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Research Article

Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning Outcomes and Academic Performance

Dr. Astha Ahuja[1*]

[1*]Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Aryabhatta College University of Delhi, New Delhi, asthaahuja@aryabhattacollege.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented disruption to education systems, significantly reshaping access to learning, modes of instruction, and patterns of inequality. This study investigates the impact of COVID-19 on education in India, with particular emphasis on learning continuity, access to online education, enrolment dynamics, and digital disparities. Employing a descriptive research design with an analytical orientation, the study relies exclusively on secondary data sourced from nationally and internationally recognized surveys, indices, and policy reports. The findings reveal that educational disruption was both widespread and uneven. A substantial share of school-age children experienced prolonged disengagement from structured learning during school closures, while participation in live online classes remained confined to a limited segment of students. Digital access, especially the availability of smartphones at the household level, emerged as a critical determinant of learning continuity, with pronounced differences evident across school types and parental education levels. Vulnerable populations, including children from economically disadvantaged and migrant households, faced elevated risks of educational exclusion due to mobility constraints, limited digital resources, and weakened institutional support. Overall, the results indicate that the pandemic amplified pre-existing structural inequalities within the education system rather than producing uniform disruption. While emergency digital learning initiatives were indispensable, their effectiveness was constrained by infrastructural limitations, household readiness, and systemic capacity gaps. It highlights the importance of policy strategies that move beyond short-term learning recovery toward strengthening public education systems, narrowing digital inequalities, and enhancing resilience to future educational shocks.

Keywords: COVID-19; Impact on Education; Learning Disruption; Digital Inequality; School Enrolment

1.Introduction

Education is commonly regarded as one of the pillars of the social growth and economic development since it is one of the primary components in the human capital development and the survival of the society. Education has been one of the main concerns in India as an important instrument to national development that is reflected in various policy frameworks and national development plans where human resource development is their focal point of priority. However, at the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and the education system was interrupted in a way never seen before in all countries of the world. The first COVID-19 positive case was at the beginning of January 2020 in India, and the national lockdown in March 2020, which introduced the direct closure of schools, colleges, and universities.

The sudden termination of the face-to-face learning entailed a crisis in learning. Schools that were compelled to transition to the online educational format and distance learning in a few days. Even though online learning allowed continuing the learning process to a certain extent, this change was uncalculated and quite uneven, which essentially altered the nature of the teaching-learning process. To the majority of students especially those who work in the early childhood learning sector, schooling was downgraded to screen playing and in the process the students were not given the chance to experience the effect of being taught by teachers and other students, learning through practical exposure and socializing. The regular routines, exams and timetables of

the studies were also being impacted by the loss of the physical classroom thus casting a shadow on the progress of the studies of the students.

The identical tendencies were observed in the world and a significant number of students were affected because of a protracted lockdown in schools. It has been estimated that the closing cost them a lot in terms of learning, particularly in more fundamental skills, such as literacy and numeracy (Azevedo et al., 2021; Conto et al., 2021). Other international organizations like the UNICEF and the world bank warned that these upheavals could lead to long term consequences on educational attainment, as well as the economic production unless effectively dealt with. The structural inequalities already present in the developing countries like India were also contributing factors to the issues, and the lack of digital preparedness compounded the issues.

The strongest issue that emerged during the pandemic was the exacerbation of educational inequality as the outcome of the digital divide. The availability of online learning was largely based on the availability of smartphones or computers, good internet connection, uninterrupted power supply and enabling environment at home. Students who were economically disadvantaged, those in rural regions and migrant families and low parental education were largely affected. Research has revealed that more socioeconomic and educated families were better-positioned to facilitate learning among children as schools were shut down with underprivileged households having more learning losses and disengagement risks (Treviño et al., 2021; Golden et al., 2023).

In India, the digital divide was also seen in access to the devices, but also in access to the ability to use digital tools. Some families had to share the same smartphone with multiple children and consequently, they did not have access to classes and had to spend more in terms of money to handle data cost. Electricity issues and internet connectivity were also experienced which limited online learning. As a result, e-learning was not able to be a just substitute of in-person learning. Instead, it reinforced the already existing inequalities within the students attending the government and private schools, as well as between the rural and urban learners.

