Learning from ASER 2020: Connecting evidence and action

Rukmini Banerji

Context

By September 2020, schools had already been closed for nearly six months. The first three months of the 2020 lockdown could be thought of as if they were summer holidays. But through the monsoon months of July, August and September, the gates of the school were locked and rain fell disconsolately on empty school roofs. It was clear even then that the situation would be fluid for some time to come. Almost a year later, we are more or less in the same situation. After 18 months of school closure, only now in August 2021, are school systems slowly considering how and when they should open.

The initial lockdown period was marked by uncertainty, fear and economic disruptions to lives and livelihoods. With a complete lockdown in place, perhaps for the first time in living memory, all adults and children remained at home or close to home for a protracted period. For many families, this was a period of intense hardship. Staying at home meant no income. However, it is also perhaps the case that the prolonged proximity forced families to think about how to deal with discontinuity in their children’s education.

It is well established that home factors are a major influence on student achievement. Research from India shows clearly that if family characteristics are controlled for, most differences in outcomes between private school children and government school children disappear. Family resources are strongly correlated with greater learning opportunities and support for children (choice of private school, enrollment in tuition classes, access to more learning materials, possible learning support at home). In India, these inequalities are deep and widespread, and over time have remained a chronic characteristic of the Indian social fabric. Given the prolonged period of school closure, have these inequalities across families led to even greater differences in terms of educational opportunities and outcomes?

Connecting the dots: Evidence and Action

ASER 2020 provides an insightful glimpse into family functioning during this time of crisis. The survey was conducted via phone and collected information from family members. ASER 2018 is the last nation-wide face to face household survey that was conducted in the ASER series, with coverage of close to 600 rural districts of India. For the 2020 survey, a representative sample of children was drawn from the ASER 2018 sampling frame. Hence, an all India picture emerges from the current study.

Digging deeper to understand how families coped with the crisis, we can turn to ASER 2020 data to tell us about which families were reached, what support children received, and whether learning material and content reached children? How were these patterns different for different kinds of families? This note aims to connect the dots between evidence and action. It highlights some of the key findings from the survey, describes some interventions that have been carried out in this period, and discusses possibilities for future action.

Reach

First, how were children reached? From the typical model of face-to-face instruction, education systems across the world moved to some form of technology assisted remote or distance education. In large parts of the global North, teachers quickly connected to students via online classes (synchronous and asynchronous). The urban elite schools in India were able to make this shift quite quickly. But for a major proportion of rural children and a sizeable chunk of the non-elite urban population, this was simply not possible. Lack of access to devices, issues with connectivity, inability to afford data were all common constraints. Large education systems were also not equipped for such a major change. While governments have succeeded in connecting their teachers to online portals and opportunities for remote training, connecting to the majority of children in any continuous way has been difficult, even in urban areas.

In the early days, some government school systems tried to establish continuous online instruction especially for higher grades, as though children were in classrooms - only now these were virtual classrooms. Others aimed to replicate familiar school processes like sending out worksheets – only now this was via WhatsApp to parents’ phones. However, these efforts were largely unsuccessful for most rural children. Even if one parent had a smart phone, the parent (and the smart phone) is
out at work during the day. Learning materials and assignments sent via WhatsApp are available to children only at night. If
there were several children in the family, the parent’s phone would be clogged with a bewildering array of materials for children.

ASER 2020 data however points to some interesting facts. Comparing household assets across years, it is clear that while the proportion of families who had television sets or motorized vehicles remained more or less the same between 2018 and 2020, this was not the case with ownership of smartphones. For households whose children are enrolled in government schools, the proportion with smartphones increased from 29.6% in 2018 to 56.4% by September 2020. For families with children enrolled in private schools, this figure went from 49.9% in 2018 to 74.2% in 2020. Whether this rise is a linear rise over time or whether this increase has been precipitated by the pandemic (or even more specifically whether smartphones were bought for supporting children’s education) is not clear. What is evident is that more households now have the opportunity to access learning resources for their children than before.

One of the questions asked in the ASER 2020 survey was directly linked to reach: How did children receive learning materials? (The survey was conducted in September 2020 and the week prior to the survey was the reference period). Only one third of all children surveyed reported receiving learning materials in the reference week. WhatsApp was the most common medium; 67% for government school children families and 87.2% for private school children reported receiving learning materials via their smart phones. However, there were other ways in which learning materials/activities were distributed and communicated. Two other common options were via phone calls (on basic phones) or visits (family members to school or teachers to home, where actual physical materials could be shared). Table 1 suggests that for families with lower access to smartphones or lower education levels, “reach” was achieved via these other means. While more details are needed to understand the underlying behavior patterns or practices, this fact points to possible compensatory strategies on the part of families and schools to counter lack of access to digital devices.

An example from the ground: In Pratham programs, especially where there had been a prior direct presence in the community, a systematic exercise was carried out in April 2020 to maximize “reach” and to create and reinforce social network structures where small groups could share resources with each other. First, Pratham teams made phone contact with at least one person in each village. With the help of prior knowledge and some help from the village contact, hamlets were mapped for that village. Then, Pratham teams tried to establish phone contact with someone in each neighbourhood or hamlet.

Finally, working with the hamlet-contact, a big push was made to get phone numbers of as many families in the hamlet who had children in primary school. This is an example of how reach can be maximized even during lockdown conditions.

By end of May 2020, Pratham teams “reached” more than 12,000 rural and urban communities and were able to send daily messages to over 200,000 contacts. Regardless of whether the family had a smartphone or a basic phone, a phone call was made to every contact number (usually by a person whom the family knew) for feedback and follow up at least once every two weeks.

