (Anand et al 2020). The uncritical onlinisation has accentuated a direct marketisation of the edtech arena at the hands of private players. This has provided a flurry of opportunities exacerbating domination, or even rule, of private capital in the name of e-resources, online teaching, edtech and edutech among other commercial possibilities. Though there are already 4,450 edtech companies in our country (Singh, 2020), the pandemic has created conditions for onlinisation's moment of unprecedented proliferation as online classes have become a new normal at all levels of education.

The school closure induced onlinisation has thus pushed the edumarket to the cusp of a mega-expansion. This has even been called the COVID-19 boost to edtech. Edtech in India received private capital funding of \$2 billion in 2020 monopolised by the big players BYJU'S (\$ 1.3 billion), Unacademy (\$264 million) and Vedantu (\$ 144 million). With booming adoption rates by school systems, teachers and parents; edtech startups received \$ 1.1 billion in just the third quarter of 2020. The leading online education business player BYJU'S in India has been valued at a skyrocketing \$12 billion (Varman, 2021). Compare this valuation to that of a gigantic corporation Tata Steel at a relatively modest \$9 billion. Even a smaller startup like Bengaluru-based Quizizz which provides apps to teachers to conduct quizzes with students has surged its monthly active users from 20 million to over 60 million in December 2020, turning profitable much before its expectation (Velayanikal, 2020). Edtech companies have been posturing themselves as a panacea (Jain et al, 2020) threatening a 'shift in authority to private, corporate, and global actors sanctioned by the state' (Rajeshwari, 2020). Is this the digital dystopia we want to create in our society with global venture capital leapfrogging its hold over school education? The consequence of this accelerated marketisation will be to provide an escape route to the state in making do with technology-based solutions while deflecting attention away from more fundamental concerns that plague school education in contemporary India.

3. Firming up another category of social division: digital infrastructural inequality:

The infrastructural inequality revealed by research in access to pre-conditions of online learning menaces to turn into a new social difference. School education instead of acting as a cross-cutting equaliser 'firms up further the social differences based on class, caste, and region, exacerbating the divisions and exclusions' (Raina, 2019: 16). The policy shifts since the neoliberalisation of elementary education have accentuated the trend of 'operationalisation of the process of developing and entrenching further hierarchies of schooling systems which not only reproduce the existing social inequalities but also exacerbate another set of graded inequalities in our stratified social structure with its overlapping social differences' (Raina, 2020). The structural distortions are so legitimised in our school education (as also a binary between government-private schools) that it has been said that 'Schools at the bottom of the pyramid are very concerned about student attrition due to financial distress and rural migration even after the lockdown lifts' (Nangia and Kapadia, 2020). This is in response to a non-profit organisation Central Square Foundation's June 2020 survey showing a trend that children attending low-fee private schools may shift to government schools for this academic year and the fact that several states have reported an increased enrollment in government schools (Jaswal, 2020). The underlying assumption looks as if low-fee private schooling needs policy support rather than government schools.

This is not the kind of school education our constitution envisioned. The Indian constitution dreamed of school education as a leveller 'that contributes to the building of an egalitarian, just and democratic social order by providing free schooling of equitable quality to all children of our country up to 14 years of age' (Raina, 2020). Instead of functioning as an instrument of creating an inclusive society through an equitable system of schooling, school education portends into a category of social division because of which children belonging to different sections of society go to different types of schools in a multi-layered hierarchy of access. Against this background, the trend of onlinisation has had the worrying outcome of turning into one more category of social division.

The devastating consequences of onlinisation are far deeper than an apparent iniquitous digital divide among students. So far, the divide did not operationalise into a serious learning loss because of lack of digital access but threatens to widen educational inequality by leading to (unjust) learning gaps.

Alternative Educational Imagination

There has been a less than adequate attempt in the public sphere for the development of an alternative educational imagination during the school closure period. Instead, there was an uncritical but near-complete onlinisation. Policy solutions have advocated blended approaches with recommendations like 'Blended Approach is the need of the hour', 'Blended learning as a class culture' (NABET, 2020: 49) and 'different effective models of blended learning will be identified for appropriate replication for different subjects' (NPE, 2020: 60). Student proclivity, in its favour, is a fallacy as research found that 57 % of students in government and private schools preferred regular face-to-face classes. Further, the number of students who preferred a blended mode of learning was much less at 40 and 33 % respectively. Also, only 3 % of students in government schools and 10 % in private schools preferred online education (NABET, 2020). As teachers face the prospects of shifting from face-to-face teaching to onlinisation with the ascent of edtech, the framing of a research agenda for a greater sense-making of technology-based solutions acquires urgency. The nascent three-gap framework that classifies e-solutions along with the categories of access, pedagogical skills and usage has been proposed (Jain et al, 2020) but needs further theory and research. It is the various state governments which manage school systems and in-service teacher education that can play a vital role in re-thinking and framing meaningful and inclusive solutions. With public education in a condition of neglect in most

states, it is exemplars like the Delhi model with a thrust on continued in-service teacher education (Atishi, 2020) that can inform the way forward to inclusive possibilities.

The goal of education is the recovery of critical thought. The school closure was an unprecedented 'new normal' in modern history to develop an alternative educational imagination based on what is wrong with our prevailing school systems. Our segregated school system is indifferent to social realities while reducing knowledge to fragmented disciplinary boundaries, something which the great American educator John Dewey rejected as the 'subject matter of education' a hundred years ago. Since then theory and education research is replete with a deep critique of schools as an educational institution in both the Western and Indian intellectual traditions (Freire, 2000/1968; Reimer, 1971; Tagore 1933; Gandhi, 1953). The school closure was a historic moment to open up the classrooms with possibilities 'to reimagine schools as places for community learning, where children of all backgrounds can study together' (Gupta, 2021). A new educational trajectory can offer possibilities to evolve teacher-led solutions to trigger students into learning through 'their own psychological devices' (Raina, 2020a). Considering how school education has turned into a category of social division in our already unequal, stratified society; school education policy could even imagine a de-schooling of society (Illich, 1972) or at least reshape schooling practices within the prevailing educational regime. An alternative imagination can begin with baby-steps as simple as inclusive methodologies for the delivery of teaching-learning resources to all students by locale-specific requirements. It is only teacher-led initiatives rather than centralised solutions that can mitigate the worrying consequences of the onlinisation trends.

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Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children in Institutions: Learning for Child Protection

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Introduction: Institutions during this Pandemic

The pandemic has brought forth two major challenges for childcare workers, working in and with child care institutions. Firstly, these institutions are not equipped to deal with the challenges of pandemic. Secondly, these institutions may not be in a position to accommodate the phenomenal increase in the number of children in need of institutional care. The increase is expected due to increase in COVID-19 fatalities which may leave many children without the care of one or both parents. Moreover, as a result of increased poverty, family stress, domestic violence, and other reasons, an increase in many children being abandoned, trafficked or separated from their families is expected. This could inevitably lead to a resurgence of demand for institutionalisation of greater numbers of children in already overcrowded institutions (CRIN, 2020).¹

Reports have emerged of numerous children's residential institutions being closed as a result of the pandemic (The Lancet Institutional Care Commission Group, 2020). Reduction in reporting to child protection units in United States and New Zealand have been documented (Jonson-Reid et al., 2020; Roy 2020). Cambodia stopped new admissions of children into any residential care facility. In Kenya over 19,200 children were sent back to their families and communities (CRIN, 2020). Similarly, in South Asia, removal of children from institutions also referred to as 'emergency de-institutionalisation' has been a widespread practice during this pandemic. In

Bangladesh, some orphanages have been closed overnight by sending children home since they lacked the infrastructure to counter the virus (Chandan, 2020). They have sent children back to their guardians and "asked them to treat the children well" CRIN, 2020.

With the shutdown of several child care institutions, children were being restored to their families and communities without any preparation. Neither were the children prepared nor were they involved in the restoration decision (Udyan Care 2020). Children were de-institutionalised mainly on the basis of the willingness of the child and the family, without a proper home study, no care plan, and almost no follow-up. Experts pointed out that such a hurried transition could do more harm to the children than good, if not appropriately planned, and urged that families must be strengthened and monitored to ensure that the best interests of children are upheld (CRIN, 2020; Goldman et al., 2020; Koenderink, 2020).

Needless to say, this abrupt relocation of the children into the families and community, contrary to the perception, is not in children's best interests. In fact, it makes the children vulnerable to emotional stress, health issues, vulnerable to lack of education, as well as an increased risk of abuse and being trafficked.

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¹<https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/children-in-out-of-home-care-lessons-from-the-pandemic>

Experience of Indian Institutions during Pandemics

In India, there are about 3.7 lakh children in more than 9,500 Child Care Institutions (CCI) in India (MoWCD, 2018). According to the data provided by Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) the numbers of adoptions and placements in foster care in 2018-19 have been 4,027 children (0.01%) and official foster care figures are not available. Moreover, the circumstances from which most children are rescued to be placed in CCIs make it difficult for them to be restored to their families. Hence, most children continue to reside in these institutions, till they attain the age of 18 years. The children in conflict with law (CCL) have once again found themselves in further margins at this time of crisis.

In an advisory dated 28 March 2020, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) advised Child Care Institutions (CCIs) to send back home children who are in conflict with law & stated that this directive was in line with a Supreme Court order (writ petition (c) No 1/2020).² The NCPCR asked state governments to prepare a list of children in observation and special homes so that they can be released. According to official data, there are 368 observation homes, special homes and observation-cum-special homes that house the children in conflict with law.³

According to UNICEF (2020), *"since the passing of the Supreme Court order in April 2020, 64% children in need of care and protection who were in Child Care Institutions have been restored to their families (1,45,788 out of 2,27,518). About 60 % children in conflict with law (5,155 out of 8,614) were also released to their parents"*.⁴ UNICEF also added that at least 132 children from Child Care Institutions (CCIs) across the country reportedly contracted COVID-19. For the children still in institutions, the situation has been exacerbated, because of restricted mobility owing to suspension of public transportation and

social distancing norms. Some attempts have been made to address this problem in India through providing continuous support remotely; however, this too has been difficult, considering that most institutions lack internet access, computers and sometimes even telephone connectivity (Mazumdar, 2020).

In India, children were de-institutionalised without a proper home study or care plan, and hardly any follow-up took place (Mazumdar, 2020). Children, who had contact with their parents or guardians, were sent back on the basis of orders from state authorities (Udyan Care 2020). Owing to restrictions on entry to outsiders, there has been a setback to the fundraising efforts as only 42 % of all CCIs receive funds through government grants, the rest rely on individual or corporate donations and sponsorships from individuals or corporate donations/sponsorships. There has been an erratic supply of food items and medical equipments. In fact, post announcement of lockdown, the institutions were shut to any visitors from outside including the staff who did not reside in the CCI premises, including external volunteers and organizations working with CCIs. Caretakers within CCIs, despite many limitations, were trying their best to keep the children engaged with games, artwork, and other activities. The institutionalised children have been cut off from the outside world adding to the strain on their already complex circumstances, thus, affecting their physical, emotional, and mental health. Furthermore, orphanages which do not receive adequate support from the government, during COVID-19 lockdown, are facing severe resource constraints, which put the children at great risk (Mazumdar, 2020).

Thus, the arbitrary action of sending children back and halting child protection services and institutions is at best a knee-jerk reaction to prevent further spread of the virus as most of these facilities are overcrowded. The most worrying aspect is that while at one end, systems are not in place to handle the COVID-19

²The Supreme Court in *In Re Contagion of Covid 19 Virus in Children Protection Homes, Suo Moto Writ Petition No. 4 of 2020*, [11] on 3rd April, 2020, issued directives for CCIs, by bringing to the fore the issue that the interest of children who are housed in CCIs needs to be looked into.

³See http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/79584157.cms?tm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cpps

⁴See <https://www.news18.com/news/india/64-children-in-childcare-institutions-sent-home-after-sc-directives-says-unicef-3149354.html>

crisis in childcare institutions, and at the same time the pandemic is making children vulnerable, which invariably will lead to an increase in demand for children at risk, to be placed in residential institutions.

De-institutionalisation as an Alternative: Concerns and Best Practice

Evidence over the years has shown strong negative associations between institutional care and children's development (Duschinsky, et al 2020). Thus, efforts must be directed toward the long-term goal of de-institutionalisation by strengthening family-based care alternatives, including extended kinship networks, adoption, and stable high-quality fostering (Goldman, P. S., et. al., & Lancet Institutional Care Reform Commission Group, 2020). Some countries are in the process of progressively transitioning to family care-based models and reintegrating children into their families and communities, through a process known as 'de-institutionalisation reform'. However, the urgency of the current situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has left most governments unprepared. The challenges and shortfalls of contemporary systems are a reflection of both the magnitude and persistence of a global problem (Runyan, 2020).

The current situation poses many pertinent questions about the whole system of institutionalisation and whether there is a contingency plan to deal with a similar crisis in future? Although, this is an extraordinary situation but similar crises often arise in form of man-made or natural disasters, what then is the best plan to ensure the safety and protection of children in need of care and protection and children in conflict with law?

Some organisations took the initiative to ensure the children's safety during this transition and encouraged children to remain with their families even after the situation improved, but this was not the case everywhere (Miracle Foundation, 2020). Along with emergency de-institutionalisation, some childcare professionals, on an emergency basis, called for more funding to support the institutions' ability to provide better care and protection to children during times of crisis (Mazumdar, 2020).

There are different care models, namely the adoption

model, kinship care model, and foster care model along with de-institutionalisation which is recognised by the United National Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The process of deinstitutionalisation has its bearings in the cultural context and there are many complexities and challenges in its implementation (Murthi and Jayasooriya, 2020). Moreover, it is also guided by two principles namely; 'necessity principle' and 'suitability principle'. The 'necessity principle', denotes measures taken to prevent children from losing parental care and falling into the care of institutions. The 'suitability Principle' entails finding the care option that is the 'most appropriate to each child's specific needs, circumstances and best interests (Cantwell et al., 2012, p. 14). Thereafter, a range of alternative care options recognized by the UN Guidelines comprising both 'family-based' care (e.g. formal kinship care and foster care) and 'family-like'/ 'community-based' care (e.g. small group homes and children's villages) have to be explored and formalised. It is important to note here that the UN Guidelines while prioritising 'family and community-based solutions' (UN Guidelines 2009, para 53), recognise appropriate residential forms of family-like care that conform to specified conditions and where the setting is the most 'appropriate, necessary and constructive' for the circumstances and needs of the individual child concerned and in his/her best interests (UN Guidelines, 2009, paras 21, 123, 126).

India principally advocates against family separation, it stresses separation in the inevitable conditions of the best interests of the child in mind (Naaz & Meenai, 2019). The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) 2015 Act, clearly mentions institutionalisation as a last resort and keeping the child in his or her biological family as the primary goal. The Act in Section 39 provides for rehabilitation and social integration of children through family-based care such as restoration to family or guardian with or without supervision or sponsorship, or adoption or foster care (Bajpai, 2017).

Recently, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) introduced various stakeholders into the system, for gate-keeping purposes, to prevent children from entering institutional care. For this, in many states, the child protection functionaries were receiving training on alternative care (Naaz & Meenai, 2019). In 2016, the Department of Women & Child

Development (WCD), the Government of Maharashtra directed all CCIs in the state to review the status of children through proper investigation and restore children to families wherever possible (Tyagi R., 2018). As a result, many children were sent back home. Further a survey was conducted by the department to take stock of the status of these children's education, health, assimilation into family,⁵ requirement of guidance, sponsorship, ascertain the nature of support required and develop appropriate programs for strengthening of such families. Another noteworthy initiative was the creation of a De-institutionalisation and Family Reunification Task Force, a body of civil society organisations set up by the Department of WCD, Government of Odisha and UNICEF (Tyagi R., 2018).

The task force aimed at preventing and reducing the phenomenon of institutionalisation of children by systematically supporting the children and caregivers, sensitising the policy makers including government functionaries and civil society on the subject of non-institutional/family focused childcare system.

Based on family-care model, Miracle Foundation works to support children and families to prevent separation, reunite children with their birth families, and place children in kinship care and adoption instead of residential care. The mentoring and support work of Miracle Foundation with 25 CCIs across seven states in the country has primarily been in sync with the JJ Act 2015.⁷

An integral aspect of Miracle's mentoring of supported CCIs has been on reunification of children with their families after due evaluation if found to be in the best interest of the child.⁸ In addition, their Child-Centered Case Management Toolkit is a resource which provides hands-on training materials to empower anyone to get children safely and permanently into families.⁹ Consequently, 25% of children from Miracle supported CCIs have been reunited and resettled with families. A follow-up on the status of the resettled children was done by the CCIs to the best of their capacity.¹⁰

Evolving a Child Care and Protection Model for Disaster and Emergency situations

Even though the current pandemic is an extraordinary situation there are often many other natural or man-made calamities that have plagued us. In this context, it would be prudent to bring about salient changes in the existing system of child care and protection. This is an opportune moment to fill the gaps and enhance the capacities of CCIs and bridge the link between CCIs, government, NGOs and community, thereby fostering meaningful public-private partnership. Furthermore, evidence shows that new placements in institutional care and new residential facilities are not required, including in crisis and emergency response - when resources are properly invested in prevention, family strengthening, and alternative care.

Models of alternative care can be thus, replicated across emergency situations such as earthquakes, cyclones, floods, etc. A noteworthy example of this practice was the kinship care that was widely used during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.¹¹ It involved relatives or friends of the family for children who are unable to live with their parents. Many children were sent to live with relatives both, after their parents had died, and as part of preventative strategies to remove them from highly affected regions. Despite predictions that communities would collapse under the strain of crisis, families and wider groups showed remarkable resilience and absorbed most children in need of care (UNICEF, 2015).

