The pandemic's blow to school children

Though Covid has severely impacted education, a recent study shows that many creative solutions have also emerged

SURESH BHAGAVATULA/SHUBH SAMTANI

I miss the physical experience of being in school, meeting my friends and learning together. I will never trouble my parents from going to school ever again", said a student from a government school in Telengana. "We are hungry to learn and improve the quality of our lives. The closure of schools is taking our dreams away", said another girl student from a foster home in Karnataka.

Many experiences like these have been captured in one of the most comprehensive research reports on the impact to the right of education for children in India during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Xth Grade student from The International School of Bangalore (TISB), Shubh Samtani, guided by Dr. Suresh Bhagavatula from IIM Bangalore conducted this research over the course of the last six months. Shubh, a 15-year old, is co-founder of 0Gravity, a free coding club movement for underprivileged that has imparted applied computer science training to over 1,000 children globally. As 0Gravity coding clubs shut down due to Covid, and with his own school go-

ing online, he realised the deep impact of this pandemic to the continuity of education for children. So the study reached out to different stakeholders in education and children to hear the challenges and framing recommendations to address the gaps.

The research integrated data and statistical models for census and demographics of children in India by a range of factors, including age and family income level with qualitative assessment of policies, Right to Education (RTE) Act, programmes and themes captured through the interviews.

In 2009, India passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act, making education a fundamental right, although for every 100 children only 32 children finish their education age-appropriately.

Virtual schism widens

The report highlights that the Covid disruption has widened the schism for access of education significantly in the virtual world.

A country with a population of 1.35 billion, only 20 per cent of families with children have access to the Internet, and only 11 per cent of households possess any type of

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computer. The shutdown of schools across the country due to the pandemic has been nothing less than disastrous in providing continuous education to children. The problem is even more exacerbated in rural India, where less than 15 per cent of families have access to the Internet.

The report further mentions that due to the closure of schools, many children have been isolated from their friends, and have not been able to visit them due to the lockdown restrictions and safety concerns. This is leading to adverse psy-

chological effects like feelings of isolation and loneliness, and even depression.

For many underprivileged children, going to school is a way out of child labour. Due to the pandemic, millions of families have lost their stable livelihoods, and many parents have been forced to make their children work. "Out-of-school children have already started filling jobs left vacant by the migrant laborer exodus," said Ramji Raghavan of Agastya Organisation.

The report also highlights how children rely on schools to provide them with regular meals, which has now been disrupted due to shut down of schools impacting their growth and development. This also means that the poorer households are spending a more significant proportion of their income on food, which is further decreasing their ability to pay for other necessities like rent or water.

Creative solutions

On the positive side, the research report has captured the creative solutions that millions of teaching and student communities have adopted across the country to overcome the challenges of lack of computer

and internet infrastructure for online learning. These solutions include smartphone sharing, usage of WhatsApp for asynchronous learning, distribution of indoor play kits for underprivileged children and even delivering learning classes via loudspeakers to maintain social distancing for children at home.

The report welcomes many of the recommendations of the recently released National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, though it does not address children's immediate education needs and significant risks exist in the execution.

The study addresses structural issues of India's educational system, such as the need for greater contribution of India's GDP towards education, faster implementation of the programmes from the recently approved NEP 2020, upskilling of teachers to be trained to deliver online classes, and providing children free online connectivity and portable devices to maintain the right to education of our children as the country grapples with the pandemic and its aftermath.

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