The impact of the COVID-19 on education can be also referred to the Human Capital Theory, according to which education is regarded to be the investment that will assist to enhance the productivity of a person and result in the economic growth in the long-run. The education shocks are thus highly harmful to the human capital accumulation particularly to the children in a disadvantaged background who are already at a disadvantage in most of the aspects. Long-term loss of learning may lead to reduced future income, reduced involvement in the labour market and inequality. Digital Divide framework outlines the manner in which the absence of equal access to information and communication technologies also added to the disparities in education during the pandemic and the fact that being able to access digital technology was a key determinant of the results of learning.

The available literature provides sufficient information on the adverse effects of the pandemic on education. As demonstrated by Tang (2023), there are the negative aspects of emergency remote teaching at the different levels of the educational system, and according to Dhawan (2020), online learning has become a necessity, but it was not able to provide the same effectiveness as face-to-face teaching. Huck and Zhang (2021) observe that the access inequality in digital resources was highly influential on the learning among students. As UNICEF reports also indicate, response to national education was uneven with most countries being unable to offer inclusive learning recovery (UNICEF, 2022; Lennox et al., 2021). Also, the literature, such as Wu et al. (2022), explains the loss in learning and the disparity in learning according to the socioeconomic, geographic, and gender differences.

These issues got especially acute within the Indian context, when millions of people lost their jobs, their income also decreased and ran home during the lockdown. There were some children who were at the risk of dropping out of school or being out of the education system forever. In that regard, the pandemic provided a clear picture of the weaknesses of Indian readiness in high-scale online education, and the necessity of taking policy and public investments to make it a sustained policy. Given the importance of education in achieving the inclusive growth and sustainable development, it is important to explore complex impacts of COVID-19 on education. The character and extent of the break and the unequal learning among education, as well as the loss of learning, are vital in devising the effective recovery measures and improving the resilience to future crisis among the education system.

Objectives

1. To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system in India
2. To analyse the extent to which digital divide and socioeconomic factors influenced educational access and learning outcomes during the pandemic
3. To assess the implications of pandemic-induced educational disruption for long-term human capital development and policy planning

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The current research paper will be based on a descriptive research design with an analytical perspective to investigate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on education in India. This type of research design is suitable because the research will record and examine observable transformations in educational access, enrolment

trends, and learning continuity throughout the pandemic as opposed to causal associations. The COVID-19 crisis was a disruption of a system like never before in the history of education and, as such, descriptive analysis was especially appropriate to understand the extent and the character of the repercussions.

The paper uses secondary data only. With secondary data, it is possible to conduct the systematic analysis of the educational trends in large-scale on the basis of the survey results, official statistics, and the policy indicators associated with the educational disruption, digital divide, and inequality. A descriptive methodology with secondary data will consequently be adequate methodologically to evaluate the general impact of the pandemic on the education system.

The analytical aspect of the research design allows to compare between the various categories of students and households, including government and private school students and households that have access to and do not have access to digital resources. The combination of descriptive analysis and analytical comparison allows the study to go beyond the narrative and produce valuable ideas of the inequality in education, learning disruption, and system preparedness amid the COVID-19.

2.2 Sample Details

As the study is one defined on the basis of secondary data, the sample is determined by the subject of national survey and official reports. The focus group of analysis is school-going children in India especially the 6-16 years age group. Particular attention will be paid to children aged 610 years, to which the number of non-enrolled has increased significantly during the pandemic. The criticality of this age group is due to the fact that early schooling has a fundamental role in cognitive and social development and any breakages during this age may have long term effects.

Besides children, households are another unit of analysis that is critical in the study. The household factors that are central to the measurement of access to online learning are smartphone ownership, sharing a device, and parental education. The sample also contains households with students studying in both government and private schools, which will enable comparing the access to the educational process and the resources available to different parts of the education system.