The current situation shows that a collaborative strategy is required to move towards an easily scalable and comprehensive yet need-based programme for children in institutions: the state using public-private partnership and resources of child care civil society groups should evolve guidelines aimed towards enhancing the capacities for the existing CCIs. It's imperative with the child-centered individualised plan that is required as per JJ act to be used for the process of de-institutionalisation and restoration to families. Re-establishing close coordination with Village and

⁵See Tyagi. R (2018) *Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond Volume 5, Number 1, March 2018 pp. 76-89 DOI: 10.5958/2349-3011.2018.00004.X*

⁶See <https://miraclefoundationindia.in/resources/>

^{7 8 9 10} *ibid*

¹¹See UNICEF, 2015, 'Care and Protection of Children in the West African Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic, file:///C:/Users/suneha_83/Downloads/final-ebola-lessons-learned-dec-2016.pdf

District Child protection Committees (VCPCs and DCPCs), CWCs, community volunteers, ASHAs, anganwadi workers, etc. with CCIs will enable monitoring of the child's well-being and safety.

For children who continue to be institutionalised, the institutions must have a disaster management plan prepared. This should not only include SOPs for safety and protection of the children but also provision of continued supply of food, medical facilities (physical and mental) and sanitary products. Further developing the practice of remote trials and court proceedings (for CWCs, JJBs etc) to expedite the judicial process in order to de-congest the observation and special homes. In addition, contact with family or extended family members must be maintained remotely to keep them apprised and help them deal with stress.

Finally, NCPCR should declare that core child protection services, service providers and authorities (Childline, JJBs, CWCs, DCPUs, SJPU, Child Care Institutions, frontline workers in CSOs/NGOs, counsellors) and anganwadi workers are 'essential' during any lockdown or declared emergency. Last but

not the least, there has to be continued support in terms of timely release and monitoring of funds. As per an Accountability Initiative report, in FY 2018-19, only 79% of the amount allocated towards ICPS was released, whereas in FY 2019-20 (till December 16th, 2019), only 44% of the revised estimates had been released by the government. Therefore, it is important to ensure that funding for children is not cut; existing resources are effectively utilised and augmented where there is a shortfall and flexibility in the utilisation of central government funding. Further, additional sponsorship should be expedited at two levels- within CCIs and to children who have been de-institutionalised.

The current public health crisis is the time more than ever to alter and evolve more inclusive and empowering ways to support the children, families, and communities. By utilising community resources to the maximum, we will not only develop more comprehensive but also scalable models of care which could be used during any kind of crisis situation in the future.

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03

Voices from the Field

Painting by: **Krishanu Modak**, Age 15

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Build Strong Foundations in Early Years: Learnings from Punjab and Himachal Pradesh

Rajat Bagga | Vajinder Thakur | Rukmini Banerji

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 visualises education in the early years (age 3 to 8) as a continuum. According to this policy, a child will spend the first three years (especially after age 3) in a pre-primary setting and the next two years (age 6 to 8) in a primary school setting. The policy also envisions a smooth transition from the pre-primary context to formal schooling.

What have been trends over time in enrolment across this age group? Enrolment data for pre-school age children in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) shows that the proportion of children enrolled in anganwadi centres (AWCs) has declined over time. For example: for a nationally representative sample of children, we see enrolment declining in anganwadis from 63% in 2010 to 52% in 2016 for 4-year-old children in India; this figure was 51% in 2018. Further, ASER data for 2018 shows that 29% of the 3-year-old children and 16% of the 4-year-old children are not receiving pre-primary exposure.

Given these trends, NEP rightly acknowledges the need to develop appropriate pedagogical frameworks for early childhood education and deliver these frameworks through a locally suitable collective network of anganwadis, pre-schools or pre-primary classes in primary schools. In addition, National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat provides a further boost for advocating and implementing steps to build foundations well in the

early years.

In light of these policy developments, this article highlights the steps taken by two Indian states - Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, in strengthening the provision of education in the early years. Both states have played a pioneering role in integrating pre-primary education within the government primary school system at scale, well before the New Education Policy's recommendations were made. In 2018, both states added pre-primary classes to government primary schools. In 2021-22, Punjab has pre-primary 1 and pre-primary 2 classes in ~13,000 government primary schools, and Himachal has pre-primary 1 and 2 classes in ~4,700 schools. Practices adopted by Punjab and Himachal are setting up the continuum for the foundation years can provide valuable learnings, as all states in India begin to implement the recommendations of the New Education Policy.

Context and Need

The decision to set up pre-primary classes within the government school system was backed by the available evidence (e.g. ASER data over the years). Here are some key trends from these two states:

- I. Considerable proportion of children were not getting any pre-primary education. According to ASER 2016:

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1. In Punjab, 32% of children aged 3 were not enrolled in any preschool.
 2. In Himachal, 18% of children aged 3 were not enrolled in any preschool.
- II. Anganwadi system was losing children at a notable rate. According to ASER 2010 and ASER 2016:
1. In Punjab, the proportion of children aged 4 enrolled in anganwadis dropped from 51% in 2010 to 21% in 2016.
 2. In Himachal, the proportion of children aged 4 enrolled in anganwadis dropped from 61% in 2010 to 36% in 2016.
- III. Children younger than the mandated age were being enrolled in standard 1 of government schools. According to ASER 2016:
1. In Punjab, 41% children in standard 1 of government schools were not yet 6 years old. This proportion was only 15% in the case of standard 1 in private schools.
 2. In Himachal, 38% children in standard 1 of government schools were not yet 6 years old. This proportion was only 28% in the case of standard 1 in private schools.

Thus, the availability of early childhood education within the government school system could provide more options for parents who otherwise were enrolling their children in private schools. The initiative also hoped to reduce underage enrolment in standard 1 by admitting and retaining younger children as a part of the pre-primary system (Bagga R. & Banerji R., 2021).

Implementation

The process of translating policy into practice has many elements and stages. For Punjab and Himachal Pradesh these included:

- **Allocation of rooms for pre-primary grades in primary schools:** In 2018, pre-primary classes were set up in all (~13,000) primary schools of Punjab and in around 35% (~3300) primary schools of Himachal. Pre-primary classes in

Himachal expanded to ~4700 classes in 2021-22. Existing school rooms were used for pre-primary classes, and no new rooms were constructed.

- **Design of pre-primary curriculum:** In both the states, the National Curriculum Framework was followed to design the activities and materials for the pre-primary curriculum, subsequently adapting it to the state-specific context. Specific activities were developed based on themes from the child's immediate surroundings, focusing on the five key developmental domains of early years (Physical, Cognitive, Socio-Emotional, Language and Pre-Math development).
- **Setting up a new team of master trainers:** A new team of master trainers was formed in both states. To gain first-hand experience of early childhood education, 44 master trainers from Punjab and 48 master trainers from Himachal ran practice classes for 10 to 15 days. These master trainers then trained the primary school teachers on early childhood education.
- **Training of teachers:** In both the states, trainings were organised at the state, district and block levels. In 2018, ~26,000 teachers in Punjab and ~3,300 teachers in Himachal were trained on the curriculum and child psychology for early childhood education. Training on child psychology was particularly relevant to guide teachers on their attitudes and behaviour towards young children, given their lack of previous experience interacting with children aged 3 to 6. Since 2018, trainings are organised every year.
- **Community engagement:** Punjab and Himachal followed several interesting approaches to engage the community. Teachers made home visits to explain the features of pre-primary classes to parents. During these visits, teachers shared pamphlets and posters with the parents. Public announcements were made in places of worship like Gurdwaras in the villages and through platforms such as the radio. Parent-teacher meetings were organised in schools to explain children's development needs to parents. Finally, graduation ceremonies for children were conducted to celebrate the efforts of children,

parents and teachers as they moved from pre-primary to primary grades.

During the COVID-19 crisis and the prolonged period of school closure, both these states ran remote engagement campaigns in which a phone message, via SMS and WhatsApp, was shared daily with parents. In addition, Punjab organised Parent-Teacher Meetings in 13,000 villages when the lockdown restrictions were relaxed. These in-person meetings are in the school premises or the neighbourhood close to children's homes. During these meetings, teachers shared COVID-19 prevention videos and posters with parents and thanked them for their continued support and understanding during the difficult times. Teachers also distributed printed kit materials for pre-primary 1 and pre-primary 2 classes to parents. Finally, in March 2022, mother workshops were held in all schools of Punjab to actively encourage families to engage with children's learning and highlight mothers' special role in children's pre-primary education. Mothers themselves did activities like colouring, craft projects and puzzle-solving. The initiatives serve as examples for states interested in conducting community engagement practices in their context.

An important element in this process is the convergence with the anganwadi system.

When pre-primary classes in the primary schools were well established as an integral part of primary schools in both states, attention turned to how anganwadis and schools should link effectively with each other. Of ~27,000 total AWCs in Punjab, ~11,000 are located inside ~8000 schools. Similarly, ~1800 schools that have pre-primary classes in Himachal have AWCs inside school premises.

In the case of Punjab, Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) supported conducting enrolment drives for schools. During school visits, it was not unusual to see AWWs assisting school teachers in conducting physical and creative exercises with children in classrooms. In the case of Himachal, the state welcomed community support to enrol children in pre-primary classes and to do teaching-learning activities with children. In many schools in Punjab, midday meals were often shared between all young children on the premises. Further, in 2019, in Punjab, the state recommended that

primary schools and AWCs jointly conduct a monthly event to spread awareness about the importance of early childhood education.

Extensive work has been done in the past few years by Punjab and Himachal in implementing this initiative. The success of these efforts is evident in the increase in enrolment in pre-primary classes in these two states. In Punjab, the pre-primary enrollment increased from 1,93,825 in the academic year 2018-19 to 3,88,898 in the academic year 2021-22. In Himachal, the pre-primary enrolment was 29,693 in 3,391 schools for 2018-19. Seeing the positive response from parents, the pre-primary initiative was scaled up to 3,740 schools in 2019-20, 3,840 schools in 2020-21 and 4,787 schools in 2021-22. The enrolment was 42,817 for the year 2021-22.

Learnings

The experiences of integrating the pre-primary stage with primary grades in Punjab and Himachal present three unique learnings that states can use to bring policy (NEP and NIPUN Bharat) to practice.

First, it is important to decide and design the delivery model based on the situation in the state:

NEP suggests four delivery models, i.e., stand-alone anganwadis, anganwadis co-located with primary schools, pre-primary schools/sections covering at least age 5 to 6 years co-located with existing primary schools, and stand-alone pre-schools. Rather than following a “one size fits all” strategy, all available options should be evaluated to arrive at a “best fit in context” solution. While the pre-primary classes in school initiative were the “best fit in context” solution for Punjab and Himachal, the same solution might not work for states like Gujarat and Karnataka. According to ASER 2018, in Gujarat, 89% of children aged 3 and 88% of children aged 4 are already enrolled in AWCs. In Karnataka, 83% of children aged 3 and 66% of children aged 4 are already enrolled in AWCs. In such states, efforts can be made to strengthen the existing anganwadi provisions for pre-primary education in the state.

Second, it is valuable to learn from practices on the ground to establish links and convergence between the AWCs and the school

While the NEP stresses the importance of linking AWCs physically or pedagogically to the schools, it does not specify the roles and responsibilities of AWWs and school teachers in this integrated setup. Experiences from Punjab and Himachal show that practical inputs for convergence can be picked from the ground, especially from schools and anganwadis which have collaborated effectively in the past. These experiences and learnings should be used to develop practical pathways. For instance, in the case of co-located anganwadi in Punjab, the practice of ensuring that the same child was enrolled in pre-primary and in the anganwadi ensured the delivery of hot cooked meals by anganwadis to pre-primary children in schools.

Third, it is essential to establish a learning continuum from pre-primary to 2nd standard

NEP advocates the reconfiguration of curricular and pedagogical structure of school education to make them relevant to the needs of learners at different stages of their development in the age range 3 to 8. Hence, the overall curriculum framework for early

years needs to be revisited. The revised framework suggests interlinking and refining learning objectives for pre-primary and grades 1-2. Himachal has already started thinking along these lines. In the academic year 2022-23, in addition to the existing pre-primary practices, the state has introduced a curriculum for grades 1-2 that focuses on the "breadth of skills" for children. The state is also planning to conduct a holistic assessment of children in grades 1-2. Moving forward, states should think about alignment and progression across early grades on the key skills, learning objectives, pedagogical process and related classroom activities.

Concluding Thoughts

Early childhood education gained renewed prominence in light of the NEP. Now efforts should be made to bring policy into practice. Experiences from Punjab and Himachal tell us that policy can be productively translated to practice if the system adapts to and responds to the needs on the ground. Further, as stated in the NEP, states should strategise on tackling the issue of access and quality by evaluating the status of their early education provisions and arriving at a "best fit in context" solution.

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Teaching and Learning School Science: An Experience of Tutoring during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pavithra Murugan | Kinnari Pandya

Introduction

In the month of December 2020, I taught a chapter in science to four 10th grade students. This was the time when the classes were fully online. When I asked them which chapter they wanted help with, all of them wanted to learn the chapter 'Heredity and Evolution' from their textbook. This is a concept that is prone to misconceptions and myths and so I was eager to teach this particular chapter of science.

Initially, the online classroom had an odd feeling to it because it seemed like the teacher was talking to herself. In the awkwardness and confusion, I kept asking the students if they could hear me. I asked the students to put their videos on if they could. While visible faces of all students did make it a better experience, I realised that teaching online is quite a challenging process. Evidently, teachers prefer to teach in offline classrooms than online. All the students hail from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Most of them are first-generation school-goers in their families. Moreover, all the students reside in a children home because of the difficulty to study in their own homes due to various issues in the family like domestic violence, alcohol consumption, abuse and other issues which have adverse impact on a child's progress at school and otherwise. As all the students stayed at the same children's home, it became feasible to schedule zoom sessions and teach them.

Understanding an Online Classroom

Michael Maryland (2002) in his book the craft of the classroom describes simple gestures and decisions

that the teacher could take and beware of while teaching in the classroom. He emphasises that the teacher is working with a group of young learners and the individuals in the group cannot be helped unless the teacher manages the class as a group. If the class is well organised it helps the teacher establish the kind of atmosphere desired and hence, facilitates smooth and true communication among the pupils and between the students and the teacher without conflicts. (Maryland M., 2002)

Managing a physical classroom is a challenge but having to adjust and shift to a completely new medium of teaching has been a true challenge for teachers. When I first started teaching online, it took some time to get used to and navigate the class well. However, by the third session, I was pretty much equipped to handle the online platform as well as my students. I set up norms for online engagement as I would in a physical classroom. We made sure we raised our virtual hands to speak and did not use the chatbox much. I also sent them videos that we watched in class so that they could watch them at their own pace as well. I utilised the whiteboard to draw or map out certain important details from the concept. The summative assessment was a Google form that the students were expected to fill in. This way I made use of the online medium as much as I could, to make this teaching-learning process fun and engaging for both the students and me.

Subject-specific and Pedagogical Content Knowledge

There are key elements of teaching that a teacher must

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consider before teaching or preparing for any class. Some of these key elements are subject-specific content knowledge which would address the question of 'what to teach?', and pedagogical content knowledge which would address the question of 'how to teach?' Another crucial factor the teacher must take into consideration in assessment is what and how does he/she intend to assess? What is it that they deem as 'important to know' topics or concepts?

Subject matter content knowledge is the organisation and amount of knowledge the teacher has. This is a deep understanding of that particular subject and goes far beyond knowing just the facts and concepts. The teacher must be capable of more than just stating or explaining the facts of the domain but should also be able to justify why this is the truth and not false. The teacher needs to be able to give a reason for the students to believe and accept the truth thus making them learn why the concept is worthy to be studied. (Shulman L.S., 1983, p. 84) Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) deals in the realm of knowledge for teaching the subject matter. It is not enough to know the content but the person should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to be able to teach the content in question. The teacher should have a ready set of tools to enhance the representations of the content knowledge to be able to deliver it clearly and powerfully.

This knowledge also encompasses knowing what makes specific concepts easy to grasp and others harder or challenging to master, gauging certain conceptions and preconceptions that students from various cultural and economic backgrounds bring with them to class, and perceiving the cognitive ability and level (ZPD) of the students. The teacher should be ready to reorganise the understanding of the learners. (Shulman L.S., 1983, p. 85)

I had just finished an evolutionary biology course the previous semester in my teacher education programme. All of these concepts were those that we revised in class as well. I read through the chapter twice. This was when I started dividing the chapter into smaller chunks and making my lesson plans and my learning objective for every session. While making my lesson plans I also found many websites

and YouTube videos that I could use as part of my lesson. Another thing I looked into after receiving a prompt from my mentor was the prerequisites the students will need to know before we dive into the chapter. Therefore, I also had my list of prerequisite foundational concepts they must have from their previous classes or chapters. The pedagogy and the teaching method I mostly used was a dialogic format. It was mostly an interactive class with the students sometimes discussing or debating various information. After I started teaching the chapter, I realised that we did not necessarily complete what I had planned in my lesson plan, but then I realised that it was more organic, natural and spontaneous even if we went a little out of plan. As long as they were understanding and reasoning what they heard and said.

I assessed them on this chapter by sending them a Google form which they filled out. It had eleven multiple-choice questions and one short answer question. After I received their responses I questioned myself if the assessment was not a very challenging one. Based on the results, I can assume that most of them got an overall grasp of the concepts. The students made two or three mistakes. Especially in the short answer question, I realised that the students should learn to use academic terms instead of commonly used terms. Even though I understood what they meant, it is always good to habituate using CALP [Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency] terms at least from high school. (Mohanty, A.K., 2019, p.179)

Student's misconceptions

Here I would like to give an insight into some of the misconceptions my students had about the concept 'Heredity and Evolution.'

