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Parental involvement in children's learning in India during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This study examines parental involvement in children's education in India during COVID-19 school closures, focusing on forms of support and socio-economic disparities. Using secondary data analysis, it identifies four key roles parents played: providing digital devices, enrolling children in private tuition, offering guided learning support, and liaising with teachers.

Many parents purchased smartphones and internet data packs to enable online learning, though access remained unequal, favoring urban, higher-income households. Private tuition served as a significant coping strategy, with enrollment rising across socio-economic groups, though disparities persisted. Parental engagement in children's learning, such as setting up study spaces and assisting with activities, was more prevalent in households with higher income and education levels. Interaction with teachers also mirrored these socio-economic divides.

This research provides critical insights into how socio-economic disparities shaped educational access during the pandemic and highlights the need for targeted policies to address these inequalities and build resilience for future disruptions to schooling.

Keywords

Parental involvement
COVID-19 education
School closures
Digital divide
Socio-economic disparities
Private tuition
Online learning
Educational access
Learning support
Parental engagement

Introduction

Parental involvement in children's education rose substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, this did not receive immediate attention with initial research around the COVID-19 pandemic focusing mainly on its health implications (Ciotti et al., 2020; Yuki et al., 2020). With school closures across the world, affecting an estimated 1.6 billion learners, there was a rise in research that sought to understand how the pandemic was affecting education (Daniel, 2020; Schleicher, 2020; Banerji and Wadhwa, 2023). As education delivery moved online, a large body of literature emerged on how digital access affected learning during the pandemic (Vyas, 2020; Azubuike et al., 2021; Cheshmehzangi et al., 2023).

However, viewing learning during the pandemic only in terms of digital content accessed is a limited conceptualisation of the varied ways through which children learnt during this time, such as private tuition and parental-driven learning at home. Mishra et al. (2020) argue that with schools closed, the role of teachers became less central to the delivery of education as learning became more self-directed. As a result, parental involvement had a considerable influence on how children experienced and accessed education.

India had the second longest school closure in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, with schools shut for over 500 days (Varma and Mishra, 2023), in stark contrast to countries such as Iceland and Switzerland where schools were shut for less than 50 days (UNESCO, 2022). Much literature on education during the pandemic focused on children's access to digital devices and the internet, and the implicit role of parents in enabling such access (Vyas, 2020; Vernekar et al., 2022; Vyas and Taneja, 2022). For instance, Vyas' (2020) study indicates that three in four parents struggled with challenges of limited internet access and

low internet speed in facilitating their children's access to education. Similarly, the SCHOOL report highlighted the challenges of internet access for children in accessing education across urban and rural India (The SCHOOL team, 2021).

Consequently, one of the dominant narratives relating to educational access and learning during the pandemic was whether there was digital 'inclusion' or 'exclusion', where inclusion was viewed as access to digital devices and the internet, while exclusion was viewed as the lack of such access (UNICEF India, 2020; Dhaygude et al., 2022; Banerji and Wadhwa, 2023). This article offers new insights on parental involvement in their children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic, by going beyond the binaries of digital 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' and exploring the different ways in which parents in India attempted to facilitate educational access and learning for their children during school closures, and how this support differed based on socio-economic characteristics. There are two key research questions it aims to answer:

- What were the different ways in which parents in India supported educational access and learning for their children, while schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did this support differ based on socio-economic characteristics, such as education and income level?

This article uses secondary data to examine the different ways in which parental involvement enabled educational access and learning for children in India, while schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is structured as follows. First, it provides an overview of the methodological approach. Second, it outlines and discusses key findings emerging from the analysis. Third, it provides a summary of the findings. Fourth, it outlines the limitations of this study. Lastly, it offers concluding remarks

on the implications of this research for research and practice.

