

The Impact of the Pandemic on Children in Public Schools from Low-income Households

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Around 300 million school-going children in India have been affected by the pandemic induced school closures. While the government has taken several measures for its schools, the negative impact on children from socio-economically disadvantaged sections, studying in private schools in cities remains a concern. In this paper, we study the experiences of children from low-income households studying in government schools and private schools from data collected via telephonic surveys between July to October 2020 with over 350 parents (sharing experiences for over 650 children). We differentiate between those attending on their own accord versus those studying under a nationally mandated policy that provides them free schooling (under Section 12.1.c of Right to Education (RTE) Act). To contextualize these experiences, we also interview teachers (30). In contrast to other studies located in rural settings, our study is located in one of India's largest cities, Ahmedabad in which over 80% of children are estimated to be studying in private schools.

While sharing of worksheets through WhatsApp remained the dominant mode of instruction and many reported limited access to teachers, more than 30% of children had not engaged in any formal schooling activities even 5-7 months after school closures (government schools: 26%, private schools 26%, RTE private schools: 22%). Children studying in RTE private schools were more likely to be engaging in online synchronous classes (36%) compared to those in government schools (22%) and private schools (32%), and government school goers reported much higher likelihood of receiving learning material and support from teachers at home. In the face of pressure from budget schools to pay fees amid debilitating job and income losses, many parents reported considering shifting to cheaper private schools, or government schools. However, the refusal to pay fees was reportedly met with harsh reactions from schools that penalised parents by withholding report-cards and 'school leaving certificates'.

While teachers from government schools faced the additional workload of conducting information campaigns, surveys, and relief work, those from private schools faced the increased risks of being laid off amid schools struggling to remain operational. The latter were sympathetic to the plight of parents, but also expressed the necessity of demanding fees to remain operational, not face salary delays, and facilitate better investments into training and resources for online teaching (which

government school teachers had significantly better access to). Government school teachers expressed different concerns - working “double shifts”; getting limited time to teach due to administrative responsibilities; being “pushed” to work on the frontline without adequate consultation about their fears; all this while facing the continued low public perception about them. Expectedly, experiences of elite school teachers (and their students) stood in extreme contrast, with substantially better access to devices and internet, and the ability to allocate more time for planning, training, and teaching.

Pointing to the deepening of existing inequalities, our study raises significant concerns about the resilience of private schools to respond in times of adversity.