1. My students were of the thought that genes, chromosomes and DNA meant the same things. This is because they are synonyms. They learn to label the chromosome when they are studying cell division. Somehow, this misconception was born. I broke it down for them - it was an easy point to start from the cell division and chromosome to DNA and to Genes that are segments of DNA.
2. Man evolved from the Ape. Another miscon-

ception that my students had. The famous photograph/image of human evolution that is everywhere makes it even more confusing. It was not a linear transition from the ape which across several reproducing generations became man. Phylogenetically, we evolved from a common ancestor that we shared with the Ape. So the apes, are in fact our living cousins. This idea was new to them. This is why I mapped out common ancestry and phylogeny in class so that this explanation would make sense.

3. Evolution makes organisms more complex. This was shared by a student. Evolution is often equated to climbing up the ladder i.e., increasing complexity. It does not work that way, I explained to her. Evolution is not there to make primitive structures more complex. It is acting at every level. This notion that humans are the ultimate peak of evolution is prevalent even in many adults and it is common in students who are not told explicitly that this is not true. Also, that all the other organisms or primitive creatures are old and have stopped evolving. Evolution is not 'progress'. This is mentioned in the textbook as well, which I think is pretty important and significant.

These misconceptions are common ones. Students may have misconceptions about many other scientific concepts as well. One way out of this is when the teacher is aware of their misconceptions and chooses to deliberately act on them. The teacher then has the autonomy to design and use the appropriate activities to clear out these misconceptions. So, it can be effectively addressed if the teacher brings the misconception explicitly out and poses it to the class. By bringing it out explicitly, I do not mean pointing it out to a particular student(s) who hold the belief but as a general problem that even the teacher seems to be figuring out with the students.

Many of these conceptions are also born from the language of the textbook, and most of the teaching and learning happens from the textbook. It could be a potential source of the birth of these alternate conceptions. Other ways that students can adopt them are through classroom discussions/conversations and sometimes also media and out of school spaces.

Constraints of Online teaching

Some of the constraints of online teaching that I experienced were mostly those constraints that were and are commonly faced by teachers all over the world during this pandemic. The fact that I could not see my students in front of me in a shared common physical space was very frustrating. Teaching online made it harder to gauge the mood of the class in general. Another aspect that online teaching took away from the students was peer learning and cooperative work. Although we had discussions and sometimes the students disagreed with each other's opinions it would have been a more engaging process if it was in a physical classroom. I could not really bring in movement or activities that we could have done in a physical space. In a physical classroom, a teacher can assess the students in various multiple aspects like participation and involvement, formative assessment and others. Although it can still be done in an online mode, it becomes a lot more challenging for the teacher.

Conclusion and Scope for further study

I realised later that only MCQs and a short answer question would not have been sufficient diagnostic tools to understand fully if the students had understood the chapter. There was scope for me to include other forms of assessments which have the potential to assess the top tiers of Bloom's taxonomy (remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating).

Through this project, I realised that learning and organising information in our minds requires us to relearn, unlearn, and constantly adjust and accommodate the information we observe, experience, or receive.

This project alongside my other courses has been a great learning tool for me to be able to understand and learn to navigate some novel situations that I would come across as a school teacher of science. This has been a fruitful learning experience.

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Compendium of Children's Voices from the Field amidst COVID-19

Rashi Mitra | Paul Moonjely

Introduction

The current pandemic has triggered an unprecedented global health, humanitarian, socio-economic and human rights crises (HAQ: CRC, 2020). What started as a public health emergency has snowballed into a formidable test for global development and for the prospects of today's children (HAQ CRC 2020, CRY, 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) designed to bring the world to several life-changing 'zeros' with its anthem of leaving no one behind, stands blurry and so does the realisation of child rights through the implementation of SDGs (Mitra, R., 2020).

Worldwide, children have been profoundly affected by the social and economic upheavals caused by COVID-19. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good (UN Policy Brief, 2020). School closures have posed severe challenges potentially breaking the learning cycles of children (Caritas India, 2020; Times of India, 2020; Kumar K, 2020), making the concept of zero learning days bleak and also aggravating malnutrition in the absence of mid-day meals (Awasthi P, 2020; Chaturvedi P, 2020). With school and university closures affecting nearly 91% of the world's student population, over 1.5 billion learners have had their education disrupted, including 743 million girls (UNESCO, 2020). With increasing emphasis on digital education, it is important to note that girls might not have equal access to online learning. Boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls in low and middle-income countries

and are 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone which can access the internet (Girl Effect and Vodafone Foundation, 2020).

The predicament of families entering into intergenerational poverty due to loss of livelihoods as an aftermath of lockdown, unleashed a storm into the lives of most marginalised children (Singh D, 2020). The pandemic had a cascading impact creating an unforeseen chain of secondary and multiple risks for children (Singh D., 2020). As a consequence of the pandemic, children are also exposed to several other risks such as dropping out of school, becoming child labourers, increasing violence against children, trafficking, cyber-crimes, child marriages etc. (UNICEF, 2020). Due to increased economic adversity, children rescued from traffickers are likely to be pulled back into the trafficking net and targeted by predators (Singh, D., 2020).

Furthermore, with the economic and labour market shock coupled with the health crisis due to the pandemic, millions of children have become vulnerable to child labour (ILO and UNICEF, 2020). As per 2020 global estimates, there are 160 million child labourers worldwide (ILO and UNICEF, 2020). The report on Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward, warns that the progress toward ending child labour has halted for the first time in 20 years (ILO and UNICEF 2021). Pandemic risks reversal of progress and ILO warns that additionally, an approximate of nine million children face the risk of becoming child labourers by the end of 2022 as a result of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). Despite the

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prohibition of engagement of children below the age of 14 in any occupations, India alone is home to 10.1 million child labourers in the age group 5-14 years (Census 2011). If the state governments do not pay serious attention and take accelerated actions to tackle this issue, we are going to lose the fight towards eliminating all forms of child labour by 2025, a commitment under the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] (ILO, 2017).

Objective

This paper is a compendium of the voices of children from the ground. It aims to appraise international and national policymakers about the perspectives, concerns and recommendations expressed by children for their growth and development. It primarily highlights three major perspectives of children amidst the pandemic, i.e:

1. Children's Stay Home Diaries
2. Concerns of children
3. Children's recommendations to policymakers and other stakeholders for children's empowerment, growth, and development.

Definitions

Children's Stay Home Diaries - Stay Home Diaries accounts for the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of children as they stay at home due to lockdown and are unable to go to school due to school closures or are unable to live their lives like the usual amidst the lockdown during COVID Pandemic.

Child Leaders – Child Leaders are child club members (Age group: 10-18 yrs) from Caritas India field areas who are associated with their local Caritas India and Partner Children's Clubs and actively engaged in community development and working towards addressing the concerns of children in their community.

Children's Club - Children's clubs are platforms through which groups of children are empowered about child rights, constitutional values and principles and exercise their right to participate to realise child rights.

Methodology

To encapsulate the perspectives, concerns, and recommendations of children during this pandemic, we at Caritas India conducted a series of virtual consultations from the period May 2020 to Jan 2021.

These virtual consultations were panel discussions and interviews, wherein Child Leaders shared their views on various topics concerning children and shared their recommendations by talking on the platform.

Around 308 Children (M= 146, F = 162) in the age group of 10 -18 years participated from the Caritas India and her partners program field areas during COVID in a series of virtual consultations organised by Caritas India from May 2020 till January 2021. This paper is a compendium of testaments and voices of children across India from the rural villages of program implementation areas of Caritas India in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Child Leaders from 6 countries from Caritas Internationalis fields across the World; Armenia, Bangladesh, Nepal, USA, Scotland, and India participated in the World Summit. Child Leaders shared their Stay Home Diaries, concerns, and recommendations and shared about the forms of violence faced by children in their country, their recommendations to end violence against children and their key message to other children as well as world leaders.

Each online consultation was organised based on specific SDG themes primarily SDG 4 – Quality Education, SDG 16.2 – End Violence against Children, SDG -8.7: End Modern Slavery, Trafficking and all forms of Child Labour and Goal 5: Gender Equality. Therefore, the findings of the paper and recommendations by children are categorised based on these Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As an outcome of the series of virtual consultations, the concerns and recommendations shared by Child Leaders were documented and developed into their Charter, which the Child Leaders submitted to various policymakers and stakeholders (Govt. and Non-Govt.).

Key Findings - Children's Stay Home Diaries, their Best Moments, Experiences and Concerns

When Child Leaders were asked about their Stay Home Diaries during the lockdown, they were asked to share their experiences, their best moments during their stay and their concerns.

Regarding their best moments, Child Leaders shared that the best part during lockdown was that they got the chance to spend time with their families, play, relax, watch TV, and learnt about good hygiene and hand washing practices.

While Child Leaders shared their concerns, many expressed fears with the sudden lockdown, closure of schools, loss of access to education, loss of jobs and increase in engagement of children in family enterprises for work. Most of the Child Leaders shared their concerns regarding no access to digital education and lack of smartphones at home.

"Please reopen the schools soon so that we can go back to school and continue our education. We do not have access to digital education and do not have money to buy smartphones"; echoed many Child Leaders from a rural village in West Bengal.

"My village does not have a high school. As a result, girls are forced to drop out after primary school. There is no bridge also on the way to the high school, which makes it risky for children to cross the river and go to school. Therefore, we want a high school in our village"; shared a Girl Child Leader from Bihar.

Many girl child leaders expressed that they are facing more discrimination as they are engaged in household chores leaving them no time to study.

"Girls are given more responsibility at home than boys of their age. During the lockdown, as the schools are closed, we do not get time to study because we are engaged in household chores. We do not even have access to smartphones to study either, as our parents say girls should not use mobile phones"; shared a Girl Child Leader from Uttar Pradesh.

"We girls are often treated as a burden by our families. We are taught that our fate is to get married and are

forced to drop out of school after primary education. That is unlike our brothers who are allowed to complete their education till high school and they are free to go to different cities to work and earn. We are discriminated against at home when girls are served less food than boys. We hope that girls and boys are treated equally at home. We hope that we are given an equal opportunity like boys"; shared a Girl Child Leader from Bihar.

The major concern highlighted by children is the digital disparity that is creating a major hindrance in their access to education. There has been an increase in child labour, domestic violence and gender discrimination at home as well as increasing poverty due to loss of livelihood. These factors have resulted in an increase in malnutrition and hunger.

Excerpts from the Speech of Child Leaders at the World Summit on Ending Violence against Children organised by Caritas India on World Children's Day: 20th Nov 2020

A girl child leader from Uttar Pradesh shared that there are several forms of gender-based violence against children such as child marriage, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. *"To end violence against children, we must not keep quiet, we must raise our voice against violence, create awareness and take steps to end violence together."*

A Child Leader from West Bengal shared that their state has a lot of child labourers working in the tea gardens. He dreams that each child in his area will be in school and not working as labour. Thus, he wants to work towards his dream and hopes that each village will have free education centres where each child can attain their right to free and quality education.

"My state witnesses a lot of child marriages. Girl children are especially discriminated against. They are devoid of the opportunity to go to school, engaged in domestic work and married off young. Education is the only tool through which all children can have a safe, secure childhood and break the cycle of violence against children"; expressed a Child Leader from Bihar.

Key Recommendations by Child Leaders in India

The Child Leaders from Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu shared recommendations on the key aspects of prevention and elimination of Child Labour (SDG 8.7), SDG 4 – Quality Education and SDG 5 - Gender Equality and SDG 16.2 – End Violence against Children. The Recommendation has been categorised into three sections – Recommendations for Dream School, prevention and elimination of child labour and prevention of violence against children.

Recommendations for Dream School

1. Treat every school equally, whether government or private school.
2. Every child is treated equally, whether a girl or a boy. There is no gender discrimination faced by children and they are given equal opportunity to attain education, pursue careers etc.
3. Right to free and compulsory education up to class 12th, so that no child is forced into labour because they are unable to bear the cost of their studies.
4. There should be high schools also in the neighbourhood and not just primary schools, to provide opportunities to complete school education and prevent dropout.
5. Schools must have their playgrounds.
6. Every girl and boy should have equal opportunity to play all sports without any gender discrimination.
7. Schools must have separate clean toilets for girls and boys.
8. Schools must install incinerators and pad vending machines at school. This shall prevent girls from missing school during the menstrual cycle every month.
9. Children at school should have access to clean drinking water, and healthy and hygienic meals.
10. Teachers should be fair to all children and treat every child equally, without any discrimination based on class, caste, religion, skin colour and even intelligence and merit.

11. The curriculum and school infrastructure should be inclusive, providing children with disabilities the same opportunity to learn as children without disabilities.
12. Establish School Management Committee in the schools to address issues related to schools and ensure quality education.
13. Increase the number of teachers in school for quality education and regular classes.
14. Schools must have a counsellor and a separate school counsellor room.

Recommendations by Child Leaders on Prevention and Elimination of Child Labour

1. Make a universal definition for children in India even in the context of child labour (0-18yrs).
2. Strict and prompt actions to be taken against the offenders of child labour.
3. All forms of child labour/slavery must be banned.
4. Government must take the responsibility of creating awareness regularly to eradicate child labour.
5. Government must take responsibility to implement all schemes effectively to prevent child labour.
6. Government officials must conduct surprise visits to all factories/establishments where children are engaged in labour work.
7. 1098 Child Helpline should be made effective and functional.
8. Child protection systems must function effectively.
9. District child labour task force to be constituted and work effectively.
10. All laws related to child labour prevention must be implemented.
11. Child-friendly corners in all police stations to be created.
12. Provide livelihood support to poor families.
13. Gram Panchayat to take proactive steps towards the establishment of child labour-free villages.

14. Child labour prevention to be added to the school syllabus.
15. Provide child-friendly space in village/town/ ward to children for group meetings/sharing/cross-learning on child-related issues.
16. Regular interface of children with all child protection units to understand the situation of child labour.

Recommendations by Child Leaders on Prevention of Violence Against Children

1. Children should be educated about their rights and responsibilities as well as laws related to children. This shall empower children to protect themselves and their peers from various forms of violence faced by children.
2. Children should be empowered through life skill sessions on prevention and protection from various forms of violence. They should also be sensitised to gender education to promote gender equality.
3. Both govt. and non-govt. policy and advisory groups must involve children also as members while drafting laws and guidelines for children. Child participation needs must be ensured in any Child Protection Committee by government as well as non-government bodies.
4. Children can play a vital role in developing and executing child rights monitoring mechanisms and tracking systems in their community to find out the most vulnerable children to prevent violence against children such as trafficking, abuse, child

marriage, out-of-school children etc.

5. Strengthen and functionalise the child protection mechanisms starting from the village up to the national and international levels.
6. Enhance awareness in communities about the rights of children and prevention of violence against them through campaigns.
7. Increase multi-stakeholder collaboration between various stakeholders at the micro-level, meso-level and macro-level both nationally and internationally to converge and work collectively towards the prevention of violence against children.

Way Forward

This paper is an attempt to document the voices of children from the field to capture grassroots reality from ground zero and their recommendations nationally and internationally through a series of virtual consultations organised by Caritas India. The Stay Home Diaries and recommendations of children from rural villages of India provide a platform for evidence-based dialogue with the government and non-government. Stakeholders should develop collective actions and policies for the best interests of children. Amidst this 'new normal' while we are still coping with the pandemic, we hope that we build a collective synergy and concerted efforts towards new hope, peace, and rightful childhood for all children.

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Parental Corporal Punishment in Migrant-dominated Communities of Gurugram during COVID-19 Lockdown

Arham Quadri

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic induced a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020. This resulted in a drastic increase in time spent by children at home. The lockdown further resulted in a huge job loss, especially for the daily wage earners who are mostly inter-state migrant workers. Many of these problems got highlighted and responded to by various agencies, but one problem that never received adequate attention is the impact of lockdown on 'corporal punishment' – physical and mental violence against children.

Corporal punishment has never been an “issue” for most of us in India and beyond. Not just teachers, but parents equally resort to punishing children. Agrasar's report¹ in 2018 “Choking Childhood-School Corporal Punishment: Everyday Violence Faced by Disadvantaged Children in India” shows that almost all parents (91%) approve of school corporal punishment and 74% admit that they use it at home.

Purpose of the Study

Children are spending their time entirely within the four walls of their respective homes. The new provisions of education are forced to become virtual in nature and despite efforts by the school teachers, it is rather unsuccessful for the children of disadvantaged communities. They do not have requisite access or the

smart devices². This has led to low engagement of children and, in return, they are left with a lot of time on their hands with barely anything to do. The parents, on the other hand, are trying to stabilise their lives and this unaccounted time of children has become an “added burden” for them.

After hearing mixed responses on how parents have been dealing with this “new normal”, as a part of our routine work on eliminating corporal punishment, we got curious about enquiring more and it led us to conduct this study.

Context

The study was conducted in semi-urban villages of Sikanderpur, Islampur, Kapashera and Sukhrali, the estimated population of which is 1,34,000.³ Almost all people work in the informal sector with occupations that include construction workers, garment workers (factory under contractual system and home-based), domestic workers, drivers, street vendors, municipal cleaners, etc. The majority of the families live in threadbare conditions. A single room is occupied by an average of five people with community washrooms and little or no personal space. The lockdown forced all of them into an even more precarious situation and caused an increased uncertainty towards fulfilment of their basic needs.

Arham Quadri, Program Manager, Agrasar

¹*Choking Childhood School Corporal Punishment: Everyday Violence Faced by Disadvantaged Children in India*, Agrasar 2018.

²“At least 27% of students do not have access to smartphone, laptops for online classes: NCERT Survey”, *Hindustan Times*, 20 August 2020.

³Gurugram has a population growth rate of 73.9% (Census 2011). The figure was multiplied by the existing 2011 population data to get an estimated result of the current population.

Methodology

The target population consisted of disadvantaged migrant families with children in the age group of 8 to 16 years. A survey was conducted using convenient sampling and snowballing with 156 parents and 162 children (75 males, 87 females). Based on the responses, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 families and case studies were formulated.

Ethics

Working with children who have been subjected to violence is difficult, and the team was cautious to collect data in line with best practice standards for such sensitive settings. This included the approach of being open and transparent with the children and their parents about the purpose of the research and obtaining their informed consent to be interviewed. All interviewees were assured that their personal data will be treated with confidentiality.