Methodology

This article uses secondary data analysis to examine how parental involvement facilitated educational access and learning during COVID-19 induced school closures in India. In answering the research questions, this article followed a four-step process. First, a set of inclusion criteria was established (Logan, 2020). The three criteria were: 1) Research that focuses on education of school going children in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2) where data was collected between May 2020 and October 2021, when schools were closed in India and, 3) which implicitly or explicitly highlights forms of parental involvement in children's education during the pandemic.

Second, relevant research studies were identified based on the inclusion criteria (Brewer, 2012). The inclusion criteria helped in narrowing down research studies which specifically looked at educational experiences of school going children in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role that parents played in their children's education. Studies that met all these criteria were included for the analysis. This included a combination of national-level studies, where data was collected across multiple Indian states, as well as state-specific studies, where data was collected from a single state. A list of these studies is provided in Appendix 1.

Third, the collected evidence was analysed to understand major themes and patterns emerging from the data (Logan, 2020). In analysing and presenting the data, existing figures and tables were used directly from the published studies and reports. In addition to the papers identified for the analysis, this article also drew upon pre-pandemic global and Indian literature to discuss the findings.

There are three advantages of using this methodological approach. One, it offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research questions by integrating data from different and varied sources (Cheng and Phillips, 2014). Two, it offers an opportunity to critically reinterpret data by linking it with theoretical frameworks and comparing it with other studies on the same topic (Johnston, 2014). Three, it allows flexibility in addressing new research questions, which were not the original focus of research studies included in the analysis (Vartanian, 2010).

Findings and Discussion

This section outlines and discusses the key findings emerging from the analysis. The findings are divided into four categories or forms of parental support in enabling educational access and learning for their children. These include facilitating access to digital devices and the internet, enrolling children in private tuition, offering guided learning support, and liaising with teachers. These categories emerged from an analysis of selected studies on education during the pandemic, accompanied by a review of evidence on parental involvement prior to the pandemic. It is important to highlight that all these forms of parental support existed prior to the pandemic but acquired greater prominence as coping strategies to reduce learning deprivation, when schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

Facilitating access to digital devices and the internet

One of the main ways in which parents in India attempted to support their children's learning during the pandemic was by

facilitating access to digital devices, and the internet. According to a study based in rural India, 28% households purchased smartphones during the pandemic, to support their children's education (ASER, 2021). A study set in urban India had similar findings, with 24% households reporting purchase of smartphones for education (Vernekar et al., 2022). Along with purchasing digital devices, evidence indicates that parents also invested in internet connections/data packs to enable access to online learning (Pattnaik et al., 2023). However, access to the internet was higher in privileged families and in urban areas (LIRNEasia and ICRIER, 2021).

Government schools in India are increasingly attended by children from more disadvantaged households, compared to those attending private schools (Bagde et al., 2022). Despite being economically disadvantaged, a larger percentage of government school parents (34%) bought a smartphone for their child's education, compared to private school parents (29%) during the pandemic, as indicated in Figure 1 below (ASER, 2021). However, overall access to smartphones for government school children (64%) remained lower than private school children (79%), indicating previously existing advantages of private school children in terms of digital access. In India, the education level of parents is linked closely with income, with higher education levels corresponding with higher income levels (Shukla and Mishra, 2020). Interestingly, ASER (2021) suggests that a similar proportion of parents across different education levels¹ (low, medium and high) in rural India purchased a new smartphone for their children's education, during the pandemic, as displayed in Figure 2. This indicates that even amidst the economic reper-

