

# Parental Engagement in Early Childhood Education During COVID-19: Learning from Structured Tech and Teacher Support Programs in Urban Maharashtra

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Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is one of the most important stages of schooling which has been recognized for its benefits to children across their lifetimes and target 4.2 of the SDG aims at ensuring quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education to all the boys and girls by 2030. A rich body of recent evidence shows that children who access high-quality early childhood education (ECE), along with nutrition and health in early childhood, show gains in cognitive and socio-emotional development and foundational learning (UNICEF, 2012), which increases their future learning (Kaul, 2016) and earning capabilities (Gertler, et al., 2014). Despite the continued discussion on the importance of ECE and its critical role in cognitive development of children, there have been limited efforts around the world to revive and maintain ECE delivery during COVID-19 induced school closures. This has especially been lacking in lower income countries like India, where revival efforts remained limited/sporadic at best. This paper contributes to this nascent evidence present on the impact of the pandemic on the pre-primary attending children in the low-income setting in India.

The shift to remote-learning methods has required parents to become the primary educators of their children almost overnight. This has been especially difficult in limited resource environments. Even prior to the pandemic, disadvantaged households faced several constraints in accessing and prioritising ECE. Parental engagement is likely to be determined by the perceptions of parents about the importance of engaging with their children's education, which itself will be dependent on the knowledge they have about how their engagement might influence the learning and development of their children. The cognitive capability of parents to support their children's education might also determine the quality of parental engagement (Mani, et al., 2013). Another associated barrier could be knowledge about methods to effectively engage and facilitate children's learning (Taylor & Wright, 2019; Dighe & Seiden, 2020), and in the context of remote learning, low self-efficacy about using technology (Povey, et al., 2016).

While there has been growing evidence on the experiences of disadvantaged households and teachers in primary schools, experiences of parents and teachers engaging in ECE during the school closures remains limited. In this context, we studied the delivery of ECE in two types of schools in Mumbai and Pune, both serving disadvantaged households -- a) Balwadis, which are dedicated ECE centres in Mumbai that are run by NGOs through a Public-Private-Partnership model with the municipal corporation of Mumbai, and b) Pre-schools of Akanksha Foundation, which is running several schools in Mumbai and Pune for low-income households, also in partnership with municipal corporations. In response to the pandemic, both types of schools initiated a structured “low-tech” programme for parents called E-paathshala, in partnership with Rocket Learning that provides structured and age-appropriate content for 3–8-year-olds in the form of bite-sized videos. These are sent through school-level WhatsApp groups that include teachers and parents.

We surveyed 676 parents and 58 teachers from these schools from April-June 2021 to understand their experiences in continuing teaching and learning, and access and engagement to E-paathshala. Surveys captured social and economic characteristics of households before and during COVID-19, details about education of all children residing in households, and parent and child engagement in ECE. Additionally, open-ended questions were asked about reasons for high and low parental engagement in ECE, experiences with digital education and with the structured tech program. In interviews with teachers, we asked questions regarding their experience of teaching and learning through digital modes and with the structured tech program, and practices they adopted for engaging parents as educators during COVID-19. Using a multivariate regression model, we measured the parent and child engagement levels during the pandemic.

We found that for those who could access the E-paathshala programme, it was associated with higher engagement levels (time spent on educational activities in the previous weeks/months). Having structured teacher and non-educational support in addition to the tech programme (provided in Akanksha foundation schools) was associated with even better outcomes. Teachers corroborated this and also stated that the digital program has helped them significantly by reducing the burden of content creation and curation. It was also found that the parents who had access to structured teacher and non-educational support in addition to the tech programme were more likely to report that they would continue to engage in ECE activities with their child when schools reopen, or if the content stops being sent to them. We also found that with the shift to digital education, class sizes by enrollment and regular attendance fell considerably. Access to ECE remained limited for those who did not have adequate devices or connectivity and who were unable to invest in acquiring learning materials.

Given the need to improve parental engagement in ECE even beyond school closures, it is critical to understand the barriers inhibiting access and engagement. There is an urgent need to understand how parents engage in their child’s education, and learn about the resources they might need to support them. Alleviating barriers of parental engagement has the potential to not just help in improving learning abilities and school readiness of the child (Nokali et al 2010) but also with mental health, social behaviour, and self-esteem in the long-run (Nokali, et al., 2010; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Jeynes, 2003). This is only possible if efforts are made to understand the resources and context of parents and children in their homes.