Acknowledgement

We are highly obliged to receive insightful and heartfelt responses from the children and their parents. We are grateful to the parents who shared insights on 'positive parenting techniques' despite the hardships they have been facing during the lockdown.

Key Findings

i. Painful to note that corporal punishment increased in more cases than not, however, there was a small ray of hope.

The lockdown brought a huge change in the lives of children and most of it was negative. Their education suffered significantly, there was a general sense of depression all around, and many of them faced difficulties in even meeting their basic needs. In addition, corporal punishments increased as well. More than 42% of the respondents reported an increase in verbal and/or physical violence during the lockdown as compared to their past.

Girl, 12 years old, Islampur *"I wasn't subjected to any scolding before the lockdown but since then, I get, both, scolded and hit."*

The burden of the domestic work of the entire house fell on the shoulders of this 12-year-old girl in

Islampur. Moreover, she takes care of her younger siblings and the children of her elder sister. When she would roam around in the park with her friends, her mother would scream and hit her. The mother felt that there is no need to waste time loitering around when the chores are endless. The child was devastated because of the punishment she had to endure.

However, more than one-fourth (28%) of the children responded that corporal punishment for them has reduced. Upon delving further into the data, it was found that 'spending quality time with the parents' was a determining factor. Children, whose parents spent better quality time with them, reported a significant decrease in the punishment as compared to those who didn't.

Boy, 17 years old, Sikanderpur *"Earlier, I used to be a bit scared of my father but now I can tell him anything without hesitation."*

The boy shared that earlier if he wanted to say anything to his father, he used to ask his mother or brother to voice it for him but now, he has developed a relationship of comfort with his father. They bonded and created a positive relationship with each other by playing various games, watching television and cooking together.

ii. Parents who resorted to more physical and mental violence during lockdown did not explain the reasons

Almost half (47.73%) of the parents reported indiscipline to be the cause for their increase in usage of corporal punishment. "There is an evident increase in indiscipline" is a common response. The parents complained that children don't listen to them anymore and without any school work, they want to play all day long and do nothing. While the majority of the children thought the reason for punishment to be lack of concentration in studies and wasting time.

This gap tells us that communication between the two parties is scarce and parents don't feel the need to tell children why they got punished.

Mother, 33 years old, Sikanderpur *"Because of the lockdown the children are more involved in games, indiscipline has also increased and their focus on the study has decreased."*

The mother has 2 daughters and a son amongst which she speaks of the youngest daughter. She strongly feels that the lockdown has impacted her child's focus on studies even more and has increased leisure time. Since her younger daughter is extremely weak in her studies and has started to spend more time playing, she is called the most undisciplined. Although the mother says that her indisciplined nature is the cause of all problems and uses punishment as a tool to make her better, the daughter perceives her lack of concentration in studies to be the reason.

iii. Children who went to their villages felt a Sense of belongingness as compared to those who were living in these four urban regions.

As a result of the lockdown, quite a few families chose to travel back to their respective villages. Out of 132 families surveyed, 28 went home or were already there when the lockdown was announced.

More than half (53%) of the children who went home reported having a better environment at home during lockdown while only 35 % of them faced problems like boredom and financial stress. The children felt they had a space of their own and a sense of community.

Boy, 11 years old, Sikanderpur *"Initially during the lockdown in the village was nice and fun, I played a lot of cricket and played mobile games with my father too, but later I started to get bored. Financial problems also increased eventually."*

The children who stayed in these colonies with their families witnessed a more difficult environment. Many of the families experienced a negative impact on their jobs and most of them completely lost their source of income. With the job loss, the families faced difficulties in meeting their basic needs. This brought in a larger question of the role of safe community spaces in child-raising in general and compassion experienced by them in particular.

iv. Girls get beaten up less, but, the obligation to take up "family responsibility" makes all the difference.

The study finds that fewer girls are subjected to corporal punishment as it is generally defined, but, at the same time, are burdened with the responsibility of

the household work. It is not an expectation but a forced obligation. This study has highlighted that if girls aren't able to fulfil these tasks, they face harsh punishment.

Girl, 9 years old, Islampur *"My father hits me with sticks if I skip the household work. Sometimes when I go out and play, he hits me a lot. He also scolds/hits me when I watch a lot of TV."*

The girl's mother fell ill during the lockdown only recently recovered. As a result, she and her elder sister were responsible for all the household work and if that work wasn't completed before their father came back, they were punished. The mother would never hit them but would explain to the girls that they should listen to their father, and if they won't, they'll have to endure this. Infighting among parents happens when the father comes home drunk. The father admits that he slaps the girls if they don't clean the house or take proper care of their mother. The girls are forced to do all the work even when they don't want to.

Out of the 87 female children participants, less than half of them (41%) reported wasting time or boredom. However, in cases of boys 'wasting time' or boredom was significantly higher. In many families even though the eldest child is a boy, he doesn't participate in the chores of the house but the younger girls have to. What does this highlight? Isn't this a disguised form of corporal punishment? Shouldn't this be included in global scales measuring corporal punishment?

v. Older children faced lesser corporal punishment during the lockdown as compared to their past, but felt financial stress more than the younger ones

Corporal punishment is a complex issue. We were keen to identify subtle variables that are directly connected to mental violence against children but are not much documented. Hence, the curiosity to understand the changes in stress due to financial stress in this phase of their lives has emerged out to be more than any other.

Girl, 17 years old, Sikanderpur *"We know the hardships that our mother has been through whereas my father, well he was always drunk and fought with us."*

As the eldest sibling (amongst 3 others), she has been exposed to a lot of dreadful family politics and abuse from quite a young age. She spoke highly of her mother and despises her father for the lack of care and concern towards the entire family. The mother is the sole breadwinner taking care of the entire family as well as the erratic demands of the alcoholic father. The mother feels a sense of obligation towards the husband thus, she doesn't cut him off even though the daughters support the idea of them getting divorced. The eldest daughter blames her father and paternal relatives for all the trauma and hardships they had to bear emotionally and financially.

What did those parents whose children experienced lesser fear/stress do? What can be learnt from those parental techniques? - Such questions require more dialogue in the child rights community to find a viable solution.

vi. Children don't always want to share the description of the punishment they face.

Most children feel ashamed and scared of opening up about the punishments they receive. The study finds that more than one-third (43.83%) of children are not open about the description of the punishment they endure.

Their sense of esteem and confidence gets disturbed when the conversation is steered towards it.

Girl, 12 years old, Kapashera *"I'm scared of my father and grandfather because they scold me a lot. Nobody hits me."*

This 12-year-old girl wakes up at 5 a.m. daily to cook for the family. If she doesn't wake up in time, she gets an earful from her parents, she claims. While her mother claims that she hits the kids herself if they don't listen to her, study properly or work at the given time, the girl shared that she is afraid of the males in the house but didn't reveal the reasons.

Mother, 33 years old, Islampur *"It is necessary to scold and hit the kids because they have become extremely undisciplined during the lockdown"*

A mother of three children, hits her kids if they don't study properly or play too much. While she told openly the forms of corporal punishment she used to discipline the kids, her 12 year old boy did not tell us anything. He kept looking away and changed the topic. After repeated meetings and discussions, he opened up about getting hit with sticks. The child's voice grew soft and head lowered when he shared the experience.

vii. Even when the majority of children experience punishment at school, they prefer to go to school as compared to staying at home.

The report "Choking Childhood" tells us that a majority of students get beaten up in government schools and many of the child participants in this study also said that they experience it. Yet, almost all (84.91%) of them prefer going to school. Many cite reasons like meeting friends, teachers, studying properly, etc. The interactions with their peers and overall environment was an important aspect of their lives which they dearly miss.

Girl, 13 years old, Islampur *"I liked going to school better than staying at home. We would play with our friends and our Sir taught us nice things"*

The girl studies in Class 8 and is inspired by her mother. She helps her mother at their bread stall but wishes to go back to school. Although her online classes are conducted regularly and she attends them, she misses meeting her friends and class teacher.

5. Possible Responses and Further Research to Build Up Systematic Responses

We can safely conclude that efforts toward building up conversations between children and parents can make a significant positive difference. It is also important to look at the issue of corporal punishment with a much wider lens to include factors like "forced responsibility" and "stress" in the global scales that measure corporal punishment. It is essential to co-create responses with the parents, who resort to compassion against punishment, to curb this pandemic named corporal punishment.

Teachers' Experiences of Changes in Children post Covid-19: A Rapid Survey

Journal Team, DCPCR

Our Journal's DCPCR Team conducted a rapid survey of 20 secondary school teachers from Delhi government schools. The aim was to gauge their observations and experiences of online teaching and of the changes they have observed in the children in their classrooms during the phase of online teaching and now after two years of school closure due to COVID-19. The questions posed to them were open-ended.

1. Teachers' Observations: Some highlights

A. Increase in Class Strength: About 55% of the teachers reported that their class strength has increased post COVID-19, possibly due to a large number of students shifting from private to government schools, especially after the first wave of COVID-19 due to economic or other reasons.

B. Experiences of Online Teaching: According to teachers, online education helped the students, teachers and parents to stay connected and continue with their education. However, despite a lot of that was generated such as live demonstrations of practical work, recorded videos and assignments to help students to learn from home, online classes had their own limitations:

- i. Limited access to online classes: Many students were unable to join online classes as they had severe connectivity and network challenges. Many families did not have access to digital devices and e-learning tools. Some cases, access to online learning was there but only through one device to be shared by two or three siblings. This situation made a large number of students irregular with

online classes and hampered their studies and learning. To tackle this challenge, many teachers did record the online classes and share them on WhatsApp groups of the particular class. Some teachers also asked students who lived nearby to help each other by attending online classes together.

- ii. Lack of conceptual clarity: Students demonstrated a greater lack of conceptual clarity through online learning as compared to when they attended in-person classes, possibly due to a lack of opportunity for them to interact with teachers and seek help and/or clear their doubts.

C. Learning Loss: A Major Challenge. All teachers reported that children's learning levels as observed now have been severely affected during COVID-19. Despite the provision of regular online classes and worksheets. Primarily, basic grade-specific academic skills in reading, writing and numeracy and basic knowledge levels, especially in terms of conceptual clarity and application have been hampered adversely largely due to irregularity in attendance.

D. Reduced Participation in Classrooms: A majority of teachers have reported reduced participation of children in the classrooms. They perceive children to be feeling insecure and not participating easily in group activities. Most children appear to have become introverted and hesitant in presenting their views or even expressing their emotions in class or interacting with the teacher or peers as they used to do pre-

Garima Sharma, Journal Consultant, DCPCR
Venita Kaul, Chief Editor, Children First Journal

pandemic. Many are less communicative than before. Teachers shared that even though they try to provide an engaging and interactive environment in the classrooms, the habit of writing spontaneous responses in the chat box during online classes has been replaced by quiet offline classes. Reasons for reduced participation according to teachers could be challenges to connecting with their previous knowledge and loss of learning as well as the less interactive nature of online classes.

E. Challenge in Assessing Children's Learning:

Teachers have reported that a major challenge after the reopening of schools is conducting written assessments in offline classrooms, where students are required to write long answers on their own. Students have been taking online MCQ-based assessments with the support of their notes and textbooks from the comfort of home and are not able to cope.

II. Steps taken by Schools to Bridge the Learning Gaps

Mission Buniyaad and remedial classes are currently in progress at Delhi government schools. These programs are working on three aspects of education:

- i. To address every individual student's level of learning.
- ii. To correlate the topics with children's daily life
- iii. Regular assessment and feedback to the students

Under this programme the following measures are being taken:

- a. Students are divided into different cohorts based on their learning abilities to help them bridge the learning gaps. Classes are being conducted with a focus on foundational learning to bring them to the level of their current grade.
- b. Students who are at the grade-appropriate level are provided opportunities to enhance their knowledge through interaction with teachers and access to library books and online content.

- c. Activity-based learning is being used along with the use of pre-prepared teaching material and KYAN for interactive learning. Interactive activities like role-play methods and engaging TLMs for a better understanding of students are being employed actively.
- d. Various online quizzes and assessments are shared regularly on the WhatsApp group so that feedback can be given to the students and parents at an appropriate level and time. Consistent interaction with the parents through sharing of feedback and material helps to create accountability from both ends: students and parents.

III. Recommendations from the Teachers

The following recommendations were made by the teachers:

- I. The focus of the schools should now be on bridging the learning gaps and the decline in learning levels. After completing basic numeracy and literacy, educators should move towards a grade-appropriate syllabus.
- ii. We need to also move beyond the curriculum and focus on strengthening the socialemotional skills of children. This requires establishing a deeper connection with the students. Children should be given the opportunity and space to express their views and emotions. The psychological well-being of the students should be tended to appropriately and with sensitivity. A facility for guidance and counselling should be provided for the students. There must be a provision for a psychiatrist and physical checkups to take care of the mental, physical and social health of the child in the school.
- iii. Parents and students should both be engaged equally throughout the learning journey. Teachers and those working with children must ensure that the education journey for both the students and their parents is engaging.



Painting by: Naina, Age 18

Children's Writings and Paintings

Year Two of My Life Post Covid 19

Viraj Sharma

Age 8, Student, DPS, Vasant Kunj

My name is Viraj Sharma, and I am a student of Class 2. COVID-19 has made my life very scary, and the second year of the pandemic has changed my life in many ways. I have learned that masks are safe, not frightening, and clean hands are very important. I wash my hands many times a day with soap, and I wear masks regularly whenever I am outdoors.

In the second year of the pandemic, my classes were held online. During this period, I spent most of the time with my mom and dad in our home. I was very busy on the phone and laptop during my online classes. I spent a lot of my time sending homework to my teachers and playing online games. I did not enjoy online classes as much as normal classes in my school. I was not allowed to play outdoors with my friends. Sometimes, I miss my friends and teachers.

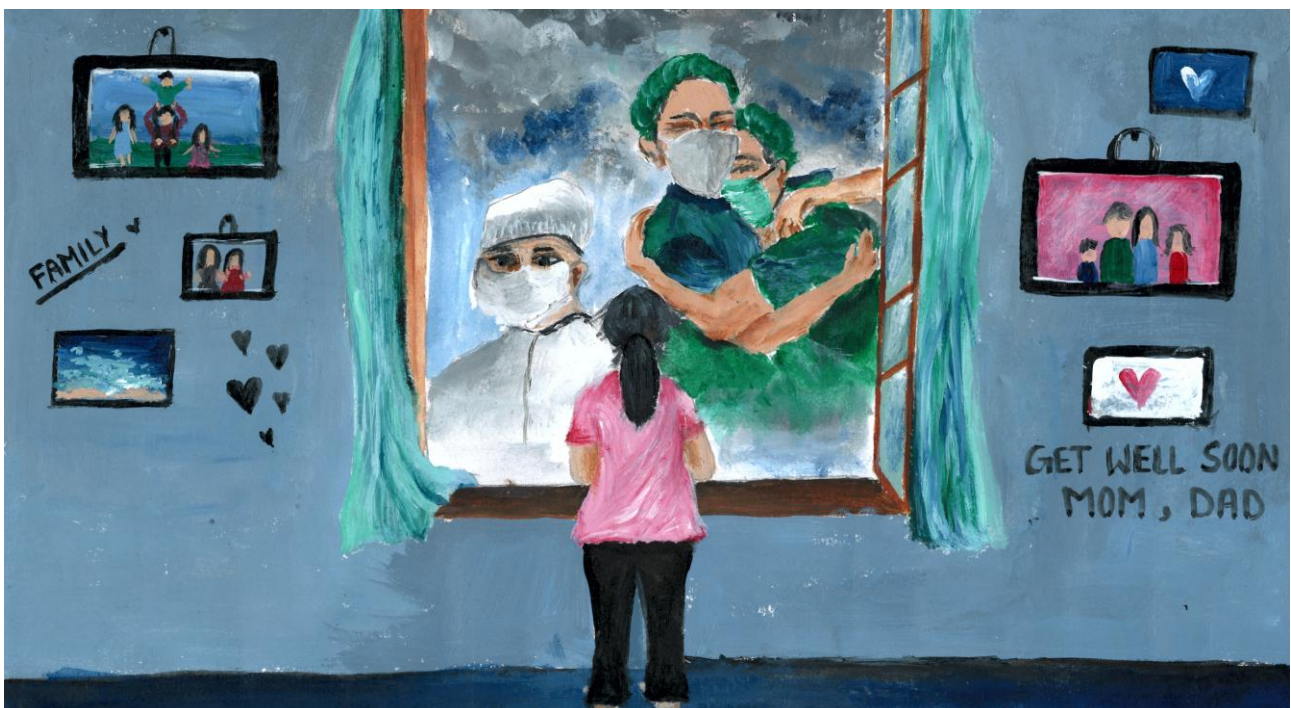
Too many online classes started hurting my eyes, and I began to rub my eyes after each class. I also faced difficulty joining online classes because I did not understand the software and program. My parents would help me out so I would not miss any online

classes. Sometimes my teacher's voice was not clear to me, and I could not understand what the teacher was teaching. This was very time-consuming, and it was hard to study also.

I sometimes got angry and sad with no outdoor sports and no playtime with my friends. It was tough, and I felt that no one was around to comfort me except my mother and father. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed my life and the life of my mom, dad, and grandparents. My family and I are more careful as we do not want to fall sick. We use hand sanitisers and keep our home clean because we have lost my grandfather to the virus. The loss of my grandfather was very painful and sad. We all miss him so much.

I am happy and excited about school reopening and returning to school. I am also happy about meeting my friends and new teachers. But I know that school will be different from before. We all will be wearing masks, and hand sanitisation will be practised. We have all learned the value of staying clean and social distancing from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Painting by: **Umaimah Islam**, Age 14



Online Class

Ananya Gaurkar

Age 8, Dhruv Global School, Pune

One day my teacher told me,
Don't spend more time on the screen
Another day she forgot,
When I started taking classes online...

