

India needs a strategy to overcome the learning deficiencies induced by school closures due to Covid

Class Struggle for Students



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Budgetary response to the Covid-19 pandemic has focused on increased health expenditure while reducing educational expenditure. However, as India emerges from Covid-generated fog, unless we want to see a lost generation of students, we will need to plan a strategy for overcoming the learning deficiencies induced by school closures of the past year.

It is important to assess the extent of the educational disruption. Delhi Coronavirus Telephone Survey Wave 4 (DCVTS-4), conducted between December 23, 2020, and January 4, 2021, offers some insights. DCVTS-4 collected data on 1,530 children in the 6-14 years category on the extent of the disruptions in schooling and learning. Three findings from this survey are pertinent for designing effective remedies.

First, it found that about 8% of the children, a majority of whom were 6 or 7, were unable to enrol due to schools being closed. While public discourse has been concerned about dropping out, delayed enrolment has received little attention. When schools reopen, these children would be in between schools. How should their admissions be handled?

Following the 'no-detention' policy articulated in the Right to Educa-

tion Act, should they be enrolled into grades they would have attended normally had there been no pandemic in 2020? Or should they be held back in grades they would have enrolled at the beginning of the academic year 2020?

Whatever option is chosen, appropriate attention must be given to this group of children to cope with the learning disruption they faced during the pandemic. Of special concern are young children, given that scientific research highlights the foundational and/or long-term importance of early years of schooling for the overall development of the child.

Second, DCVTS-4 found that even in a relatively prosperous region like Delhi-NCR (National Capital Region), about 18% of children received no educational inputs from the school. Private tutoring filled the niche for a small percent. But about 12% of students still did not have access either to the resources provided by the school or private tuitions to help with formal learning.

Writing on the Screen

While schools made an effort to provide blended learning through a variety of teaching methods — including live online classes taught by school teachers (63%), providing recorded lectures or online educational/learning videos by teachers (69%), provision of learning materials to students (68%) and assessing them through homework, assignments or projects (73%) — there are substantial socioeconomic inequalities in students receiving any inputs from school with 47% of the poorest children being left out.

Third, digital inequality — both in the schools children attend and in households' internet and device access — has meant that access to onli-



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Still Pottering about

ne learning is mediated through the socioeconomic background of children. In the absence of formal face-to-face teaching, live online instruction by teachers using various digital platforms is, perhaps, the best substitute. However, substantial inequality in access to online learning has meant that urban children (75%) and those from rich households (71%) were more likely to have participated in this form of remote learning than rural children (55%) and from poor households (55%).

Lack of access to a device is the most commonly cited reason for not participating in online learning. The difference between government and private schools in providing online instruction appears muted in Delhi-NCR, particularly when compared to the urban-rural divide. But this may not be representative of a nationwide trend.

As schools reopen, instead of business as usual, it may make sense to start with intensive remedial classes, particularly in rural areas. Rather than focusing on the completion of the syllabus, it may be more beneficial, particularly for children in the 6-14 age group, to gain mastery over age-appropriate foundational skills such as reading and arithmetic.

The silver lining in this cloud may be that this short-term, intensive focus on foundational skills may allow us to bridge inequalities that have plagued our pre-pandemic schools.

A Lesson Learnt

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys have shown that a significant proportion of children lack basic reading and arithmetic skills. The unprecedented situation created by the pandemic can, thus, be used as an opportunity to address this learning crisis in the country, ensuring 'learning for all'.

There is prior evidence that intensive interventions, such as those done by the educational NGO Pratham, can substantially improve learning outcomes. It may make sense to make use of this crisis to improve our learning outcomes by starting with intensive programmes designed to create a level playing field. This may require increases in educational expenditure, an issue not recognised by the current budget.

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