Support:

ASER 2020 probed whether and how families helped children to study at home. Available data from the survey on parental education was categorized in the following way. The “low” education category included children in families where both parents had education levels of Std V or less. At the other end were children in families with “high” education levels - both parents had completed at least nine years of schooling. All other children’s families fell into the “medium” category. Using these categories, in the ASER 2020 sample, 22% children fall into the “low” parental education category, about 50% in the “medium” category and 27.6% in the “high” category. While there are wide variations across states, in 10 major states, the proportion of children
with “low” parental education is between 20-30% (Rajasthan is the only state where the percentage is higher than 30%). For all other states, “low” parental education is an issue for less than 1 out of every 5 children. Broadly speaking, close to 80% children in contemporary rural India have parents who have had at least 5 years of schooling.

If parents are more educated, do children receive more help at home? The answer from ASER 2020 is “yes”. At least that was the case six months into the COVID crisis. Close to 70% families reported helping children. Approximately 50% children with “low education” parents get help at home as compared to 89% children with “high education” parents. Younger children get more help than older children. A slightly higher percentage of private school children get family support as compared to government school children. Apart from parents, a significant fraction of respondents reported getting help from siblings, especially in families with “low” parental education.

A small study done in Pratham programs in the early days of the lockdown shows interesting family dynamics. With a small sample of families, Pratham teams explored who does what within the family as far as children’s learning support is concerned.

The broad learning from that exercise was that while the message (smartphone or regular phone) may come on the father’s phone, mothers or siblings are more likely to help the child with the learning task.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Overall</th>
<th>Who regularly does the activity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Village Youth</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
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**Content and activities:**

In the last year and a half, there have been extensive discussions about remote learning, digital content and the role of technology in school education. Much of this debate has centered on the potential and promise of what can be termed “high technology” (smartphones, apps, portals, online classes). The concern about the deepening of the digital divide is raised repeatedly in the media and among practitioners. While “edtech” may be the flavour of the moment, not enough has been done in the last eighteen months to look closely at how and to what end people are using the resources available to them, which are often “low tech”.

ASER 2020 investigated the availability of learning materials at home. A very important, yet rarely highlighted aspect of last year’s education experience in India was the fact that by September more than 80% children across rural India had textbooks for their current grade with them. State governments used different ways to get textbooks to children but overall 84% of government school children had their current grade textbooks as compared to 72% of private school children. Textbooks are familiar objects. They are portable and can be used by any children at any time. They can be taken to parents, older siblings or neighbours to ask for clarifications. In many cases, primary grade textbooks have sections like worksheets for children to use. In pre-COVID typical years, textbooks were often the only learning material that children had at home. It is also likely that family members may find it easier to help children with textbook tasks than with assignments or tasks received via WhatsApp.

ASER 2020 data on children’s engagement with activities points to two interesting trends. First, during the reference week (week prior to the survey in September 2020) about 30% of children did not do any learning activities. This figure is about the same for government school children and private school children. “No activity” children are also relatively more likely to be found in “low” education families (40% in these families, although surprisingly 30% children in “medium” education families and close to 20% in “high” education families also did no learning activity in the reference week). But across all types of families and schools, among those who did learning activities, a clear majority (60%) used textbooks.

In a one-time large scale phone survey with randomly sampled households, it is difficult to probe details of learning activities that are being sent via phone messages by schools. However, in Pratham programs some of these “deep dive” studies have been done.
Several lessons from the past year include the importance of on-going conversations and two-way communication (messages are sent and follow up phone calls are made for feedback). The continuous engagement leads to greater participation over time and more traction for learning activities in the family. The feedback calls have also proven to be very useful for modifying content (topic, task, language used, sequence, etc.) to make it more suitable for families to participate (“reaching at the right level”).

Looking ahead

ASER 2021 will be in the field in September, which will help in tracking changes over time. We will know a lot more about what families and schools are doing a year later to support children’s learning during school closure. We will hopefully see how these patterns have changed as families and schools have learned to cope with the crisis.

Whatever the path forward, there is no denying that parents and families will continue to play a central role. Family support must be leveraged by schools in a more systematic way. During the months of school closure, many educational activities have been done at home and in the neighbourhood. While effectiveness may be hard to measure, the effort has to be acknowledged, applauded and built on. In thinking ahead, home, neighbourhood and school has to be seen as a continuum in which each strand can supplement and strengthen the efforts of the other, keeping in mind that some families and children are more difficult to reach and to teach than others.

The pandemic has not gone away. There are threats of a third wave. But we now have well over a year of experience of what to do. Schools and families need to be ready to adapt to evolving contexts. Three contexts are possible: first, complete lockdown where no movement is allowed. In this scenario only remote connect is possible. Second, where restricted movement is feasible: teachers are coming to school but schools are not open for children. Third, when all movement restrictions are lifted and school are open for children. In any given location, the situation may move from one of these to another without notice. Locally, schools and families need to know what to do as the situation changes. “One size fits all” will not work. In any situation, alternative ways to reach the most disadvantaged have to be worked out.

The full impact of a year and a half of school closures will be properly understood only with the passage of time. For school systems that are accustomed to continuous face-to-face instruction and year on year progress from one grade to the next, the pandemic has been a big shock. Effective strategies that ensure learning for all are yet to emerge. The fact that there was a “learning crisis” even before the pandemic was acknowledged, but often not dealt with in practice even in pre-COVID times. The long period of school closure will be layered onto the pre-existing condition of unsatisfactory and widely varying learning levels. State after state is talking about remedial education and “catch up” programs. But is remedial action needed or is a deeper structural reform the need of the day? The New Education Policy 2020 has stressed the need for strong foundations. Perhaps this is the time to re-think the “what” and “how” of schooling and learning.