

Policy Brief

Mitigating Learning Disruption During Covid-19: Evidence from India

Summary

Long school closures in India during the pandemic caused significant learning disruption, with particularly adverse consequences for marginalised girls and boys. Data from large-scale representative surveys does not show a massive fall in enrolment because of the closures. However, low levels of basic reading and maths skills among school-age children are concerning. In response, various centrally managed interventions took place during the pandemic (e.g. to encourage enrolment, including through social protection). Schools also undertook measures with a more direct bearing on children's learning. Continued efforts are needed to reach severely disadvantaged children who are not enrolled.

Key messages

- **Government relief to schools can contribute to high enrolment rates in times of crises**, and help keep children in school, even when households face financial stresses, such as family members' loss of livelihoods.
- **It is imperative to focus on sustaining enrolment over time**, particularly through regular school attendance and reduced absenteeism, including for the poorest children.
- **While centralised responses can help in some areas (e.g. by providing midday meals and other relief measures), day-to-day decisions to address the learning needs of children may be better left to schools** – these include the decision to close schools, which can be left to school management to take on the basis of the number of cases of infection in a village or neighbourhood.

Mitigating learning disruptions

School closures were among the longest in the world

In India, schools were closed as part of measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Although there were variations across states and within grades, school closures lasted for nearly two years and were among the longest in the world. Children from disadvantaged families who did not have the resources to access education (online or otherwise) were the most affected. At macro-level, these learning disruptions were expected to manifest themselves as a drop in school enrolment and worsening of the learning crisis; for example, through low achievement scores, inadequate funding and poor-quality learning. Although there was no perceptible drop in enrolment during the pandemic in India (ASER 2022), this may have been due to ‘pent-up’ enrolment:

Now that schools have opened, enrolment levels are high across all age groups and... in every state there is an increase in anganwadi [childcare centre] enrolment as well. I see this as the pent-up enrolment that is now happen[ing] and there is probably some amount of mixing also [because there was a backlog] (Key informant interview (KII)).¹

Moreover, universal enrolment does not necessarily mean low levels of school absenteeism (Chavan 2023); overall learning levels remained low. The percentage of children in Standards V (grade 5) and VIII (grade 8) who were proficient in reading Standard II (grade 2)-level text declined from 51 per cent and 73 per cent to 43 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively, between 2018 and 2022. Reading and maths levels in 2022 were also low and showed little change from pre-pandemic levels (ASER 2022).

Relief provided through public schools mitigated the impact on enrolment

The relief the government provided through public schools may have helped to counter reductions in enrolment (KII). India had an extensive midday meal programme for primary and upper-primary schoolchildren studying in government schools and other schools financially aided by the government, which continued during school closures. Alongside this, the government provided cash transfers to parents at different times during school closures, while the percentage of children with grade-appropriate textbooks also increased (ASER 2021). These forms of support likely meant that parents did not withdraw their children from schools even when faced with financial stresses such as loss of livelihood. Indeed, enrolment in government schools likely provided an additional and much-needed source of relief to poor parents. However, the pandemic adversely affected private schools, particularly those where fees were lower. School closures and livelihoods disruption meant that private schools did not have enough resources to continue to run. Many parents withdrew their children from private schools and enrolled them in government schools instead. As a result, in contrast to the years before the pandemic where there was a steady drop in enrolment in government schools, enrolment in these schools increased for the first time in 2022.

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¹ Because schools were closed for nearly two years, children enrolled in grades 1 and grades 2 during 2020/21 did not receive any real schooling. When the schools reopened, it is not clear if these (older) children were enrolled in higher grades (which would have been the case had there been no school closures), or in grades 1 and 2 along with new (younger) children.

Private tuition mitigated the impact on learning levels

Access to private tuition may have helped reduce the negative impact of school closures on learning levels. A comparison between West Bengal and Karnataka states reveals that although schools in West Bengal reopened almost a year after Karnataka, the fall in learning levels was lower in West Bengal (ASER 2022). It is likely that the private tuition sector in West Bengal played a mitigating role. Although schools were closed during the pandemic, private tuition continued to function. The private tuition sector is also flexible, in that it allows the possibility for parents to individually negotiate a convenient time, location and price with tutors for the tuition they provide to children (KII).

More broadly, the role of private tuition in providing education to children during the pandemic is also attested by the sharper drop in learning levels in northwest India compared with eastern India. Northwestern states such as Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have a higher incidence of private schools and lower prevalence of private tuition, whereas eastern states have fewer private schools but very high levels of private tuition.

However, private tuition does not have universal coverage and it is likely that children who could not afford private tuition were worse off because of their lack of access. During 2021, only about 40 per cent of children nationally received private tuition. Even in a state with a high incidence of tuition, such as West Bengal, a quarter of children did not have access to private tuition. Indeed, many children may have discontinued private tuition as a cost-saving measure because of income shocks that accompanied lockdowns. Around 11 per cent of children reported discontinuing private tuition (ASER 2020).