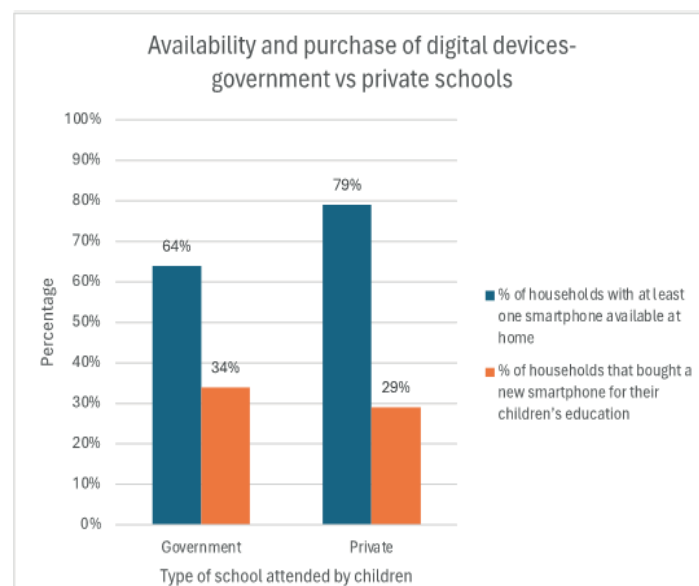


FIGURE 1: AVAILABILITY AND PURCHASE OF DIGITAL DEVICES, BASED ON ASER (2021, P. 28)

cussions of the pandemic, disadvantaged families in India chose to invest in a smartphone to ensure educational continuity for their children. However, the overall availability of smartphones remained highest in households with high education levels (ASER, 2021).

When learning moved online due to school closures, parents across different income and educational levels attempted to facilitate educational access for their children by purchasing smartphones. However, access to digital devices was not enough in enabling access to learning. Only 27% children reported that they were able to access a smartphone for their studies at all times, while the rest were unable to access it at all

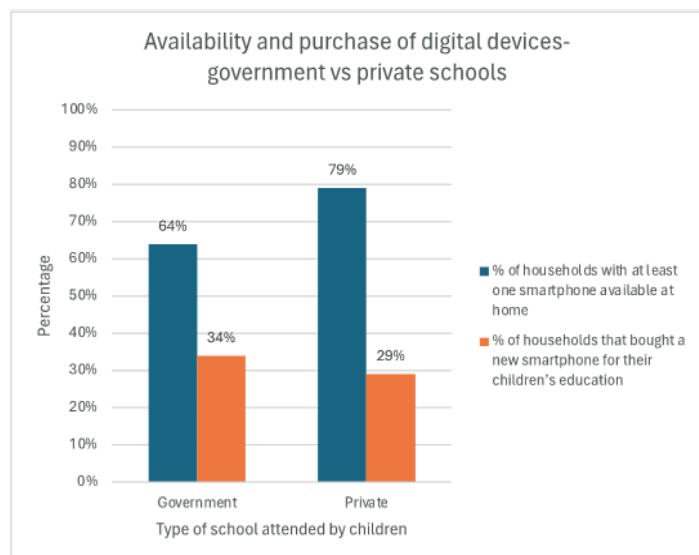


FIGURE 2: AVAILABILITY AND PURCHASE OF SMARTPHONES ACROSS EDUCATION LEVELS, BASED ON ASER (2021, P. 28)

or only on a few occasions (ASER, 2021). Evidence indicates that limited access to digital devices for children was due to insufficient number of devices in low-income households, and where usage was often prioritised for working adults (The SCHOOL team, 2021).

Further, low internet access and connection speed hindered children from regularly accessing online classes in rural as well as urban India (Kulkarni, 2020; Vyas, 2020; Vyas and Taneja, 2022). In one report, 75% parents cited internet related issues as challenges in accessing online education during the pandemic (Vyas, 2020). Data relating to these challenges is presented in Table 1 below. In addition, children in rural areas were 24% more likely to face internet issues compared to those in urban areas (UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, girls were 30% less likely to have access to digital devices within the household, compared to boys (Ghatak et al., 2020).

Challenge	Percentage
Did not have the right device/ had to share with family members	44
Data pack was too expensive	35
Did not have internet access	34

TABLE 1: CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILDREN IN ACCESSING DIGITAL EDUCATION, BASED ON VYAS AND TANEJA (2022, P. 46)

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while parents across different income and education levels attempted to facilitate educational access through the purchase of smartphones, access continued to be greater in urban areas, in households with greater education levels and in households where children were enrolled in private schools. This indicates that existing inequalities across region, class and education levels constrained meaningful access to education during school closures.

