

# The Covid Lockdown and School Closures in India

Education for All. Inclusive Education Benefits All Children

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*Several studies over the last year have shown how the adverse effects of the COVID pandemic and school closures on the education of children in India. The Annual status of Education Report 2020 (ASER) highlighted the limited access to online education for both rural and urban children, with poor access to smartphones.*

*There was poor access to other learning materials as well, particularly in the children of first generation learners, with only 23% having access to these materials as compared to 49% of other children.*

*So also the SCHOOLS study, by Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera, found only 31% of children studying regularly online in cities, and 15% in villages.*

*The UNICEF rapid assessment of learning during school closures in the context of COVID also showed the poor penetration of digital learning: many students did not have access to mobile phones. Even where students had access to devices, the awareness on their use for remote learning was low. 40 % of respondents did not use any form of remote learning in 6 months.*

This lack of access to digital learning and other resources contributed to other dismal findings. Most studies have shown actual regression in learning levels, not just a failure to advance in learning as expected each year. Even prior to the pandemic, primary school children have low levels of learning - for example Std 4 children fail to read simple sentence or do simple sums. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic. 60-70% of children who are now in standard 5, were in year 3 when the lockdown began and are likely to be at Y1/ Y2 levels of education.

Experts have given various suggestions as how to overcome this learning loss. All are agreed that if teachers merely teach the syllabus of the class in which the child is placed, the child will not be able to learn. Nor is this a matter of going over the previous year’s syllabus. The child will be unable to cope, and this will lead to dropouts. The child also internalises his failures. A young girl of about 10 who was selling flowers house to house in

Tamil Nadu, said sadly that before the lockdown she could read English, but that she had forgotten it. She did not plan to go back to school as she felt she could not study. She is not aware that this is not her personal deficiency; it is a result of a systemic failure to provide her educational support.

How do teachers now manage the classrooms? They face a situation where learning levels in foundational aspects of language and maths now vary widely in children of the same age group. This is where some of the skills in teaching children with disabilities play a vital role.

In preparing schools for inclusive education teachers are taught to make individual education plans and teach the child at his own level. They learn to skills of managing classes with learners at varying levels of learning. This training will help the teacher manage his entire class. Classroom diversity is often considered in relation to demography – gender, linguistic, caste or socioeconomic groups, but diversity is also that of disability, interests, abilities learning levels and learning styles,. Inclusive education is about making the school environment responsive to these varying needs.

Training in inclusive education helps the teacher assess the child's strengths and plan teaching based on his / her strengths. Learning how to make an individual education plan will have a positive impact on the learning of all children with and without disabilities. It is not just children with disabilities who need different teaching techniques because of visual or hearing or physical impairments.

Children without disabilities too have different learning styles- visual/ auditory/ print/ kinaesthetic etc. If a teacher knows how to teach a child with visual impairment, he will be able to help a child whose learning style is more auditory. Many of us who have gone into higher education may have reflected on our own learning styles as compared to our colleagues- do we prefer to learn alone or in groups? Do we learn better from a text book or from a lecture? Do we discuss things with our peers or write out answers? We may have developed this insight on our own learning styles only at a higher level of education. The teacher trained in inclusive education is able to assess the learning style of his students and cater to these. Teachers learn to develop lesson plans with a combination of teaching styles. They learn to engage the entire class using visual, storytelling and activities, which incorporate the most common learning styles (auditory, visual and kinaesthetic). This also creates a welcoming, friendly classroom atmosphere which is not threatening or discouraging. The classroom becomes more participatory, includes group activities and the purpose or relevance of the lesson is more clear to the students.

Other skills in inclusive education include different methods in assessment, with flexibility in answering or demonstrating knowledge. It builds from the known to the unknown, also based on the child's home or local environment.

The government of Tripura state, India, initiated a programme, Saksham Tripura at the beginning of 2020, to improve the education of children in the state, including children with disabilities.

Though of course, the pandemic caused much delay in implementation, mainstream teachers in over 400 government schools are being trained in various pedagogical skill for the support of children with disabilities in inclusive education. This will stand the teachers in good stead as schools reopen and they are faced with such an unexpected diversity in the

classroom of children at different levels of learning. This approach will benefit all the children in the state. It is an approach which deserves larger study, replication and implementation.

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