The sample is mostly a representation of rural households which is the target of the large scale education survey which is carried out in the pandemic period. The rural areas presented more problems associated with internet connections, power availability and digital infrastructure, which is why they are especially important to examine digital divide and inequality issues. Meanwhile, there are also wider system-level patterns that are taken into account in the study, which describe national trends in the states and union territories.

Moreover, the sample encompasses by implication vulnerable populations, that is, children in migrant families, the economically disadvantaged population, and those with special needs. Though they are not necessarily reported as distinct groups in statistical data recorded in the secondary sources, their educational lives find their manifestation in indicators connected with disruption of enrolment, school dropouts, and lack of involvement in learning processes. In general, the sample reflects the multicultural socioeconomic, institutional, and geographical settings of the Indian education system, which is why it is appropriate to study the educational inequality and the disruption in the pandemic.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis process will be aimed directly at generating unambiguous and interpretable outcomes in accordance with the study goals. The analysis is a multi-stage and systemic process which combines the descriptive and comparative processes.

The relevant indicators were identified in the first stage based on the secondary information sources employed in the study. These pointers are the school enrolment status, non-enrolment rates among kids aged between 6 and 10 years, engagement in learning or online activities, access to smartphones in various households, and the disparity between government and non-government school learners. These features are the empirical foundation of the research and are related directly to the quantitative patterns under study.

The second stage involved a descriptive analysis to outline some of the major trends during the pandemic period. This included the investigation of proportions and trends when it comes to changes in enrolment, access to digital devices, and participation in online learning. The details of children who could not have access to live online classes, the percentage of households that lacked access to smartphones, and the shift in the level of dependence on government schools during the pandemic are described using descriptive statistics. This phase gives the background findings that are required to record the extent of the disruption in education.

The third stage involved undertaking the comparative analysis to analyze the differences between various categories of students and households. Government and private school students were compared to determine the disparities in the access to digital learning resources. On the same note, the use and non-use of smartphones in households were compared to learn how the digital access affected continuity in learning. Where available, the analysis of differences according to parental education levels was also compared to determine the extent to which parents background influenced educational experiences. Lastly, the results were discussed against the framework of the conceptual perspectives that informed the research, especially those concerning human capital formation and digital inequality. This interpretative measure is important so that the findings are not released in a vacuum but they are rather contextualized in the overall discussion on education, inequality, and development.

3. Results

The shutdown of schools in the COVID-19 situation caused severe discontinuity in the continuity of learning in India. The abrupt end of class-based learning meant that there were limited opportunities to undergo structured learning especially by younger children. According to the evidence provided by ASER-based assessments, most students could not participate in learning activities on a regular basis throughout the lockdown.

Table 1: Learning Engagement of Children During School Closures (%)

Learning Engagement Status	Percentage
Children engaged in learning activities	35.6
Children not engaged in learning activities	64.4

Source: Banerji (2021), based on ASER (Pratham) findings on children's learning engagement during COVID-19 school closures.

Table 1 indicates that less than forty percent of children were engaged in any form of learning during school closures, highlighting the magnitude of educational disruption caused by the pandemic.

3.2 Limited Reach of Online Education

Online learning was the main substitute when the schools shut down; nevertheless, it was not as extensive as possible. The findings indicate that only a limited number of students were able to participate in live online classes due to infrastructural limitations and unequal access to the internet.

Table 2: Access to Live Online Classes During the Pandemic (%)

Access to Online Classes	Percentage
Attended live online classes	11
Did not attend live online classes	89

Source: *World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF (2021),* The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery.

The table 2 demonstrates that online education could not serve as a universal substitute for classroom learning, as the vast majority of students lacked access to live online instruction.

3.3 Digital Divide in Smartphone Availability

Access to online learning depended on smartphone access to a great extent. Although the pandemic made the use of digital devices more reliant, there were still substantial disparities in the households of the government and the students of the private school.

