

Supporting young children in the time of COVID

Suman Bhattacharjea¹

The long-awaited National Education Policy (NEP) was finally released six months ago, in July 2020. On the subject of school education, it clearly outlines the importance of beginning at the beginning, with young children and foundational learning. These policy objectives are not new. The focus on the pre-primary stage began to gain momentum with the release of the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education in 2013. Likewise, the importance of ensuring foundational skills was recognised by national initiatives such as the Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat programme as early as 2014. While data from the last couple of large-scale ASER surveys (2016 and 2018) show a welcome uptick in children's foundational reading and arithmetic in early primary grades, especially among government school students, achieving the NEP's stated goal of ensuring that every child acquires foundational skills by 2025 will undoubtedly be further complicated by the consequences of COVID-19.

With schools closed since the period of national lockdown beginning in March last year, it is too soon to tell what the impact of the pandemic will be on school and pre-school enrollments. ASER 2020 data suggests that the largest impact may well be on the youngest children, at least in the short term. In stark contrast to the other age groups surveyed for ASER 2020, the proportion of young children not currently enrolled increased sharply in comparison with similar households surveyed two years ago in ASER 2018 (Table 1). Overall, among young children in the 5-8 age band, the proportion of children not enrolled anywhere increased by 4 percentage points over 2018 levels. Standing at 7.5% in 2020, this is more than double the figure of 3.6% obtained in 2018.

However, even within the age band of 5-8 years, the increase in the proportion of children not currently enrolled is highest among the 5-year-olds and diminishes steadily with age. Among 5-year-olds this proportion is 6.8 percentage points higher in 2020 than in 2018, but only 2.4 percentage points more among the 8-year-olds. This suggests that the children not currently enrolled anywhere are mainly those who had not yet obtained admission when the school shutdowns happened in March, rather than children who had been enrolled and then dropped out of school once the pandemic hit.

Table 1: Enrollment status of young children (age 5-8). Current status (2020) and percentage point change over 2018 levels.

Age	Not enrolled	Enrolled in:			Total
		Anganwadi	Pre-primary*	Primary**	
5	14.9	24.1	26.2	34.9	100
	<i>+6.8</i>	<i>-4.0</i>	<i>-4.2</i>	<i>+1.4</i>	<i>0.0</i>
6	7.9	5.6	15.2	71.3	100
	<i>+4.5</i>	<i>-2.0</i>	<i>-3.1</i>	<i>+0.5</i>	<i>0.0</i>
7	5.7	0.9	6.6	86.8	100
	<i>+3.9</i>	<i>-0.9</i>	<i>-1.5</i>	<i>-1.5</i>	<i>0.0</i>
8	3.9	0.4	2.0	93.8	100
	<i>+2.4</i>	<i>-0.3</i>	<i>-1.8</i>	<i>-0.3</i>	<i>0.0</i>
5-8	7.5	6.4	11.2	74.9	100
	<i>+4.0</i>	<i>-2.6</i>	<i>-3.3</i>	<i>+1.9</i>	<i>0.0</i>
6-10	5.3				
	<i>+3.5</i>				
11-14	3.9				
	<i>+0.7</i>				

For each age or age group in the table, numbers in the first row show ASER 2020 Wave 1 figures. Numbers in the row immediately below, in italics, show the percentage point change over ASER 2018 levels for comparable households.

* Refers to children enrolled in any pre-primary class, regardless of level (LKG, UKG, Nursery etc) or management type (government or private).

** Includes children enrolled in any primary school grade (Std I or higher, government or private school).

¹ Director of Research, ASER Centre

At the all-India level, these data show that the increase in young children not currently enrolled comes mainly from children who in a normal year would have been enrolled in some form of pre-school provision (Anganwadi or pre-primary class) rather than in primary school. For the country as a whole, school enrollments (Std I and above) have changed only marginally over 2018 levels for this age group. However, as Purnima Ramanujan and I wrote in the ASER 2018 report, states vary enormously with respect to what young children do, and national figures mask these enormous differences. For example, Table 2 below presents data for selected states regarding what 5-year-olds were doing in ASER 2020, as compared with 5-year-olds in comparable households in 2018. These data underline once again that for young children in particular, plans for the future will need to be tailored to individual state contexts. With the exception of Assam, data for every state shows an increase in the proportion of 5-year-olds not enrolled anywhere between 2018 and 2020. However, states like Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat that had very few 5-year-olds not enrolled anywhere in 2018, show enormous increases in this proportion in 2020; whereas in other states the increase over 2018 levels is far smaller.