The teaching classes were so long,
And were without an end
The misery was I could not whisper,
Into the ear of any friend

I was told to keep my mouth shut,
And ear open wide
I was not allowed to ask any but,
And my questions were not ready to hide

Finishing the syllabus became a race,
And the fun was that they made the window
blackboard

I went watching and listening to be in pace,
And the ophthalmologist gave me eye drops and
glasses when my eyes were sore.

Now the doctors told me,
Decrease screen time
But my mouth is shut,
And not dare to tell the teacher online

कोविड-19 और पढ़ाई

Amrika Kumari

Age 18, GGSS School No. 2, Delhi

जब कोविड का दूसरा साल आया तो हमारा स्कूल बंद हो गया था। मेरी मम्मी को खाना लेने के लिए स्कूल जाना पड़ता था। हमारे पास पैसे भी नहीं थे।

लॉकडाउन में, मेरी मम्मी की मैडम ने हमारी मदद करी, उन्होंने हमें राशन खरीद के दिया। हमारे परिवार में कमाने वाले सिर्फ दो लोग ही हैं- एक मेरी मम्मी और मेरी बड़ी दीदी।

लॉकडाउन में हमारे परिवार को बहुत मुश्किलों का सामना करना पड़ा।

हमारे पास बड़ा फ़ोन नहीं था। इसलिए मेरी पढ़ाई भी नहीं हो पाई। मेरी मम्मी की तबियत ख़राब थी, हमारे पास पैसे नहीं थे दवाई खरीदने के। हमारा राशन कार्ड भी नहीं है।

मेरे पापा नहीं रहे। मेरी मम्मी की विधवा पेंशन नहीं आती है। हमारे पास खाने के लिए पैसे नहीं थे फिर भी हमें मकान-मालिक को किराया देना पड़ता था। हमें मकान मालिक किराये के लिए बहुत परेशान करते थे। मेरी मम्मी राशन के लिए इधर-उधर भटकती थी।

कोविड-19 महामारी का दूसरा वर्ष और भारतीय सदर्थ में बचपन और शिक्षा का महत्वपूर्ण रूप से बाधित होना

Ayush Bharti

Age 18, RPVV Gandhi Nagar, Delhi

कोविड-19 महामारी का दूसरा वर्ष पहले वर्ष के मुकाबले ज़्यादा अच्छा बीता। कोविड-19 महामारी ने बच्चों से उनका बचपन छीन लिया। इस महामारी में अधिकतर बच्चों के माता-पिता की मृत्यु हो गयी। बच्चों का खेल तक बंद हो गया था। घर पर बैठे-बैठे बच्चे चीड़-चिड़े हो गए थे। उनके माता-पिता को भी पहले के मुकाबले ज़्यादा गुस्सा आने लगा था क्योंकि कोविड-19 महामारी में उनकी नौकरियां छीन ली गयी थी। उन्हें यह डर सताने लगा की उनका और उनके परिवार का खर्चा कैसे चलेगा। बोहत से बच्चों को तो गरीबी के कारण अभी भी काम पर जाना पड़ रहा है।

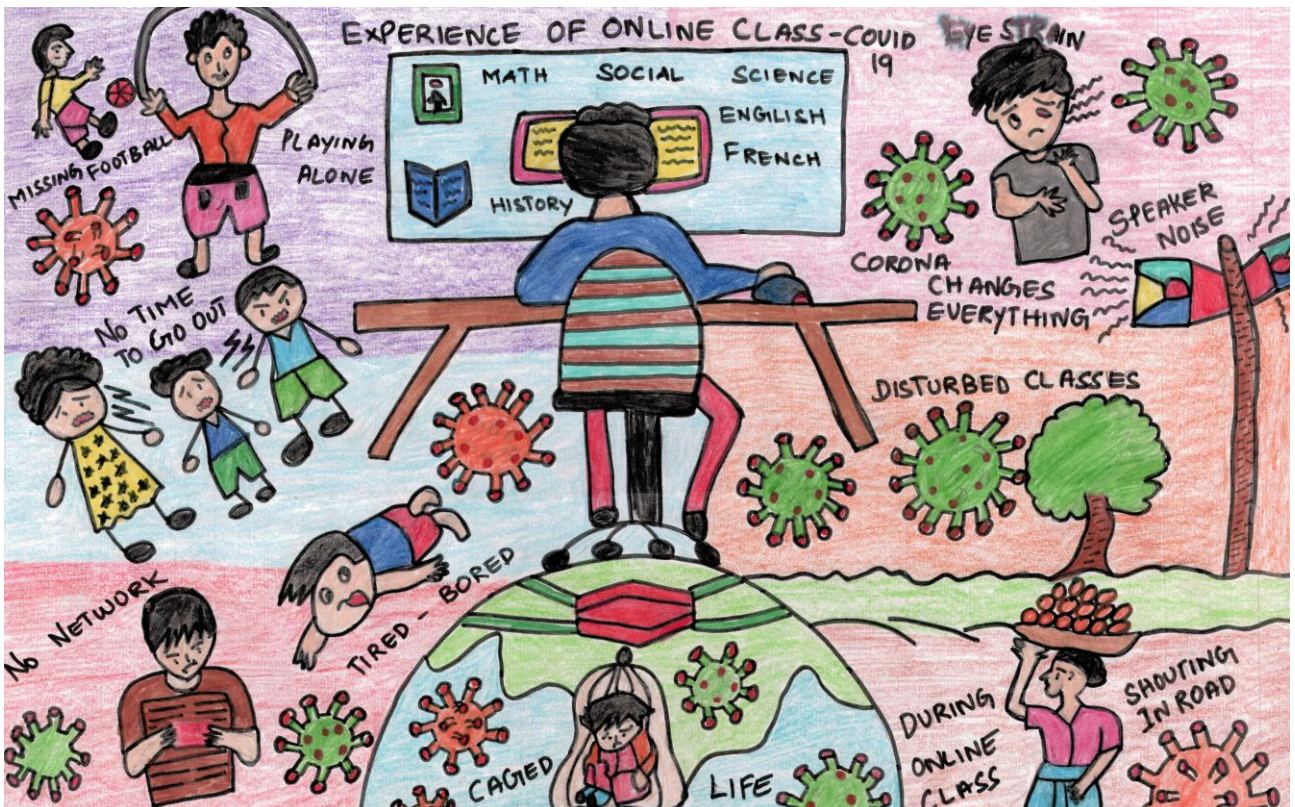
जो परिवार समृद्ध है, उन्होंने अपने बच्चों को ऑनलाइन कक्षा में उपस्थित होने के लिए फ़ोन तो दे दिया लेकिन कभी देखा नहीं कि उनके बच्चे फ़ोन में क्या करते हैं। कभी-कभी वीडियो-गेम खेलना अच्छी बात है लेकिन बच्चा पूरे दिन ही वीडियो-गेम खेलने लगे तो यह उसकी सेहत के लिए बहुत हानिकारक है। इस बात का उदाहरण मेरी कक्षा के ही कुछ बच्चे हैं जो रात रात भर जागकर फ़ोन चलाते हैं। जिसकी

वजह से उनके सर में दर्द रहता है और उनका पढ़ाई में ध्यान नहीं लगता है। अब तो उनका व्यवहार भी बच्चों जैसा नहीं रहा है।

कोविड-19 महामारी ने बच्चों की शिक्षा को भी बहुत प्रभावित किया है। सभी विद्यालयों को बंद कर दिया गया था। बच्चे ऑनलाइन कक्षा लेते नहीं थे, कक्षा चालु करके सौ जाते थे, खेलने लगते थे, इत्यादि। जब टेस्ट होते थे तो बच्चे चीटिंग करते थे। इन दो सालों में उनका अनुशासन पूरी तरह भंग हो चुका था। बच्चों को पहले के मुकाबले अब कुछ भी जल्दी याद नहीं होता है। "कार्यपत्रक" जो बच्चों को उत्साहित करने के लिए भेजा जाता है, लेकिन उसका उल्टा असर होने लगा है। विद्यालय के पाठ्यक्रम के साथ कार्यपत्रक करना बोझ सा लगने लगा है। जिसकी वजह से बच्चे मानसिक रूप से अस्वस्थ होने लगे हैं और पढ़ाई में कमज़ोर हो गए हैं।

इस तरह कोविड-19 महामारी ने बच्चों का बचपन छीना और उनकी शिक्षा में बाधा उत्पन्न करी है।

Painting by: **K. Yeshwin**, Age 8



A Pleasing Day in School

Azka Zehra

Age 18, Hamdard Public School

25th of March, 2020. A day which no one can forget, ever! A countrywide lockdown was announced. All shopping malls, restaurants and other services except pharmacies and hospitals closed. Even the schools were shut down. Everyone rushed towards the shops to buy their essential goods. Everyone around us tensed and worried except me and my brother, Zohaib. We were incredibly happy. There were no heights for our happiness. Our schools got closed! It was something that we had always wanted. We felt free and decided to play and enjoy the lockdown as much as possible. And we did it, we played & enjoyed all day long but only for a few days. After some days we started feeling bored and lonely. We had nothing to do and nowhere to go. We sat idly for the entire day and rolled here and there like a stone!

Then, one day, we received a notification from our schools on our mobile phones. It was a notice for the reopening of school. "Reopening of schools", both of us exclaimed. It said the schools would reopen for the online classes the next day via zoom. "Online Classes, how's it even possible" I exclaimed. "And what's Zoom?" asked Zohaib. The terms 'Online Classes' and 'Zoom' were very new. We had never heard about them before. So we went to our Uncle Rafeeq for help and told him about the message. "Ah! Zoom," he replied. "It is a video telephony software program". Zohaib and I stood confused. "Through it, you can easily communicate with many people at a time by audio and visually", he continued. "It means we talk to our teachers and classmates at once through it", exclaimed Zohaib. "Yes, indeed", he nodded.

The new sun rose and we were super excited. We woke up early, dressed appropriately, and sat in front of our computer screens. And then, in just a click, we reached our classrooms! We greeted our teacher, and she greeted us back. The echoing sound of good morning was so satisfying to my ears as if it was something my

ears had longed to hear for ages. Our teacher welcomed us to the online school. That day those smiling faces of our teacher were just so mesmerising and delightful. Online classes were not exactly like a real school but they arrived as an antidote for our poisoned lives and a duct tape for our torn-out hearts. I found school so pleasing that day for the first time!



Painting by: **Saisha**, Age 18

A mother and a son: Love in the times of corona

Arnav Singhal

Age 11, Pathways School, Gurgaon

I am an eleven years old boy, born and raised in Delhi. I want to write about my relationship with my mother to understand, celebrate, and improve it.

My life revolves around my mother, and thus, I end up in a fight with my mother now and then. The most significant bone of contention between us is what we call 'studies'; the never-ending, never enough and omnipresent studies. My mother has serious doubts about my seriousness in my studies. She is better than Sherlock Holmes in collecting evidence for my non-seriousness. She tells me, 'Time is God, so don't disrespect it.' I think, 'can I not just worship clock for five minutes every day to prove my faith?' To second my demands, such as a new laptop, I use all tools provided by mother nature to the human species; eyes that can release salted water, limbs that can perform repetitive actions and vocal cords that took lakhs of years to emit loud noise. But my mother calls my art 'blackmailing'.

I often break up with her after failing to reach any middle ground. But since I am just eleven years old and can neither cook nor wash clothes nor decide which homework to do first nor sleep without my mother, we patch up. We sat together to analyse what went wrong between us. We have come up with a few reasons. One problem is lack of time. My mother works at a place with constant work pressure, and I see her working on her laptop the whole day. Whenever she gets time, she wants to help us with our studies so that we don't lag at school. Thus we don't spend any

leisure time together. I was waiting to spend 'no work and only play' time with her.

Another reason could be my constant strive to fulfil her expectations. I want to always stand first in everything I do so that my mother feels proud of me. But I forget to be happy in all this. I feel competitive when I am winning and guilty when I am not winning. Neither state helps our relationship. To add to our troubles, we all were hit by COVID-19. We got locked inside our homes. Young members of all species need to go out and play. Without this, my unburnt energy transformed into aggressive, emotional reactions. I understand that I should see the pressures upon her, cooperate more with her, and put forward my opinions before her in a more peaceful manner. I can do all this when I can smell *rajma chawal* on the gas stove in the kitchen. Otherwise, I find it challenging. But I should and I will. We shall resolve it all by talking, discussing and growing together. For everything else, there is a mother's smile and *gulab jamun*.

चलो घर

Mahamuni Shravani Chandrakant

Age 12, R. J. Thakur Vidyamandir, Thane, Maharashtra

एक दिन दोपहर को जब हम बच्चे सो रहे थे, तब अचानक से माँ की आवाज सुनाई दी। “उठो-उठो चलो हमें अपने गाँव जाना है। चलो-चलो जल्दी करो गाड़ी छूट जायेगी। चलो बच्चों, उठो जल्दी।” हम दोनों बहनें आँखें मूँद कर क्या हो रहा है, समझने की कोशिश कर रहे थे। तभी पापा ने कहा, “चलो-चलो जल्दी उठो गाँव जाना है।” माँ और पापा जल्दी-जल्दी कुछ कपड़े वगैरह चीज़ें बड़ी-सी थैली में भर रहे थे और ऊँची आवाज़ में बोल रहे थे, “जो भी बच्चों की लगने वाली चीज़ें हैं वहीं ले लो बाकी सामान यहीं रखना है।”

जब हम स्टेशन जा रहे थे, तब चारों ओर लोगों की भीड़ दिखाई दे रही थी। सभी अपने-अपने गाँव जाने को जैसे भाग रहे थे। हर एक के हाथ में कुछ न कुछ कपड़े, बर्तन या बड़ा-सा थैला दिखाई दे रहा था। स्टेशन पर तो इतनी सारी भीड़ थी कि हर कोई गाड़ी में बैठने की रेस लगाए एक-दूसरे को धकेल रहे थे। और एक अनजाना-सा डर सबके चेहरों पर दिखाई दे रहा था। सभी लोग किसी भय में दिखाई दे रहे थे कि “चलो जैसे भी हो यहाँ से निकलो, अपनी-अपनी जान बचाओ।” और वो अनजाना खौफ था कोरोना।

हमारे देश में लोकडाउन की घोषणा की गयी थी। काम-धाम, चलना-फिरना, घर से बहार निकलना सब कुछ बंद किया गया था। पूरा देश घरों में कैद हो गया था। सिर्फ हमारा देश ही नहीं, सारी दुनिया को कोरोना ने अपने कब्जे में ले लिया था। टीवी पर बार-बार खबरों में यहाँ इतने लोग मरे, उस देश में उतने जाने गयी जैसी खबरें न्यूज़ चैनल पर प्रसारित की जाती थी। पूरी दुनिया के लोग अपनी जान मुद्दी में लेकर जैसे जिए जा रहे थे। कोरोना या कोविड-19, नाम की इस महामारी ने सारी दुनिया को अपने पंजों में दबा रखा था।

स्कूल कॉलेजों को ताला लगा दिया, कारखाने बंद करवा दिए, दुकानों पर यहाँ तक मंदिरों में भी ताले लगावा दिया, सब कुछ बंद करवा दिया था। घरों में जो भी कुछ खाने को था, सब सामान खत्म हो गया था, जो लोग रोज़ कमा कर अपना पेट पालते थे उन पर भूख से मरने की नौबत आ गयी थी। घर से निकले तो कोविड मारेगा और घर में बैठे तो भूख।

धीरे-धीरे थोड़े महीनों बाद, कुछ पाबंदी हटाई गयी। गाँव के सीधे-सादे लोगो का जीवन शहरों के लोगों जैसा नहीं रहता। वो लोग तो सुरक्षित थे अपने-अपने गाँव में की साफ़ सुथरी कुदरत के आँचल में। हम, हमारे चाचा, चाची, परिवार वाले, गाँव के जो भी लोग

किसी काम से शहर में रहते थे, उन सभी को कोविड ने अपने-अपने गाँव की याद दिला दी।

कुछ दिनों बाद जब दुकानें खुलीं, समय का निर्बंधन रखते लोगो का चलना फिरना शुरू कर दिया था। बच्चों का स्कूल और कॉलेज की शिक्षा ऑनलाइन शुरू करवा दी गयी थी। हमारी शिक्षा भी ऑनलाइन थी लेकिन हमारे गाँव में नेटवर्क नहीं था। नेटवर्क ना होने के कारण कुछ भी पढ़ाई नहीं होती थी। यह तो हमारी बात हुई परन्तु बहुत से बच्चे ऐसे थे जिन्हें एक दिन का भी खाना नसीब नहीं होता था, उनके पास ऑनलाइन शिक्षा के लिए स्मार्ट फ़ोन कहाँ से होगा। हम जैसे कितने सारे बच्चे होंगे जिनपर मोबाइल फ़ोन ही नहीं है और है तो, गाँव में नेटवर्क नहीं है। इस वजह से शिक्षा से बेखबर रह गए और स्कूल, पढ़ाई से बहार निकल गए। उन्हें बस सभी ओर चेहरे पर मास्क पहने, ज़िन्दगी जीने की कोशिश में डटे-डटे लोग दिखाई देते थे और कुछ नहीं।

फिर पता चला सरकार ने सभी बच्चों को अपने-अपने कक्षा में पास करवाने का आदेश स्कूलों में दे दिया है। लेकिन उससे क्या होगा, पढ़ाई तो हमारी हुई नहीं। चौथी से पांचवी और फिर छठी कक्षा, मंज़िल तक पहुँचने के लिए हमने वो सीढ़ी चढ़ी ही नहीं। हमें तो धकेल दिया ना वहाँ से यहाँ तक। सभी बच्चों की पढ़ाई में ग्रहण-शक्ति सामान नहीं होती जो आगे की पढ़ाई समझ सकें। ऑनलाइन कक्षा में सीखने वाले, और उनके सिखाने के तरीके मुझ जैसे कितने सारे बच्चों को समझ भी नहीं आती थी। तो कितने सारे बच्चे पढ़ाई से बहार निकल गए। कुछ समझ में ही नहीं आता था, रोज़-रोज़ स्कूल जा कर कुछ अच्छे से सीख नहीं पाते थे वो ऑनलाइन कैसे सीखेंगे। बच्चों को ऑनलाइन सीखने के लिए उनके माँ-बाप को भी तो मोबाइल समझ आना चाहिए ना।

अब हम सब फिर से शहर आए हैं। हमारे पापा का काम और हमारा स्कूल अब रोज़ाना शुरू हो गया है। माँ की भी रोज़ाना की भाग-दौड़ शुरू हुई है। हमारे स्कूल की तैयारी में वो दोनों जुटे हुए दिखाई देते हैं। अब हमारी बारी है, अपनी-अपनी जगह पर खुद को साबित करना है। जो पढ़ाई छूट गयी थी उसे समझ-बूझ कर नई शिक्षा भी हासिल करनी है। थोड़ी देर लगेगी, थोड़ी-सी दिक्कतें होंगी, थोड़ी-सी और मेहनत करनी पड़ेगी लेकिन मैं करूँगी। ज़रूर करूँगी। इस भागती-भगाती, स्पर्धा से भरी दुनिया में मुझे अपनी जगह बनानी है। मुझे खुद को साबित करना है और अपनी अलग-सी तसवीर बनानी है, तो पढ़ूँगी, मैं ज़रूर पढ़ूँगी।

Covid: Short Story

Fayeiz Rafiq

Age 17, S.P Higher Secondary School, Srinagar

“The nation has reached a grim new milestone, more than a million cases of coronavirus and in a sign of the worsening emergency across the country, the national government tonight suddenly made the call to close all educational institutes and to turn to remote learning.”

