

GAPS IN LEARNING: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON RURAL STUDENTS AND THE PANDEMIC

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

In a year of severe disruption for schools caused by the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, [students in rural areas have received only marginal assistance](#) in the form of structured learning materials from teachers, and have had to rely more on parents and siblings to study at home. This unsettling finding by the [Annual Status of Education Report 2020](#) should prompt the Centre and the State governments to plan remedial measures for the future, when it will be safe again for students to return to the classroom. In the interim, they must work with schools to make remote learning possible. The ASER 2020 survey covering 26 States and four Union Territories has come up with striking findings, including one of a shift in enrolments from private schools to government institutions, of about five percentage points over 2018, ranging from class one to higher secondary levels. Also, with the suspension of physical classes since the lockdown in March, there is a marked rise in students not being enrolled, either because they dropped out, or because it was not possible to get admitted. It must also concern governments that the digital divide stands out starkly once again: the survey found 43.6% of students in government schools without access to a smartphone, while 67.3% of those who received learning materials in these institutions got them over WhatsApp, underscoring the role played by gadgets and connectivity. On the other hand, only half the children got help with studies at home, a third got materials from teachers, and nearly 60% used textbooks.

The ASER survey provides data that could facilitate intervention by the education system in some respects, even if, going forward, schools opt for a hybrid solution of partial reopening and online learning. Expanding availability of textbooks to all, including those who dropped out or are waiting to be formally admitted, will help parents and siblings aid learning. Bridging the divide on educational aids, now including smartphones, will enable transmission of learning materials, and personal tutorial sessions. Beyond these basics, however, the education system could creatively use opportunities during the current year to broaden learning. Students could use the safety of the open countryside to learn, under guidance from teachers, a host of topics by doing things themselves. This is particularly feasible for lower classes, where observational learning creates a strong foundation. Educational video, which has helped thousands, can advance learning even beyond the pandemic, using talented teacher-communicators. States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala have already hosted curriculum-based video lessons on the Internet, after beaming them on television. It will take out-of-the-box thinking during the pandemic to come up with interventions that are a substitute for traditional methods and prevent 2020 becoming a zero year, as parents everywhere remain wary of sending children to school.

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