School-led local initiatives show promise, though their impact is not known

There were various school-based initiatives at local level, and variability within states in how

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schools and teachers reached out to students (KII). The Covid-19 pandemic allowed teachers to loosen the centralised system of education, deviating from the strict curriculum of prescribed textbooks and course syllabi, but ‘there is no measurement of it’ (KII). Beyond remote teaching through digital platforms, schools were reaching out to students in three ways (KII):

- 1 In some states and some locations, teachers went door to door or did some kind of instructional work in the community – however, it is ‘hard to say’ to what extent this was mandated by schools or governments, or self-initiated.
- 2 Grade-appropriate textbooks had been delivered to most children by September 2020.
- 3 Schools in some states offered students or their parents the opportunity to collect (non-digital) worksheets or learning materials from school, or teachers delivered them to students’ homes – about a third of all children had some contact with schools or teachers in this way (*ibid.*).

However, initiatives taken by the state were from ‘very far away’, using media such as TV, radio and so forth. For example, Himachal Pradesh ran a ‘very consistent phone based sending of messages every day’. While there is not ‘a very good measurement of how much of it landed on the ground’, in all likelihood it was limited. Bihar ran a TV show ‘continuously’, but ‘when we asked people at the ground level, not very many people were watching that show’ (*ibid.*). State-run national TV channel Doordarshan, was also running educational programmes – they, too, were a ‘flop show’ (KII). A survey of 15 states found that only 1 per cent of rural children and 8 per cent of urban ones regularly watched them (SCHOOL Team 2021).

Emphasis on foundational learning and numeracy in the New Education Policy

A salient feature of the New Education Policy (2020) is its emphasis on foundational learning and numeracy. The policy proposes universal attainment of foundational skills of grade 3 students by 2025. It appears that the mission of ensuring children attain foundational learning and numeracy is being taken seriously (Chavan 2023). There is increased focus on strengthening the early childhood education component of the government's Integrated Child Development Services early childhood development programme and foundational learning in grades 1 and 2 (KII).

One of the innovative ways to address learning disruptions caused by Covid-19 has been to involve mothers of young children with some years of schooling in foundational learning programmes (KII). In the state of Maharashtra, this has been scaled up to be part of the foundational learning and numeracy strategy.

However, there appears to be less emphasis on 'catch-up' programmes for older children. Delhi is an exception. The government carried out programmes for children attending later primary grades and upper-primary grades in government schools, though evidence of their effectiveness is limited (KII). Box 1 shows an example from Tamil Nadu.

Box 1: Illam Tedi Kalvi ('Education on the Doorstep')

One of the largest remedial instruction programmes in the country to help students cope with learning loss because of prolonged school closures is Illam Tedi Kalvi (translated as 'Education on the Doorstep'). The government initially piloted the programme in selected districts of Tamil Nadu when schools re-opened in November 2021. Subsequently, the programme was extended to the entire state in January 2022. Led by volunteers who were local residents with high school or college degrees (but who typically did not hold professional teaching qualifications), the programme provided instruction to 3.3 million students. Attended disproportionately by disadvantaged students, it was possibly one of the largest supplementary instruction programmes nationally and globally. Under this remedial programme, instructors could deviate from school curricula and 'teach at the right level', given that evidence from before the pandemic indicates that this is an effective means to help students bridge learning gaps. Statistical analysis indicates that test scores of students attending this programme increased by 0.17 and 0.09 standard deviations in maths and Tamil, respectively, over a period of 3–4 months (Singh, Romero and Muralidharan 2022)

Policy recommendations

- Now that school enrolment has increased, it is imperative to focus on sustaining this enrolment over time, particularly through regular school attendance and reduced absenteeism.
- Special efforts need to be made to reach out to severely disadvantaged children,¹ who continue to remain non-enrolled in a context of near-universal enrolment in primary education.
- While centralisation is needed to provide midday meals and other relief measures, day-to-day decisions to address the learning needs of children may be best left to schools. This includes the decision to close schools during a pandemic, which can be left to school management to take based on the number of cases of infection in the village or neighbourhood.

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¹ See, for example: <https://scroll.in/article/1044264/pushed-out-of-school-in-the-pandemic-they-now-stitch-shoes>

Further reading

ASER (2021) [Annual Status of Education Report \(Rural\) 2021](#)
ASER (2022) [Annual Status of Education Report \(Rural\) 2022](#)
Chavan, M. (2023) [‘Old Habits and New Norms’](#), *Ideas for India*
SCHOOL Team (2021) *Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education*
Singh, A.; Romero, M. and Muralidharan, K. (2022) [Covid-19 Learning Loss and Recovery: Panel Data Evidence from India](#), RISE Working Paper Series, 22/112 DOI: 10.35489/BSG-RISEWP_2022/112

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