Table 3: Smartphone Availability by School Type (%)

School Type	Household with Smartphone	Households without Smartphone
Government schools	56.4	43.6
Private schools	74.2	25.8

Source: Banerji (2021), based on ASER (Pratham) findings on children's learning engagement during COVID-19 school closures.

Table 3 highlights persistent inequalities in digital access, with government school students significantly more disadvantaged in terms of smartphone availability.

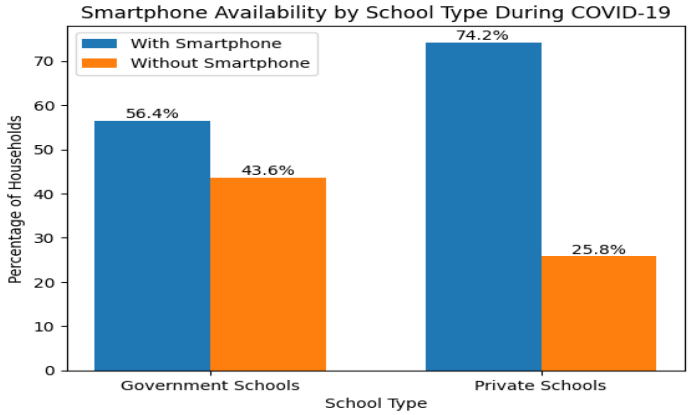

Figure 1: Bar chart comparing smartphone access across school types.

Source: Banerji (2021), based on ASER (Pratham) findings on children's learning engagement during COVID-19 school closures.

Figure 1 shows the gap between governmental and private school households with respect to the availability of smartphones in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicates the inequality in access to digital resources among students.

3.4 Changes in Patterns of School enrolment.

Parental choices of schooling were affected by economic stress that arose due to loss of jobs and reduced income during the pandemic. The outcomes indicate a significant change towards government rather than the private schools and more non-enrolment among the younger kids.

Table 4: School Enrolment Distribution (%)

Academic Year	Government Schools (%)	Private Schools (%)
2019–20	51.1	43.4
2020–21	52.2	43.6
2021–22	54.9	43.3

Source: Ministry of Education, Government of India (2023), *UDISE+ 2019–20 to 2021–22 reports on school education statistics*.

Table 4 has indicated approximately the distribution of school enrolment between the government and the private school in India in the 201920 and 202122 enrolment through the change in enrolment patterns in the pandemic and post-pandemic period. The education level of parents proved to be one of the factors influencing the availability of digital learning resources in children. Homes characterized by a higher educational level of parents showed much more access to smartphones, which allowed them to continue learning even in the time of school closures.

Table 5: Smartphone Ownership by Parental Education Level (%)

Parental Education Level	Households with Smartphone
Below primary level	45.1
Secondary level and above	78.7

Source: UNESCO & World Bank Group (2021).

Table 5 shows a strong association between parental education and digital access, indicating how socioeconomic background influenced learning opportunities during the pandemic.

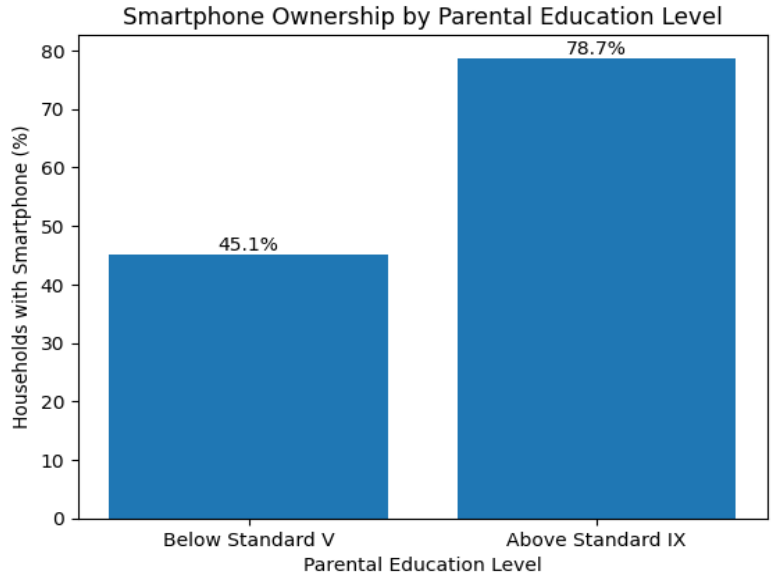

Figure 2: Bar chart comparing smartphone ownership across parental education categories. Source: UNESCO & World Bank Group (2021).