Enrolling children in private tuition

While much literature on education during the pandemic focused on access to digital devices, the use of private tuition as a means of supplementary education received relatively less attention (Vyas, 2020; Cheshmehzangi et al., 2023). An analysis of

private tuition a form of parental support during the pandemic is relevant as research indicates that tuition served to reduce learning loss in certain parts of India (ASER, 2022).

During the pandemic, close to 40% children in rural India were enrolled in private tuition, a rise of over 30% from pre-pandemic numbers (ASER, 2021). The rise in private tuition to ensure learning continuity for children was not restricted to India. In the United States, one in five upper-income families reported hiring a tutor to support their child's education (Horowitz and Igielnik, 2020). However, in India, hiring private tutors was not restricted to upper-income families alone. 40% of children attending government schools, which are increasingly attended by the most economically disadvantaged families in India (Sahoo, 2016), were enrolled in private tuition during the pandemic, slightly more than children in private schools (ASER, 2021). One reason for high enrolment in private tuition within India could be affordability, with the average monthly cost in rural India less than GBP 3 (Sukumar, 2020).

School Type	Percentage of children enrolled in private tuition
Government School	40
Private School	39

TABLE 2: ENROLMENT IN PRIVATE TUITION BASED ON SCHOOL TYPE, BASED ON ASER (2021, P. 26)

Interestingly, the rise in enrolment in private tuition was the most for households with low parental education² (48%) while increasing the least for households with high parental education levels⁴ (20%), as shown in Table 3 (ASER, 2021).

Parent's Education Levels	Percentage increase in private tuition.
Low	48
Medium	34
High	20

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE INCREASE FROM PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS IN PRIVATE TUITION ENROLMENT, ACROSS DIFFERENT PARENTAL EDUCATION LEVELS, BASED ON ASER (2021, P. 26)

One potential explanation could be the fact that enrolment in private tuition was already higher in high education households before the pandemic began (ASER, 2018). At the same time, the significant rise in private tuition enrolment amongst children in households with low parental education can be viewed as an attempt by parents to reduce the impact of school closures and ensure learning continuity for their children during the pandemic. A different study, which covered urban and rural India, found that the proportion of lower caste³ children accessing tuition during the pandemic was less than half that of children from higher castes (Vyas and Taneja, 2022). While there is no pandemic specific data, pre-pandemic evidence suggests an urban-rural divide in access to private tuitions, with children in urban areas enjoying significantly greater access (MHRD, 2016). These findings reflect parents' lack of confidence in forms of digital learning that children were receiving through schools, an insight echoed by multiple studies, and the use of private tuition to fill this perceived gap (Vernekar et al., 2022; Vyas and Taneja, 2022). While enrolment in tuition rose across different

income and education levels during the pandemic, children in high-income households and with better educated parents were still more likely to have access to private tuition (ASER, 2021; Vyas and Taneja, 2022). This indicates that existing advantages enjoyed by economically and socially privileged households in India served to reduce the learning deprivation suffered by children in these households during the pandemic.

Guided learning support by parents

Globally, various studies reported a significant rise in parental involvement in their children’s education, when schools closed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bubb and Jones, 2020; Lawrence and Fakuade, 2021). According to a study set in urban India, 80% parents reported spending more time with their children on educational activities such as asking questions and revising concepts, during the pandemic as compared to pre-pandemic levels (India Today, 2020). However, the extent of learning support provided by parents during the pandemic was closely linked with their income and education levels.