Zaid sank deeper in his soft beanbag and let out a sigh of relief as he heard the TV reporter say that. “No more of that hellish school, inner peace, finally”, he said as he plugged in his PlayStation 5 that his dad had bought him on his birthday last week. Later he ordered a few pizzas and *biryani* and called his friends over to celebrate.

Only several miles from Zaid's house, in Seemapuri, a very rural area, Sahil was listening to the same news report on his father's old radio. He looked worried; he didn't want to skip school because his family could barely afford it in the first place. His mother worked as a cleaning lady in the primary school nearby and his father was a driver for a government officer. Sahil himself worked as the newspaper boy before school, yet he was the top scorer of his class, not because he liked to study, but because he dreamed of his mother living in luxury one day.

Sahil took the membership of a cheap cybercafé for his online classes, there was no instructor so it took him a while to learn his way around a computer. The internet was slow and the machines were old, but this was the only cybercafé in Seemapuri that was open during the pandemic.

Zaid attended a few classes through his phone but soon started skipping them because it had never been easier. He made new friends on Instagram, a group of bikers who raced almost every night on the worst roads of Delhi. It took him just two days to convince his father to buy him the bike he wanted. He started racing with these people too because he liked the adrenaline rush.

The bikers apparently also took a lot of drugs, because it was fun of course. Zaid was a bit iffy about the drugs at first, but after his first LSD tablet, he didn't want to ever stop experiencing that.

Sahil searched for online jobs just so he could cover up the costs of his membership, but he landed a jackpot, over the months he had learned to type fast and he got selected for a typing job which paid him 300 rupees per week. That was more than his mother was making. He even started working overtime to get some extra money so that his younger sister, Ifra, could join a primary school.

From hard drugs to petty crimes, a year had passed by and Zaid's life kept going downhill, Sahil, on the other hand, was hired as an instructor in the same cybercafé. His mother no longer had to work as he was providing well for the family. This really proved how the amount of privilege a person possesses doesn't determine their ability to deal with situations of pressure.

Poem: It's been a year

Jyotsna Murugan

Age 14, Aklavya International School, Puducherry

It's been a year; oh wait, it's been two,
Ever since COVID-19 struck, out of the blue

Life's been hard, being stuck at home,
All we've ever wanted was to go out and roam

Life is harder from the front line,
All my respect goes out to those divines

I would write this poem from their perspective,
But I believe it wouldn't be effective,
To show the true pain they went through,
They hid it so well, we had no clue

So this is going to be about me,
And all the other youngsters,
Whose emotions I can capture perfectly

About something as cruel,
As online school

You'd think this is an exaggeration
But trust me, it's a complete frustration

For this sentence, let me,
Give you an explanation

It all started with an app called "zoom",
With it, I could bring the whole class into my room,
Learn about Egypt and Ancient Rome,
All from the comfort of my own home

"This doesn't sound too bad," I hear you say,
Well, you were right, at least for the first few days,
Until the problems soon started kicking in,
We all knew they were bound to begin

The teacher's voice started breaking,
And then she got disconnected,
At first, this was surprising,
But believe me, it became expected

Once I left, my mic turned on,
That was one of the biggest mistakes of my life,
Everyone heard my mum screaming at me about
whatnot
The embarrassment was immeasurable; I can't
describe

Everyone's cameras were always turned off,
No one could be seen,
All I've been staring at for hours,
Just an empty black screen

As I lay in bed, ignoring the 15 assignments
I had yet to complete,

I thought about whether it was just deceit,
When they told us this would be over in a couple of
weeks

I missed my friends and even my teachers,
Even that quiet, weird kid named Roger,
Even though I feel like a fool,
I have to admit; I missed my school

A lot of things about online school have troubled me
Some not as much but still to a certain degree,

At this point, you'd think if I had something positive
to say,

It was a misunderstanding,
But as someone famous had once said,
Every cloud has a silver lining

When I felt my eyelids get heavy as I listened to my
teacher,

Groan on and on about rational numbers,
With a simple flick, I muted my computer,
And fell into a deep, deep slumber

Once I woke up and I felt really hungry,
So before my next online class,
I decided to make,
A giant strawberry-banana smoothie

I joined my class, switched the tabs,
And then started playing a movie,
Watching Fantasy Island,
I sipped on my delicious smoothie

The exams were tomorrow, but I didn't mind
For the answers were right before my eyes,
Not admitting that I cheated,
but a little peek at the book doesn't hurt

After reading all this, you'd think,
What finally is my opinion on online school?

Well, it had some good, it had some bad,
But when it came to pass, I was truly glad.



Shweta
Verma
Xth 'A'



05

Best Practices

Painting by: Shweta Verma, Age 15

Pedagogy in the Pandemic: Including Children with Disability in Virtual Classrooms

Megha Dhillon

Introduction

While the Right to Education is a fundamental right in India and the government has been working towards the universalisation of education, although children from socially disadvantaged groups still struggle to go to school. The National Education Policy 2020 recognises these continued struggles among girls, transgenders, children from SC-ST groups, minorities, orphans, and children with disabilities among others. India is home to a large number of children with disabilities. In fact, Census data from 2011 shows that the highest number of persons with disability in India (17%), fall in the age range of 10-19 years (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2021). The havoc created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent closure of schools has posed major barriers to learning for children with disabilities (Goyal, 2020). These challenges have been even greater for children who face multiple disadvantages such as being disabled, of the female gender and belonging to a poor household (Jones et al., 2021).

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 defines inclusive education as a system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities. However, it appears that even prior to the pandemic, children with disabilities were missing from schools

in large numbers. [The State of the Education Report 2019 for Children with Disabilities by UNESCO](#) highlighted the poor rates of education among children with disabilities. Of the total 6,572,999 children in the 5-19 age group, only 61.18% had attended an educational institution. This is clearly below the national average of 70.97% of children in all categories. About 26.68% had never attended any educational institution as compared to the national average of 17.21%. Around 12.14% attended an educational institution but dropped out later. Negative attitudes along with a lack of accessible infrastructure, assistive technology and learning resources have been significant barriers to school inclusion (UNESCO, 2019).

The NEP 2020 has delineated several measures to increase inclusion for children with disabilities. Some of these are supporting schools in providing accommodation to children with disabilities, recruitment of special educators with cross-disability training and training all teachers to teach children with specific disabilities. The unexpected arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the implementation of this policy. In fact, it has created a novel and unique set of barriers to children's development and education. One of the complications associated with the virus is that children with disabilities who have underlying health conditions remain at higher risk of becoming infected and developing severe illness. Additionally, children with auditory, visual and

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cognitive disabilities face important barriers in accessing public health information pertaining to preventative measures necessary to curtail the spread of infection. Another concern has been about the effects of social isolation on the emotional development of children with disability who tend to have smaller peer networks than able-bodied children. (Taheri, Perry, & Minnes, 2016). It has been suggested that quarantine pressures and increased burden on families during lockdowns might place children with disabilities at increased risk for discrimination and violence within their households (UNICEF, 2021).

Given that education has come to be mediated through technology during the pandemic, a note must be taken of the potentialities and challenges imposed by this transition. Online learning overcomes the barrier of physical distance. Certain forms of online education offer the advantage of self-paced learning and immediate feedback. On the other hand, the challenges of online education include the loss of direct communication between the learners and educators and technical difficulties that can hinder the teaching process (Dhawan, 2020). It is challenging to make online classes engaging and participatory ([Kebritchi et al., 2017](#)). Furthermore, there are no clear guidelines by the government in educational policies to ensure quality control. In addition, not all teachers and students have access to technology.

Given these difficulties, due consideration must be given to children with disabilities, specifically those who have limited or no access to the internet, computers, and other devices. This is most likely to be the case in low-income households. A survey conducted by the community-based organisation Swabhimann (2020), with over 3,000 learners with disabilities from varied states such as Odisha, Haryana and the UT of Pondicherry found that only 56.48% had smartphones, either personally or collectively in the family. Poor internet connections and speed of data made it difficult to hear what the teacher was explaining, watch videos and download assignments and documents.

Several students with disabilities were unable have sustained attention on the phone. According to estimates provided by [Save the Children](#) (2020) during the pandemic, 90% of the caregivers of

children and young people with disabilities reported encountering obstacles to learning. A higher number of parents and caregivers of children with disabilities (28%) reported “no access” to educational materials than parents/ caregivers of children without disabilities (21%). Further, 71% of children with disabilities reported needing home-schooling /learning materials compared to 51% of children without disabilities. A greater number of children with disabilities (60%) reported not having someone to help them with school work, compared to children without disabilities (36%).

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to persist for several years to come. Although, school closures are not advisable from the perspective of quality education, intermittent infection surges may propel temporary shifts to online education. In this scenario, it is necessary to create systems of online education that are disability-sensitive by emphasising accessibility through the framework of Universal Design. Before the pandemic, the focus had been to ground offline teaching in the principles of Universal Design. Any shift to online education now demands that these principles be applied to learning spaces that are virtual or hybrid. The three principles of Universal Design Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002) are- multiple means of representation (educators should present information in a variety of formats such as text, audio, video and hands-on activities), multiple means of action and expression (allowing students a variety of ways to demonstrate what they have learned such as through text, visual or oral presentations) and multiple means of engagement (using different ways to motivate learners for example by providing choice, minimising distractions, fostering collaborations and facilitating coping skills).

In recent years, there has been some progress in terms of the availability of learning material in different formats. With respect to educational e-resources, the Department of School Literacy and Education, under the Ministry of Human Resource and Development has initiated platforms such as e-Pathshala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) and SWAYAM. NCERT digital books can be downloaded free of cost through the e-Pathshala mobile application. Books having UNICODE can be read using Text-to-Speech (TTS) software. The

government has also created Barkha: A Reading Series for 'All' based on the principles of inclusion and the concept of Universal Design Learning. While these developments are highly positive and necessary, they may not emerge to be sufficient in making online learning truly accessible to children with disabilities.

The first and foremost need of the hour is to create a larger workforce of special educators. The shortage of trained special educators is widely known (TNN, 2021) and remains a barrier to creating inclusive educational spaces in the country. Educational programs such as the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan contain provisions such as the undertaking of capacity-building programs for existing special educators and ensuring access for children with disabilities to support services through special educators. However, the lack of trained workforce makes it impossible to fully implement such provisions. Many reasons have been cited to explain the shortage of special educators in the schooling system which range from lower pay and less appreciation than other teachers to perceived lack of respect for the role, excessive paperwork and high workload (MacFarlane, [Leslie](#) & Piper, 2021). However, there is little research on these factors in the Indian context making it an important area for future research.

Since 2021, many state governments have offered free phones or tablets to children so that they may continue their education online (e.g., PTI, 2020). However, most efforts only target children in grade 9 and upwards. The emphasis lies mainly on students who have to appear for board exams and those in primary education are neglected. The gadgets are also not essentially designed to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities. Moreover, simply having a device at home does not necessarily mean that children have access to it. The latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) survey released in 2021, found that while more than 67% of children enrolled in schools across the country have at least one smartphone at home, about 26% still do not have access to the device (Hindustan Times, 2021). It is these forms of inaccessibility that must be addressed.

There are also concerns that teachers may lack ICT skills and knowledge for teaching online. It is

apparent that teachers across the globe need special training in online as well as hybrid modes of education. Pedagogical techniques that work well in offline classrooms cannot be assumed to work equally well in online spaces. There is a plethora of information on the techniques that can be used for online teaching for children with disabilities. Some suggestions include frequent check-ins with the children, using individual and small-group breakout rooms on Zoom, giving alternative assignments that meet the same learning target, shortened assignments that emphasise quality over quantity and a focus on social-emotional learning (Branstetter, 2020). It has been found that schools which focus on SEL see an average of 11% improvement in academics (Durlak et al., 2011). This is attributed to the idea that when students feel safe and supported, they experience more positive emotions, which in turn enhances cognitive resources for learning.

Most offline teaching relies on one-sided lectures which range in duration from 30 to 50 minutes. While in truth, meaningful learning may be better achieved through shorter lectures, more student-teacher interaction, collaborative learning, and small group work. The need for such teaching strategies emerges even more prominently when classes are held online, given that all interactions are mediated through a screen. There is little or no documentation regarding how often or how successfully these strategies have been used by teachers in India since the outbreak of the pandemic. In a survey of 288 teachers from Delhi and surrounding areas, only 54% believed that they had been trained to deal with the unprecedented situation, like COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown. The remaining teachers responded in the 'no' or 'cannot say' category. The disaggregated responses between government and private school teachers indicated that only 18% of the former group of teachers had received such kinds of in-service or pre-service training (Jain, Lall & Singh, 2020).

It must also be noted that the transition to online teaching takes time and practice. Yet, teachers in government schools are often recruited for non-teaching duties such as ration distribution, leaving even lesser time for adapting to the new normal. Although there have been some reports of state governments such as those of Uttar Pradesh and

Kerala organizing programs on online teaching for teachers (e.g., PTI, 2021; INAS, 2021), it is not clear whether any such programs have focused on training teachers to teach children with disabilities. Such training may include knowledge of different features of apps and websites that make them accessible and pedagogical techniques that foster students' attention during online classes, particularly in the case of developmental disabilities such as autism and ADHD. It is also unclear whether any such programs have been conducted specifically for special educators. More training programs and efforts to document their effectiveness alongside adequate support and resources for teachers can be useful measures for the government and schools to undertake.

Another major barrier to online education for children with disabilities is the lack of digital literacy among parents, especially in low-income households. The National Family Health Survey in 2020 revealed that over 60% of women in 12 states and union territories have never used the internet. The survey by Swabhimann (2020) found that most mothers who helped their children at home did not know how to operate learning apps. The government has operationalised various schemes to improve digital literacy in India. The National Digital Literacy Mission and the Digital Saksharta Abhiyan were launched in 2014 to impart digital training to about 5 million citizens. Within two years, both schemes achieved their stipulated targets (Singh, 2021).

However, this coverage is clearly inadequate for a country of over a billion people with staggering levels

of digital illiteracy. In 2017, the government launched the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan with a target of 60 million households. Unfortunately, the scheme was marred by the non-achievement of targets. It is also important to look at whether these schemes can equip parents and students with the digital literacy skills they need to access online education, given that when the schemes were launched, education was still primarily taking place in offline classrooms. An important step in enhancing digital literacy among parents who have children with disabilities can be ground-level community-based programs conducted through collaborations between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders that rely on trained volunteers who can assist parents with the use of online platforms.

The path to education is not an easy one for children with disabilities. Charting through a long history of segregation and then integration, the country has finally moved with the idea of inclusive and equitable education. However, the greater burden faced by children with disabilities means that additional efforts are still needed to ensure that their needs are met through the different phases of this pandemic. Programmatic actions need to address these specific challenges through inclusive policy responses, teacher training, and support to teachers, as well as provisions of assistive technology, accommodations, monitoring, and feedback.

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Fostering Mother Engagement through Neighbourhood-Level Groups: Learnings from an Early Years Intervention in Gujarat

Aditi Macwan | Tulika Jain | Varsha Hariprasad

Introduction

A child's ecosystem is one of the most important factors when considering their development during the early years. They learn from the environment around them and are influenced by those with whom they interact regularly, such as parents, grandparents, siblings, anganwadi workers, and members of the community. Interventions must therefore focus on ensuring that the ecosystem is equipped to provide appropriate inputs and a supportive learning environment to further the child's growth and development. In India, many households in rural communities and urban slums do not have access to the resources, knowledge, or time to properly engage with children (Alcott, et al., 2018). At a time when pre-primary institutions were closed across the country for nearly two years, learning at home was indispensable, especially for young children who require an emotive and hands-on learning experience.

In India, mothers typically spend the greatest amount of time with the child and hence, play the role of a long-term influencer in the child's development journey. Pratham has been working with mothers towards the goal of empowering them to play an active role in their child's learning journey, and influencing the household environment to make it more conducive to the child's developmental needs. Our work focuses on promoting the awareness of mothers on the development of their child's age-appropriate abilities and building their confidence in supporting this development at home regardless of their education

level or background. Learning at home can be done through simple play-based activities with the support of common household objects that are repurposed as learning and play material. A conducive household environment is thus one where children are encouraged to play and explore, where members of the household can actively engage with children alongside their daily tasks.