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the number of smartphone owners in the parent-to-parent education groups grows significantly, which implies the unequal access to online learning resources during the COVID-19.

3.6 Education Effect on Vulnerable Populations

There were educational disadvantages disproportionately affecting some groups of children in the pandemic. Learning challenges among these groups were aggravated by reverse migration, economic vulnerability and the nature of special needs education.

Table 6: Educational Challenges Faced by Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerable Group	Observed Educational Impact
Migrant children	Interrupted schooling due to reverse migration
Children with special needs	Difficulty adapting to online learning
Economically weaker households	Increased risk of dropout

Source: Contextual analysis from NITI Aayog (2017)

The table 6 summarizes how structural vulnerabilities translated into unequal educational outcomes during the pandemic.

3.7 Digital Preparedness and Human Capital Context

India's capacity to respond effectively to digital education demands was limited. National and global indices indicate gaps in digital readiness which constrained the effectiveness of online learning initiatives during the pandemic.

Table 7: India's Network Readiness Index Ranking (2021–2023)

Year	Network Readiness Index Rank
2021	67
2022	61
2023	60

Source: Portulans Institute (2023). ***Network Readiness Index 2023*****.**

Table 7 shows about India's performance in the Network Readiness Index from 2021 to 2023, showing a steady improvement in the country's global ranking in digital readiness and technological infrastructure

4. Discussion

The research findings suggest that the COVID-19 was an endemic shock to the education, and this affected the persistence of learning, disparities in access to learning resources, and inequity across social groups. The reduction of the student engagement and attendance of the live online classes was considerable and demonstrates that, the long-term school closures directly impacted the learning process. According to the evidence of Engzell et al. (2021), these interruptions were converted into measurable learning losses, which confirmed that long-term absence of formal schooling worsens educational benefits in situations in which the compensation measures are weak or unavailable.

The findings also refer to emergency transfers to distance learning as unable to be inclusive substitutes of face-to-face education. As Bozkurt et al. (2020) observe, online learning in the times of the pandemic is rather a reaction to the crisis than a designed pedagogical change. The explanation of the low level of access to live online classes and that digital learning was not adequate in alleviating the disruption in the instruction is explained using the conceptual framing. The results confirm the disparity between the remote teaching under the emergency situation and effective digital instruction with the stress on structural and institutional barriers, which limited the scope of online teaching and its quality.

Contributing significantly to the explanation of the findings is disparity in the availability of learning resources. The differences in availability of smart phones and the household capacity to support on-line learning are the signs of the greater social economic stratification. Betthaeuser et al. (2023) demonstrate with a large-scale meta-analysis that the socioeconomic impact of the learning outcomes in the pandemic was polarized, with poor students experiencing more significant losses. These findings are in line with this evidence, and it is stated that the digital access was a mediator of the educational continuity and that the unequal household resources were directly translated into unequal learning opportunities.

It is also depicted in the changes in the school enrolment pattern that was observed within the interaction between the education systems and the household economics. The movement of the private and the state schools speaks of the increasing financial instability of the families during the pandemic. Dorn et al. (2020) assert that the threat of education disengagement rose in the presence of economic shocks associated with COVID-19 where schooling was associated with high expenses by the individual. The patterns of enrolment identified in such research could then be interpreted as the reactive measures to the economic uncertainty with the stabilizing influence of the sphere of the public education during the crisis periods.