According to a national survey of rural parents, 7% more children attending private schools received learning support from parents than those attending government schools (ASER, 2020). The level of learning support was also closely linked with the education level of parents – while 89% children in families with high parental education levels received learning support from parents, the figure for households with low education levels was 55% (ASER, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that the ASER report fails to clearly describe the form of learning support offered to children. Further, the lower percentage of parental support in low education households should not be interpreted as a lack of intent — other studies indicate that this could be due to limited availability of time as well as a lack of ‘formal’ knowledge (Roksa and Deutschlander, 2018; Elliott and Bachman, 2024)

Parent’s Education Levels	Percentage of children receiving learning support.
Low	55
Medium	77
High	89

TABLE 4: LEARNING SUPPORT BASED ON PARENTAL EDUCATION LEVELS, BASED ON ASER (2020, P. 19)

Vyas and Taneja’s (2022) study of private school parents breaks down learning support by parents into three specific forms – setting up a special space in the house for the child to learn, asking questions and ensuring that their child was involved in a learning activity of some form. In all these forms of support, high-income families⁵ were able to support their children more than low-income families, as presented in Table 5 below. While the findings above relate to explicit forms of learning support, it is important to highlight a more implicit form of support – availability of time for children to focus on education. For instance, in Shah’s (2020) study, 16% students reported having too much chore work as an obstacle to learning. Multiple studies indicate that children in poorer households had to spend more time on household chores or income-generating activities, limiting time available for learning (Vernekar et al., 2022; Vyas and Taneja, 2022). This demonstrates the need to look beyond issues of digital access while trying to understand the pandemic’s impact on learning and to instead, deeply examine the

Ways of support	Percentage of low-income households	Percentage of high-income households
Setup a special space in the house for the child to learn	26	50
Asked questions to the child based on what they had learnt	27	38
Ensured that the child was involved in some learning activity everyday	33	53

TABLE 5: LEARNING SUPPORT ACROSS LOW AND HIGH-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS, BASED ON VYAS AND TANEJA (2022, P. 44)

role of economic and social inequalities in hindering access to learning.

Liaising with teachers

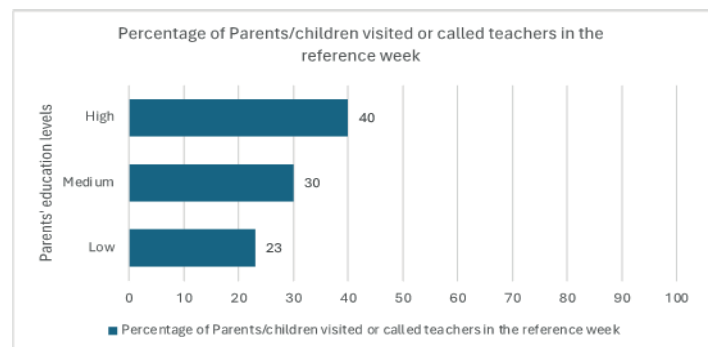
In Barge and Loges' (2003) conceptualisation of parental involvement, two key elements are supervision of learning and regular contact with teachers. While parental involvement in supervising learning increased during the pandemic, their role also extended to liaising with teachers to understand their child's progress (ASER, 2020). Similar with other forms of learning support, parents and children in high education households had greater contact with teachers, as indicated in Figure 3 below. This suggests that children whose parents could offer greater support at home were also those who engaged with teachers more. Further, private school parents and children were more likely to contact a teacher during school closures, than government school parents/children. This finding is consistent with global literature, which suggests that parental engagement with teachers is closely linked with socio-economic characteristics

FIGURE 3: CONTACT BETWEEN PARENTS/CHILDREN WITH TEACHERS, ACROSS EDUCATION LEVELS, BASED ON ASER (2020, P. 23)

(Jones and Palikara, 2023)

Summary

This article offers new insights on parental involvement in their children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic, by delineating the different ways in which parents in India supported educational access and learning for their children, while schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are four key forms in which parents supported educational access and learning. One, by purchasing smartphones to facilitate children's access to online classes. Two, by enrolling children in private tuition to ensure learning continuity, indicating the lack of confidence in online classes as the sole form of learning during the pandemic. Three, by engaging with children on their



learning and by setting up a separate learning space. Four, by liaising with teachers on their child's learning progress. While all of these are explicit forms of parental involvement in their child's learning, an implicit form of support was availability of time on education, which was limited in low-income families, where children had to spend more time on household chores or income-generating activities, limiting time available for learning.