Engaging mothers to support their children's development and learning gained greater significance after the pandemic prompted nationwide closures of preschool centres. Since March 2020, mother engagement has evolved to become a core pillar of Pratham's early years' intervention. In 2021, to build a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of this mothers-centric intervention, Pratham conducted an exploratory study across 26 rural villages in Banaskantha district in Gujarat, to understand the mindsets and expectations of mothers, and further evolve our mother engagement efforts. This paper presents our key findings.

Overview of the Study

The study was designed keeping in mind that preschool centres (primarily anganwadis) were closed, and movement in the community was at times restricted. Despite these challenges, it was important to connect with mothers regularly and facilitate local group interactions. The intervention, which ran from January 2021 to June 2021, included sharing learning activities and building awareness through:

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- **Direct contact with mothers via digital content** shared by Pratham team members twice a week over WhatsApp and SMS
- **Mothers' group meetings** twice a month, facilitated by Pratham team members.

Before the pandemic, Pratham's approach aimed at engaging children both within the institution - primarily in anganwadis, as well as outside it - at home and in the community. Due to extended anganwadi closures, digital messages and mothers' groups played a crucial role in children receiving learning support in their early years. Through digital messages, Pratham shared information and simple learning activities directly to parents' mobile phones, to promote their ownership, confidence, and habits to become educators at home. Mothers' groups were organised at the neighbourhood level to increase the mother's *awareness* and *understanding* of different developmental domains and influence her *practices* at home to conduct these age-appropriate activities with her child. Through these mothers' groups, Pratham aimed to leverage the group environment to promote participation and foster a culture of peer support.

Mothers' Group Meetings

A total of 430 groups covering about 1,300 mothers were formed across 26 villages in Banaskantha. Group meetings focused on **demonstration, discussions, and actual practice**:

- Mothers were oriented on simple play-based activities that they could conduct with their children. These activities focused on the child's development across social-emotional, cognitive, physical, and language domains. Activities included, for instance, using utensils to explain the concept of shapes, using calendars to explain numbers, or using stories, daily conversation, rhymes, and games to nurture the child's social-emotional skills. In addition to the digital content, mothers received printed worksheets and were acquainted with how to use household materials such as bottles, buttons, crayons or strings for play-based activities.
- Discussions were conducted on topics ranging from understanding children's developmental

needs, to how to enhance their learning at home, as well as health, nutrition, and hygiene.

- Providing feedback and reviewing the previous week's activities formed a core feature of group meetings. This was to foster an environment where mothers could share their experiences, support each other, and forge stronger relationships.



Source: Pratham Education Foundation

These groups met twice a month, and across the meetings, attendance remained strong at an average of 85%, with some fluctuations based on seasonal agricultural activities. Additionally, around 40% of the groups had a leader mother who played a larger role in facilitating interactions and sustaining the group's momentum. Leader mothers were often selected based on their strong communication skills, while characteristics like their education level, age, and social status did not play a major role in selection. In most cases, the leader was selected by the Pratham team member, with a smaller minority volunteering themselves or being chosen by other group members.



Source: Pratham Education Foundation

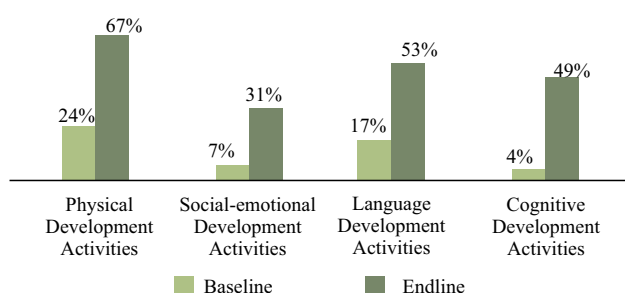
Detailed qualitative and quantitative data was collected to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of this intervention on mothers and children.

Impact on the Mother's Awareness, Understanding, and Practices Concerning the Child's Development and Learning

To capture the impact of the intervention on the awareness, understanding, and practices of mothers concerning their child's development and learning, a survey was conducted with 1,670 mothers. The baseline survey was conducted in January 2021, at the start of the intervention, while the ending was conducted in July 2021. While the survey captured several areas of interest, some key insights included:

- Mother's awareness of preschool education:** The mother was asked if she was aware of the concept of preschool education. At baseline, only 20% of surveyed mothers had this awareness, however, by ending this figure increased to 74%.
- Mother's practices about her child's development and learning:** The mother was asked if she spends time with her child on their development and/or education. At baseline, 60% of mothers said that they do so, and this figure increased to 80% at endline.
- Mother's understanding of each developmental domain:** The mother was asked to name specific activities that she could do with her child to enhance their physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive development. The figure below indicates the substantial improvements that were made by endline – this progress could be attributed to the fact that both mothers' group activities and digital content emphasised how each activity was linked to a particular developmental domain.

Figure 1: Percentage of Mothers who could name at least 1 activity under each domain



By linking the survey results with the background of mothers and inputs received by them, several important patterns become visible:

- Mothers who were a part of groups were more likely to have better awareness and understanding: 39% of mothers surveyed only received digital content, while 61% were a part of mothers' group meetings in addition to receiving digital content. At endline, mothers who were a part of groups were more likely to be aware of the concept of preschool education compared to those who were not part of groups. Moreover, mothers who were a part of groups were more likely to be able to name specific activities to enhance their children's development. It must be noted that even mothers who only received digital content saw improvements compared to baseline, however, group meetings and the group culture fostered even further progress.

Figure 2: Percentage of Mothers who were aware of the concept of pre-school education

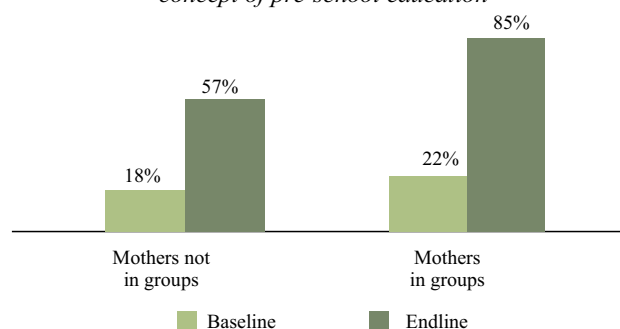
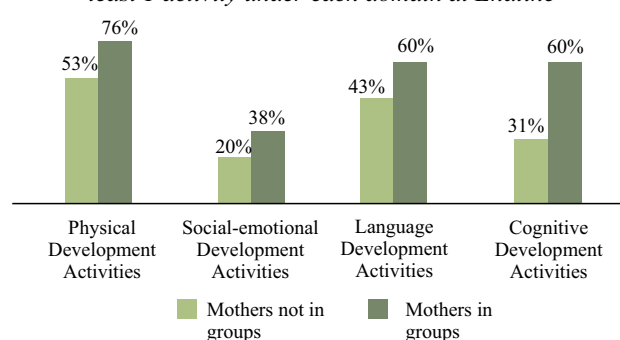


Figure 3: Percentage of Mothers who could name at least 1 activity under each domain at Endline



Mothers' groups were able to address gaps that existed due to differences in access to technology:

Almost 60% of mothers surveyed did not own phones, which is often a proxy for their social standing. At baseline, these mothers had a lower level of awareness and understanding as compared to mothers who

owned phones. However, as mothers without phones participated in group meetings, they had significant improvements over time and were comparable to mothers who owned phones. Mothers' groups were thereby an effective mechanism to address gaps in access to technology and information, and play an equalising role for mothers who are otherwise likely to get left behind.

Figure 4: Percentage of Mothers who aware of the concept of pre-school education

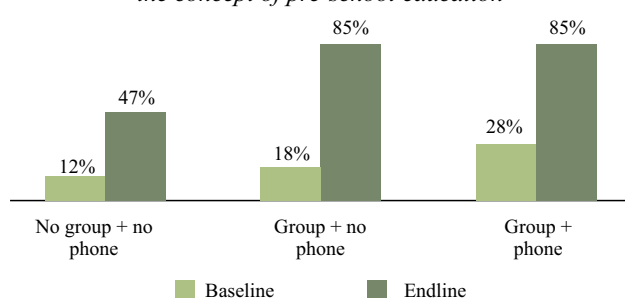
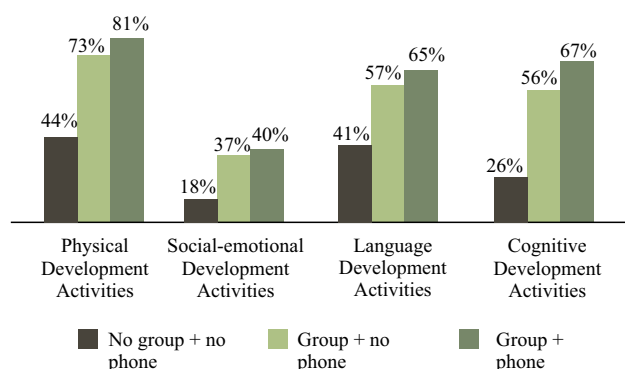
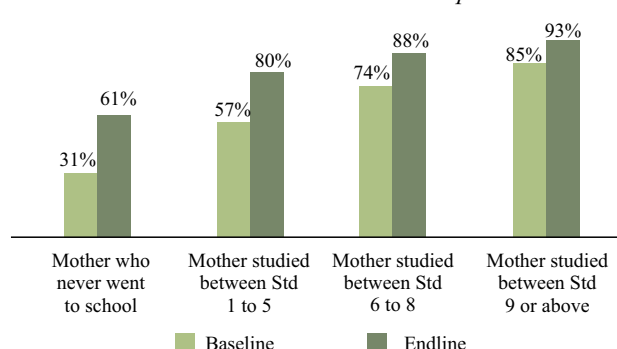


Figure 5: Percentage of Mothers who could name at least 1 activity under each domain



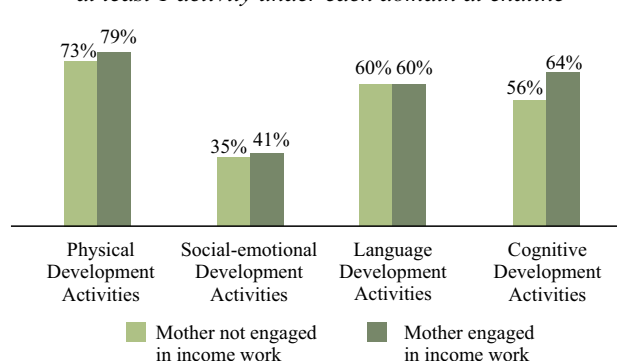
- The intervention was able to address gaps that existed due to differences in the educational background of mothers:** Almost 60% of mothers surveyed had no prior schooling or had only studied between standard 1 to 5. At baseline, these mothers were less likely to spend time on the development and education of their children. However, by the end of the intervention, there was a significant improvement in their child-related interactions and practices. The gaps that existed between mothers who came from stronger educational backgrounds versus those who had lower educational backgrounds were reduced due to the simple activity-based content and demonstrations in mothers' groups by other mothers and Pratham team members.

Figure 6: Percentage of Mothers who spent time on their children's education/development



- Mechanism of mothers' group meetings ensured that even working mothers were fully engaged - hence these mothers had significant improvements in awareness, practices, and understanding:** 50% of mothers surveyed were engaged in work like farming, animal husbandry, or daily labour. Even though these mothers usually had very little leisure time, Pratham staff members ensured that meetings happened at timings suitable to them. Moreover, if working mothers were unable to attend any sessions, other caregivers (like grandparents) attended in their place and shared learnings. Group leaders also individually discussed learnings with mothers who missed any sessions. As a result, at endline, there was no significant difference in the awareness, practices, and understanding of working mothers compared to mothers not engaged in any income-generating activities

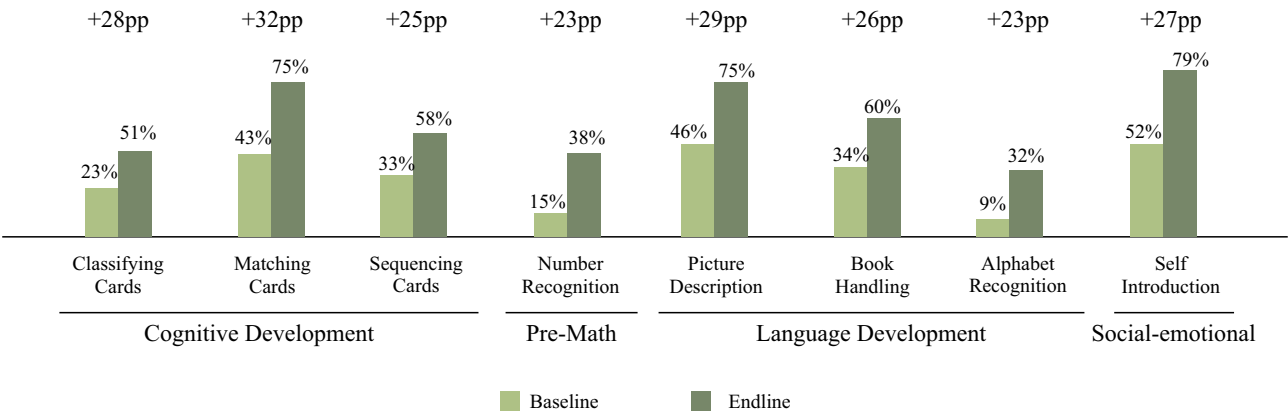
Figure 7: Percentage of Mothers who could name at least 1 activity under each domain at endline



Impact on the Child's Development and Learning

To capture the impact of our intervention on the child's development and learning, assessments were conducted with 870 children (aged 3 to 6 years) whose mothers were a part of mothers' groups. The baseline was conducted in November 2020 while the endline

Figure 8: Percentage of Children who could do the activity correctly



was conducted in July 2021. The assessment captured children's levels using activity-based methods. For the intervention, there was significant progress among children across all domains and activities.

Unfortunately, the data set did not have a control group, and hence we are unable to say if the progress seen was due to the intervention (exposure to learning activities and the functioning of mothers' groups), or a function of natural growth and development in the child's life.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The study in Banaskantha has shown how efforts to engage mothers led to the strengthening of their awareness and understanding of early childhood developmental domains, and an increase in appropriate engagement with young children. Moreover, the sharing and learning culture of mothers' groups, the support provided by leaders and caregivers, as well as the simplicity of content and demonstrations conducted by Pratham staff members were able to address pre-existing exposure and education differences among mothers. As the role of

mothers in children's early years has gained further importance since the onset of the pandemic, it is crucial for mother engagement efforts to be inclusive and to develop mechanisms that empower mothers regardless of their backgrounds and other constraints.

The insights gained from the study in Banaskantha have shaped Pratham's approach to our early years' programming, with mother engagement efforts being integrated across programs where we work directly and in partnership with the government. For instance, since August 2021, Pratham has been implementing a nationwide Readiness Campaign in response to extended preschool closures, by supporting mothers in promoting the development of their Grade 1-2 children through group meetings and digital messages. As of December 2021, the campaign reached over 165,000 mothers across 21 states. Going forward, reaching children with activity-based learning through their mothers should remain a priority when promoting early childhood care and education.

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Fostering Students' Leadership is What They Most Need Now: Some International Experiences

Wendy Kopp

Estefany Ruiz Ortega teaches six classes each day to students from 7th through 11th grades in the outskirts of Cali, Colombia, in a neighbourhood where families, many of whom are Afro-Colombian or indigenous, have a very low income that comes mostly from the informal economy and where there is no green space or recreational infrastructure. Ms. Ruiz shared that because last year's classes were virtual, she and the other teachers could see some of the challenging situations happening in students' homes, so when they came back to school in person this year, she knew she would need to actively listen to them to understand what is going on in their lives and develop ways of meeting their needs. She began by asking them questions: What motivates them to come to school? What happened during the pandemic? Is there something they'd like to share?

Understanding that her students were managing a range of issues—from living with violence to fear of bullying to depression—Ms. Ruiz realised how important it was for her students to be in a safe space, to feel trust and connection. She also resolved to build their socio-emotional skills through co-regulation, fostering their self-awareness, and building their conflict resolution skills.

As a result, early this school year she took some of her students to the mountains, and they saw firsthand the impact of environmental degradation when the mountain they were climbing no longer had its usual snowy peak. She saw the inherent motivation her students had to do something about the situation and recognised their potential for leadership. When the

students returned to school, Ms. Ruiz supported them to design and implement a campaign in the school to collect plastics for recycling.

In classes with as many as 40 students, Ms. Ruiz saw beneath some of the classroom management issues she was having and realised that her students were trying to get her attention. Understanding their potential for leadership and desire to be useful, she constructed a project through which her older students in the Grades 10th and 11th taught the younger ones. Through this, she saw that when she entrusted them with responsibility and gave them a chance to exert their leadership, they were more interested and motivated.

“When people say this is a lost generation, it hurts me” Ms. Ruiz says. She's seen firsthand that when we listen to students and put them in charge, they can contribute and learn so much.

Ms. Ruiz found that the path to tackling the range of challenges her students were facing, as they returned to school, was listening to her students and enabling their leadership. Her example is one of many across international network of teachers, education leaders and advocates in more than 60 countries. When we set out over these last months to understand from these teachers and educators what students need now, we heard a resounding theme that seems to be relatively missing in the public discussion—we heard that students need the power to drive their learning and to ensure that what they learn is relevant to them.