The structural side of educational disadvantage is elicited by the tendency toward vulnerable populations. The children of the migrant families and the poorer classes were the ones to be subjected to those types of barriers enhanced with mobility, access, and the institutional support. The key argument which Zierer (2021) makes is that the school closures are more likely to increase the inequities which already exist as the students who were already at risk cannot lose the formal teaching the most. The existing outcomes that presented that the

disruption of education during the pandemic was not a uniform distribution either, but concentrated among individuals with the least shock-absorbing capacity support this opinion.

The experiences of teachers should also be seen as the prism through which the overall functioning of the education systems in the pandemic is viewed. The COVID-19 has registered high levels of burnout among the teachers, as reported by Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2023), which were attributed to high workloads, the necessity to change the pedagogical processes, and emotional pressure. Although this research does not focus directly on the teacher results, low performance of online teaching and lower levels of engagement by students in the results can be partly attributed to the inability of the teachers to deliver instructions in the situation of crisis. This demonstrates the teacher well-being to be a significant yet underestimated component of the resilience in the education system.

The family life also played a role in shaping the school closure in the education process. According to Andrew et al. (2022), lockdowns have augmented the disproportionate character of paid and unpaid labour in households and particularly in women. The secondary impacts of these dynamics on education are that it is likely that an increased number of caregiving and household demands has curtailed the ability of households to offer learning to children, specifically in the educational environment where parental participation was vital in facilitating children to learn at a distance. Differences in learning engagement that have been experienced during the pandemic can be put into perspective through these factors.

The findings at the policy and system-level show the disadvantages of crisis-reactive measures in response to educational disruption. According to Gouedard et al. (2020), a successful recovery must be grounded on well-coordinated actions encompassing digital infrastructure, governance reforms, and special support of needy learners. The results provided in this paper confirm why such solutions are needed where it indicates that structural inequalities which are indicated by the pandemic cannot be addressed through disjointed or technology-based solutions.

Finally, the overall conclusions of the findings are not limited to short-term learning impairment. Reimers and Schleicher (2020) introduce the pandemic as the occasion to reevaluate the education systems, with the emphasis on resiliency, adaptability, and equity. The information presented in this paper validates this argument as well and states that without the sustained reform, the achieved losses in education during the COVID-19 would be converted into the long-term lack of human capital and social mobility. To eliminate such issues, we ought to cease to be dependent on recovery and begin transforming, and the policies must be grounded into the concept of inclusive access, system readiness, and learners belonging to the most vulnerable group.

5.Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only represent a moment of discontinuity of learning but revealed the vulnerability of the structure in the organization, delivery, and governance of learning systems. This research has created the data according to which the interruption of education during the pandemic was not a shock, an equivalent, but an improvement of the system of inequalities. Not only were the institutional responses to the need to keep learning informed by the domestic resources, the presence of the internet and the socioeconomic location, but also the well-developed nature of the educational injustice. Among the lessons learnt in the course of the work, one should note that such burning evidenced development of digital education as much-needed, and manifested critical limitations of technological-based solutions on the basis of their implementation without a comprehensive preparatory foundation. Online tools have no ability to substitute the high-quality pedagogical infrastructure of infrastructure, capacity of educators, capacity of learners, and sensitivity to contexts, as online learning has shown to be widespread. It implies that an adequate measure is not platform provision to create resilience within education but a coordinated action along with a series of levels of the system is required. The other feature which is present in the findings is that publicly funded education is stabilizing in an economic stress environment. The education systems are implicated by patterns of enrolment and various accesses as being central in moderating the impacts of crisis on exclusion. This confirms the need to increase the capacity of the public sector and ensure that the preparedness to crisis is incorporated in the long-term education planning and not viewed as an extraordinary problem. Lastly, the pandemic develops a crisis at which the education policy must be reassessed. The remedial approach to recovery may be excessively focused on the surface impacts of inequality that the crisis has brought to light. The most important aspect of the sustainable development is the fact that the education system should be more flexible, inclusive, and data-driven towards vulnerable groups. With the concentration to the structural conditions under which the outcomes of education unfolded during COVID-19, the policymakers can use the lessons of disruption to create a platform to develop better and more resilient education.

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