Table 2: Enrollment status of 5-year-olds in selected states, 2018 and 2020

State	ASER 2018				ASER 2020			
	OOS*	Pre-primary**	School	Total	OOS*	Pre-primary**	School	Total
Madhya Pradesh	0.4	76.3	23.3	100	12.2	55.8	32.1	100
Rajasthan	0.6	90.5	8.9	100	14.0	68.6	17.4	100
Chhattisgarh	0.7	86.8	12.5	100	5.1	73.6	21.3	100
Maharashtra	0.9	65.1	34.0	100	11.5	68.3	20.3	100
Gujarat	1.3	51.5	47.2	100	24.0	29.9	46.2	100
Bihar	1.5	87.2	11.3	100	6.4	88.4	5.2	100
Andhra Pradesh	2.0	73.9	24.2	100	25.7	64.0	10.4	100
Telangana	2.7	69.0	28.3	100	16.5	40.4	43.0	100
Assam	4.3	67.2	28.5	100	3.9	56.5	39.6	100
Kerala	5.0	71.3	23.7	100	8.8	54.1	37.1	100
Uttar Pradesh	6.7	48.2	45.1	100	13.0	36.1	50.9	100
Karnataka	8.9	29.3	61.8	100	19.0	25.0	56.0	100
Odisha	11.5	54.1	34.5	100	15.5	55.2	29.3	100
Tamil Nadu	18.0	44.3	37.8	100	24.6	35.0	40.4	100
Total	8.1	58.5	33.5	100	14.9	50.3	34.9	100

* Not enrolled in any institution at the time of the survey

** Enrolled in any pre-primary class (eg: Nursery/LKG/UKG) in any institution (Anganwadi/school)

Getting children enrolled in pre-schools or schools is something that as a country we have many years of experience with and know how to do successfully. More worrisome is the fact that when they do finally enter a classroom after this long gap, children whose foundational skills were shaky prior to the lockdown may have forgotten much of what they had learned - a phenomenon known as 'learning loss'. Although much of the literature on learning loss comes from the Global North, two recent analyses based in South Asia are relevant here. A recent analysis of the consequences for children that are clearly visible even 4 years after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan show what could easily happen if action is not taken immediately.² Rukmini Banerji (2020) has examined 'learning loss' over summer vacations in our most populous state, Uttar Pradesh; and offers a path forward in terms of helping children to catch up quickly (see her piece in this report for a summary).³

² Andrabi, T., Daniels, B., Das, J. 2020. Human Capital Accumulation and Disasters: Evidence from the Pakistan Earthquake of 2005. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/039. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/039

³ Banerji, Rukmini. 2020. Learning "Loss" and Learning "Gain" in Primary School Years: What Do We Know from India That Can Help Us Think Forward in the COVID-19 Crisis? RISE Insight Note. https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/publications/20200723_RISE%20Insight%202020_19_Banerji_UP.pdf

The good news that ASER 2020 offers is that particularly in the case of young children, households increasingly have the resources with which to support their children's education. ASER 2020 data shows that parents in rural India are far more educated than before. For example, among children in the 5-8 age group, more than a third had both parents who had completed Std IX or higher. Even among children enrolled in government institutions (Anganwadi Centres or primary schools), who are often from socioeconomically disadvantaged households relative to those who attend private schools, more than three quarters had at least one parent who had studied beyond Std V (Table 2). Across the entire ASER 2020 sample, the data also reveals a huge jump in mobile phone ownership since 2018: 62% of households had at least one smartphone, up from 37% in ASER 2018. This means that many more families have the ability to access learning resources, whether shared by schools or from other sources.

Table 3: Children age 5-8 by enrollment status and parents' education level

Enrollment status	Parents' education level*			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
Not currently enrolled	22.2	46.0	31.8	100
Government Anganwadi, pre-primary or primary grade	24.2	51.1	24.7	100
Private pre-primary or primary grade	8.7	41.1	50.2	100
Total	18.7	47.3	34.0	100

* 'Low' parental education includes families where both parents have completed Std V or less (including those with no schooling). At the other end of the spectrum, the 'high' parental education category comprises families where both parents have completed at least Std IX. All other parents are in the 'medium' category where there are many possible combinations.

Involving parents and families in supporting young children's transition from home to preschool, and from pre-primary to primary school, has long been considered good practice in terms of ensuring a continuum of early learning environments and experiences for the child. One positive outcome of the school closures due to COVID-19 is that involving parents became a necessity. But ASER 2020 also shows that families did not wait for institutions to reach out. Regardless of whether schools got in touch with them, families invested time and effort to support their children's education. Overall, an enormous 80% of these young children received help at home, including more than two thirds of those who are not even enrolled currently (Table 3). Among children who received help, they were most often supported by their mothers (41%) or fathers (35%). Not surprisingly, the availability of learning support at home was higher for these young children than for older age groups, especially the help provided by mothers.

Table 4: Children age 5-8 by enrollment status and provision of learning support at home

Enrollment status	Does child receive learning support at home?			
	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
Not currently enrolled	67.4	31.9	0.7	100
Anganwadi	77.6	22.4	0.1	100
LKG/UKG	85.6	14.3	0.1	100
School	80.7	19.0	0.3	100
Total	80.1	19.6	0.3	100

Going forward, this is something that the education system must build upon. Despite the unfortunate and abrupt school closures that were a consequence of the pandemic, there is clear evidence that parents can and want to support their children's learning, regardless of where the child is enrolled, how much they themselves have studied, or whether the school reached out to them. This is a huge advantage that must not be squandered: on the contrary, it must be leveraged to make sure that children are able to overcome the consequences of the pandemic relatively quickly. Rather than returning to the belief that teaching-learning can take place only in classrooms, the experience of these last nine months can be built upon to create systematic mechanisms to help parents and educators communicate and collaborate, in order to build a solid early years foundation for all children.