“We need to unlearn the idea that power lies only in

Wendy Kopp, CEO and Founder, Teach for All

the hands of teachers", shared the teachers Mălina Luciana Flocea and Ionela Munteanu from Romania, reinforcing their perspective about the need to "pay attention to the complexity of the learning process where the two main roles, student and teacher, must be interchangeable." Similarly, a teacher from Thailand, Noppamart Kamsaen wrote: *"Students' voices need to be heard and their actions need to be seen. We need to listen to what they want to learn, what they want to be, and respect their decisions."*

As we engaged with educators across our network, we heard that the key to motivating and engaging students is fostering their agency and voice. At the same time, we know that this is the only path to preparing students who can navigate the uncertainty that is ever-more apparent during this pandemic. These are skills that will be crucial in preparing students to create meaningful careers in a changing economy and solve the complex challenges facing communities, countries, and our global society. The challenges of this era are opportunities to accelerate progress in this direction. Chan Soon Seng, CEO of Teach For Malaysia, put it this way: *"As a result of COVID-19, many more students are dropping out of school, and the idea of memorising more content for exams is not convincing them to come back. Instead, we see students energised by being able to do something to make a difference for themselves and their communities—now. The great opportunity we have in front of us is to reshape education from a process of depositing knowledge into children, into a process that develops leaders who will lead themselves, and us all, towards a sustainable and equitable future."*

Teach For All's Global Learning Lab has spent the last several years learning from classrooms where students are growing in their ability to lead and shape a better future. We wanted to understand what differentiates teachers who are fostering students' sense of agency, their awareness of the world and of themselves, their problem-solving and critical thinking skills, their empathy and ability to work across lines of difference, and their sense of well-being.

What we learned is that perhaps the most important differentiator of these teachers is their very orientation, which undergirds all their actions—they begin

from a belief that their ultimate destination is developing students as leaders who can shape better lives for themselves and others. In seeking to understand how these teachers developed, we found that they had experiences that led them to "un-learn" mindsets inculcated by our education systems and to develop new perspectives in their place. These teachers came to see their students as whole people and as leaders with the potential to reshape the world. They came to see themselves as learners and to resist allowing the nature of their commitment to the growth of their students to prevent them from growing alongside their students. They came to see the assets present in their students' communities, which are so often overlooked. They came to see challenges as systemic and to reflect on the root causes of the things that happen in classrooms, schools, and communities, rather than seeing them as problems within students and the people in communities.

We see so much of this in Ms. Ruiz's example—she came to understand the roots of the challenges she saw playing out in her classroom, she saw her students' desire to lead and make a difference, and she saw herself as learning from her students and evolving her approach accordingly. With education systems around the world having suffered their biggest shock in generations, educators and parents are rightly worried about the impact that the pandemic has had on children's education, and the desire to take action to compensate for this disruption is to be welcomed. However, rather than rolling out a rash of interventions to make up for learning loss, we should set out to foster students' agency and leadership in addressing the situation. Before investing in mass efforts to build the skills teachers need to catch students up, we should start by investing in professional development designed to support them to embrace new mindsets and let these perspectives guide the skills they need to build.

Moreover, even as we invest in building teachers' commitment to elevate the students' voices and leadership, school and system leaders must recognise the implications for their own approach. Rather than meeting in adult-only rooms and developing plans for addressing students' learning loss and their mental health and well-being, we should bring students into the conversation and seek their thoughts and

engagement in developing the path forward. Teach For All's Student Leadership Advisory Council, comprised of eight students from as many countries, shared recently their prevailing experience that adults decided everything during the pandemic and didn't listen even when they raised their voices. One student, Lucha Papikyan from the village of Aragatsavan in Armenia, shared that her experience was different. Her school's Student Council which unlike most such groups has a mandate to partner with administrators to strengthen the school, rather than to plan social events was quick to step up during the pandemic. They organised training for the teachers to help them learn how to utilise technology and conduct online lessons.

As an example of the kinds of change which place the student's voice at an institutional level, Teach For Italy has designed its monitoring, evaluation, and learning system to serve as a tool for student engagement and empowerment. The system enables teachers to monitor their students' personal and academic growth, their emotional and mental wellbeing, and also their opinions and feedback for the teachers about their classes, their overall experience in school and their own personal learning styles. Last year, Teach For Italy gave back all the data to its fellows, aggregated per class clusters, to allow them to discuss and interpret the results with their students. This approach strengthened these student communities around shared interpretations of their well-being and academic progress and kept them closer together during the months of lockdown. It fostered their self-reflection skills and their ability to influence their school environments. Going forward, the organisation aims to use this system to foster student leadership and active citizenship through 'data ownership'. The organisation is developing a digital platform to simplify the participation of students in the surveys,

enabling teachers to plan regular discussions of the results with their students, and teaching them how to autonomously visualise and understand the data they have generated.

Similarly, Suchita Mohan, a school leader with iTeach schools in Pune, India, who has charged his Student Council with a mandate to improve the school, shared with the group data from weekly tests of 9th graders. When the Student Council members saw how far behind the students were despite all the online learning that took place when schools were shut, they were concerned and took the initiative to create a plan. They met with each teacher to prioritise the content taught and provided extra support for students who needed it during and after the school day. With the help of these interventions, the school was able to achieve more than 90% of the students passing the high-stakes test and moving on to Grade 10.

Even before the pandemic, classrooms and schools were failing to prepare young people sufficiently to thrive in this uncertain world and to put communities, countries and our global society on a trajectory to meet our aspirations for peace, justice, sustainability, and shared prosperity. Today, at this juncture when students face unprecedented challenges to their learning and well-being, we have an incredible opportunity to change this, but only if we resist the temptation to jump to stop-gap interventions that don't address the root causes of this failure. Meeting students' well-documented needs and seizing this opportunity to create education systems that are fit for the challenges we face around the world will require elevating students' agency and ownership and giving them the power. Our students are ready and waiting—they just need us to partner with them and do what is necessary to equip them for the future.





06

Book Review

Painting by: **Ankita**, Age 13

Review of 'Shiksha: My Experiments as an Education Minister'

Author: Manish Sisodia

Reviewed by: Adisha Mishra | Raju Sarkar

A child is entitled to several rights, yet the right to education holds the utmost value, for it is what leads a child to be aware of what is rightfully theirs. The school's environment, the care and stringency of the principals, and the loving lessons taught by the teachers play an essential role in modelling a child's future. Thus, seeing the dilapidated condition of this pristine relationship, the then newly-elected Aam Aadmi Party of New Delhi decided to take the onus of revitalising Delhi's public schools. 'Shiksha: My Experiments as an Education Minister' written by the Hon'ble Education Minister of State, Mr Manish Sisodia, walks us through the wars that he waged not just to change an existing system but rather build an entirely new one from the ground.

This book can be evaluated on two grounds—the organisation and structure of the book and the tremendous work and optimistic intentions mentioned in the book. However, it would not be easy to analyse the former without bringing the latter into the limelight. After all, the work on the ground made it possible for the author to formulate them into words.

As promised in the title, fitting with the first sentence, the readers embark on a courageous, struggling journey to ensure that the best quality of education is imparted to the students of public schools in Delhi. Written in lucid language, the book reflects on how the newly formed government acknowledged education as the rights of the children and not just a constitutional provision. Indeed, there have been governments and schemes to promote education, but no government has prioritised education and

continues to do so, like the aforementioned. The commitment to the idea that it is education that can curb violence, and not just education in the universities but primary classrooms that the author vehemently mentions, is not a mere vote-appealing tactic. In fact, in its most recent budgetary allocation, the party has assigned 22% of its budget to education, staying true to its words (Chettri & Ghosh, 2022).

Furthermore, the book is a culmination of solid statements and subtle jibes at the other political leaders. It provides quite practical insights into various educational practices based on empirical evidence as well as Indian educational philosophy. For example, the idea of bringing models from Finland, USA, and UK and using the Indian education philosopher's ideas in implementing the Jeevan Vidya Shivir to train educationists is an apt example for the nation and other states, should they wish to recognise education as the need of the hour. Additionally, the organised manner in which the author talks of how his team moved from restructuring the physical spaces, such as classrooms, libraries, etc., to incorporating the views of many significant education stakeholders, provokes one to think of the meticulously constructed systemic changes.

However, even with all its convincing elucidation, the author does not cite the results of the same. While every allocation, every measure, and story are documented, the book lacks empirical evidence that can back the efficacy of these structures. While the cited results of the 'Mega PTM' and statements of the mentor - teachers corroborate the installed

Adisha Mishra, Teach for India Fellow

Raju Sarkar, Teach for India Fellow

¹ Chettri, S., & Ghosh, S. (2022, March 27). Delhi budget 2022-23: Fifth of spend goes to education, slum kids on board. Retrieved from timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/fifth-of-spend-goes-to-education-slum-kids-on-board/articleshow/90466056.cms

mechanisms, the absence of data raises the question if the children across the schools that are under the Directorate of Education (DoE) are actually reaping equal benefits, as proclaimed by the author.

Moreover, for someone implying that the children are dignified individual entities, it seems ambiguous that they are only beneficiaries with no say. The book encases the story of a persistent battle, backed by

hopes and diligent work. Even with its shortcomings, the small but profound impacts it has created, in the forms of, say, SMCs and Happiness Curriculum, are a model for the world. It portrays a world-class level of education that is not just every student's right but every government's duty. And to make sure that every utopian word of the author comes true even in the post-pandemic era, their perseverance mustn't fail.



The Why-Why Girl

Author: Mahasweta Devi

Reviewed by: Merilyn Matthews | Kavya

The “Why-Why Girl”, Mahasweta Devi's first picture book published in the year 2003, is a meaningful portrayal of why it is pivotal to make children aware of their rights, including the right to education, and protection of children from exploitation of labour and the right to play. Mahasweta Devi was an Indian writer and social activist who wrote extensively on the themes of caste, social issues, and struggles faced by indigenous tribes. These themes took inspiration from personal experiences making them more relatable to the readers. The popularity of this story has gained enough recognition to be included as a part of the school curriculum.

Children, specifically those from lower castes, are subject to various forms of discrimination. These discriminations include child labour, manual scavenging, and other child rights violations. Today, through unknown mediators, children under the age of 12, particularly girls, are already being employed as manual scavengers in local villages. (Akhilesh & Kumar, 2022). Given the existence of such incidents even in the present world, it becomes increasingly important to ensure adequate engagement with these topics through critical reflection and discussion.

Moyna, the central character of the text, belongs to a Dalit community known as Sabars, who face the wrath of poverty and landlessness. She recognises her position as being different from other social classes. Unlike other people from her community who choose to not complain about their hardships, Moyna is a strong protagonist who stands up for her basic rights which is the first step essential to bringing about a change.

In the text, Moyna highlights how she finds it difficult to attend school owing to her work schedule. This strictly violates the Right to Education Act (RTE Act guarantees education to every child between the ages of 6 and 14) and the protection of children from exploitation. This is also a reflection of how formal educational institutions are exclusive to particular sections of society and are not accommodative of the diverse lifestyles our country inhabits. Mahasweta's text reveals the stark differences between children's lifestyles in rural and urban areas, with this text particularly focusing on the rural setting.

Moyna is burdened with work and studies to the extent that she does not have a childhood that she could cherish. As a child, one of the fundamental rights is the Right to Play. Given Moyna's circumstances, she has no option but to prioritize work and education at the cost of this basic right. Although this might seem insignificant when compared to the other rights, every child must be entitled to be brought up in a joyful environment.

Moyna questions many discriminatory practices, including age-old customs such as leaving leftover food for people from the Dalit community in exchange for labour. In the text, Moyna is expected to thank the elite owner who provides her with food in exchange for her work. Moyna instantly denies this as she feels respect is mutual and the owner should be grateful for the work that she does for him as well. Though her curiosity makes her question and fight such absurdities of Indian society, such questions leave an unforgettable impression in the reader's mind about the perils of a system that fragments society and promotes inequality.

Merilyn Matthews, Student, University of Leeds
Kavya Narayanan, Student, University of York

Children First

In the later stages of the story, Moyna is a teacher who encourages her students to be more inquisitive about everything that surrounds them. This specific instance is a motivation for the current and future generations. Moyna's stance and decision to utilize the privilege that she earned, benefits not just her but her community as well.

In the larger diaspora of children's literature, engaging with themes like child rights encourages children from a very young age to be aware of their rights and become well-informed citizens of society. A limitation of this text could be the fact that the author is an omniscient narrator and hence, her perspective is not

brought to the forefront. Additionally, a child reading this text would more likely focus on the central character rather than being motivated to analyse the societal and systemic issues the story underlines.

Moyna's character provides a solid foundation to the story that deals with multiple intrinsic issues in Indian society. While in many communities, women have to be obedient without questioning anything, Moyna appears as a strong-minded character who is not tolerant of any injustice. It is inspiring to see a young girl break the traditional norms of a patriarchal society simply by owning her identity and taking her stance.

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Recommended Readings

Book Name & Author	Details
<u>Mothering a Muslim</u> By Nazia Erum	<i>Mothering a Muslim paints a shocking picture of the extent of bullying that children face within the school premises. Talking to over 145 children and their parents across 12 cities, Erum lifts the veil from a social taboo, uncovering some profoundly troubling truths.</i>
<u>An Insight into the Indian Juvenile Justice System</u> By Vaishali Rathore	<i>The book delves into an in-depth study of the Juvenile Justice System prevailing in India. In order to evaluate the current system, it is crucial to understand the meaning and definition of closely-associated terms like juvenile delinquency, children in need of care and protection, centres for their reforms and rehabilitation, etc.</i>
<u>At Home</u> By Shweta Ganesh Kumar	<i>A day in the life of two children in a time of lockdowns and social distancing.</i>
<u>Bend in Time</u> By ed. Bijal Vachharajani (Speaking Tiger Books)	<i>This book has writings by children: In this collection of stories and essays by children and young adults from different parts of India, we see unbridled imagination and empathy, as they write about what is happening around them.</i>
<u>Chumki and The Pangolin</u> By Lesley D Biswas (Duckbill Hole books)	<i>Children's Fiction- The dangerous virus is making everything go into lockdown. But the village poacher trying to catch the pangolin Chumki has befriended.</i>
<u>Jamlo Walks</u> By Samina Mishra (Puffin Books)	<i>A hard-hitting book on what the lockdown did to the people of India, particularly its young citizens. Discusses the importance of recognizing injustice and inequality in our day to day interactions</i>
<u>The PARI Series</u> Priti David, Nivedha Ganesh, Subuhi Jiwani, Aparna Karthikeyan, Vishaka George (Publisher: Karadi Tales)	<i>There are 5 books in this series which talk about the challenges that the marginalised (children/people) have to face every day (be it accessing healthcare, food, education and others). These stories are woven around (rural/migrant) children and their struggles. It is a series that pushes urban child/adult readers to rethink concepts like inequality or inequity. It is a collection worth looking at even though it may not be directly linked to the pandemic.</i>
<u>Sunny Days Inside: And Other Stories</u> By Caroline Adderson	<i>The stories follow the course of the pandemic, from the early measures through lockdown, as the kids in the building observe the stresses on the adults around them and use their own quirky kid ingenuity to come up with ways to make their lives better.</i>

Recommended Readings

Book Name & Author	Details
<u>Rez Dogs</u> By Joseph Bruchac	<i>Told in verse inspired by oral storytelling, this novel about the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the ways Malian's community has cared for one another through plagues of the past, and how they keep caring for one another today.</i>
<u>Windows</u> By Patrick Guest	<i>This book uses a delightful playfulness to capture the poignancy, the hope and the truth of this experience for many of us through this coronavirus pandemic and will become a treasured capsule of life in 2020.</i>
<u>Hush</u> By Prateek Thomas	<i>A graphic novel: Hush, the maiden publication from Manta Ray, thrusts a loaded gun into the hands of a schoolgirl and blows the lid off classroom innocence. Nothing is what it seems. Terror stalks the corridors, but not in a way you'd expect.</i>
<u>Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir</u> By Malik Sajjad	<i>Munnu is a seven year old child whose childhood is scarred by conflict. A beautiful and poignant story which looks at the Kashmir conflict and its impact on everyday living through the perspective of a child.</i>
<u>Becoming Unbecoming</u> By Una	<i>A heart rending account of gender violence told in graphic-novel form, this volume explores how a serial murderer's violence is seen/ experienced by a 12 year old girl – Una.</i>
<u>Child Soldier: When Boys and Girls are used in War</u> By Michael Chkwanine and Jessica Humphrey's	<i>Told in the first person this is the story of a child's experience of being abducted and inducted as a child soldier in the rebel militia of Congo and his scarred childhood.</i>
<u>When Stars Are Scattered</u> By Victoria Jamieson	<i>Story of two brothers Omar and Hassan and their lives spent in a refugee camp in Kenya. Profound and heart breaking narrative of children's experience of war and hardship.</i>

Our Next Issue: December 2022

“Children First Journal on Children's Lives”, a peer-reviewed and bi-annual publication, invites authors from across the globe to write for its third issue to be published in December 2022, on the theme:

“Moving on: Pandemic & Beyond”

Over the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on children's lives and education in India, and across the globe, some of which we have tried to capture in the current issue. As we move forward, taking the pandemic and its aftermath in our stride, and proceed slowly towards a more “hopeful” tomorrow, especially for our children, our next issue focuses on “Moving on: Pandemic & Beyond”. Through the prism of this theme, we invite reflections and narratives from our readers and subscribers on the new challenges that may have emerged over this period that could impinge on the rights of young children in terms of violence and abuse, care and protection, nurturance and all-round development, as also measures to address these challenges. These could be in terms of tried and tested solutions and/or success stories and narratives which can provide insights and guidance to child rights activists and other stakeholders who engage with and work towards ensuring children's rights and well-being.

Authors can submit their papers under four categories: Research, Critique and Commentary, Voices from the Field and Best Practices. We also invite reviews of books that have relevance to the theme. We invite papers that will contribute to further the understanding of rights of children, suggest strategies to combat challenges and help government and other stakeholders to move forward in safeguarding the rights of children and ensuring children get happier childhoods.

To know more about the submission process for the next issue, kindly visit our page at www.dcpqr.delhi.gov.in



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