Limitations

It must be acknowledged that the methodology applied by this article suffers from certain limitations. Firstly, there is inadequate information about the research design and sampling techniques used by some of the studies included in the analysis, which might affect the reliability of the findings (Johnston, 2014). Secondly, this approach fails to account for the contextual differences within states and regions in India. As a result, the report might be unable to capture the complexity of social factors and contexts that enable and constrain parental involvement in their child's education (Bryman, 2008). Thirdly, there are very few studies where the data is disaggregated based on socio-economic characteristics, such as income and parents' education levels. Thus, the report's reliance on a limited pool of evidence affects the validity of its findings. At the same time, the report offers new insights on parental involvement in their children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic in India and contributes towards a greater understanding of the ways in which parental support differed based on socio-economic characteristics.

Conclusion

Overall, the report highlights that the level of support that parents were able to offer was closely linked with their education and income level, with children in households with higher incomes and higher education levels more likely to receive learning support than those in more disadvantaged households. It is important to highlight that the lower parental support in disadvantaged households cannot be viewed as a lack of intent in such households, but rather reflects existing socio-economic disparities in India.

Firstly, while parents across different income and education levels attempted to facilitate educational access through the purchase of smartphones, digital access continued to be higher in more educated households, in urban areas and in households that were economically better off. This indicates that existing inequalities of class and region determined access to learning during the pandemic. Secondly, children's access to private tuition during the pandemic continued to be higher in high-income households and those with greater education levels, indicating that existing advantages enjoyed by economically and socially privileged households in India served to reduce the learning deprivation suffered by children in these households.

Thirdly, children in high-income households and those with greater education levels also received greater learning support from parents, such as availability of a space to learn or parents engaging directly with them on their learning. It is important to highlight that the lower levels of parental learning support within disadvantaged households should not be interpreted as a lack of intent. Rather, it should be viewed as resulting from constraints of time and limited prior experience with 'formal' education. Lastly, parents and children in higher education households had greater contact with teachers during school closures, suggesting that parental engagement with teachers is

closely linked with socio-economic characteristics, such as class and education levels.

This article highlights that existing disparities within India based on income, education and region affected the extent of parental support that children received in accessing education during the pandemic. This raises critical questions about the role of socio-economic inequalities in children's educational access and experiences and reveals the need for governments to provide more targeted educational support to disadvantaged children, especially during school closures. Lastly, there is a need to explore in greater detail how socio-economic disparities served to constraint parental involvement in education during the pandemic, and its implications for children's learning now. This could offer valuable insights to understand how large-scale disruptions to schooling affect educational inequality and contribute towards the development of policy measures that can address such inequalities.

Notes

1. In ASER (2021), low parental education refers to households where both parents have completed Grade five or less, medium parental education comprises households where either or both parents have completed between Grade six and Grade nine, high parental education refers to households where both parents have completed at least Grade nine.
2. In ASER (2021), low parental education refers to households where both parents have completed Grade five or less, medium parental education comprises households where either or both parents have completed between Grade six and Grade nine, high parental education refers to households where both parents have completed at least Grade nine.
3. Caste is a system of graded social inequality where individuals at the top of the caste system enjoy the most privileges and those at the bottom, enjoy the least.
4. In ASER (2021), low parental education refers to households where both parents have completed Grade five or less, medium parental education comprises households where either or both parents have completed between Grade six and Grade nine, high parental education refers to households where both parents have completed at least Grade nine.
5. In the study, high-income households refer to those earning more than INR 80,000 (GBP 762) per month while low-income households refer to those earning less than INR 20,000 (GBP 190 per month).

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