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Learning Lessons

The RTE Act says that no child could be deprived of his/her right to education. The grievous complaint of schools due to the pandemic has endorsed that process which is especially relevant to socially and educationally disadvantaged children.

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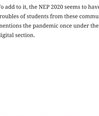
By Abhinav Mehrotra

One crucial area where the pandemic has played havoc with is in the education of children, the hardest hit being those from rural areas or poor families. Being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC), India had enacted the Constitution (86th amendment) Act, 2002, through Article 21A of the Constitution that deals with fundamental rights. Consequently, a separate legislation—Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009—came into being. Under Section 3 of the RTE Act, children in the age group of six to fourteen years have been granted the right to free and compulsory elementary education in a neighbourhood school.

What makes the RTE Act, 2009 significant is the phrase "free education". That basically means that no child can be deprived of his/her right due to financial constraints. A provision of special training has been made under Section 4 of the RTE Act and schools run by the state government and local authorities have been given the responsibility to carry out the mandate.

Despite these safeguards, there exist issues regarding the quality of education being imparted; the gap in the learning level of students; lack of clarity on the area or limit for defining a neighbourhood school; insufficient funding, etc. These have been further extenuated due to the pandemic as online education has been adopted to mitigate the lockdowns imposed. The children belonging to the rural areas have suffered the most due to limited or no access to electricity and internet connectivity.



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In this context, in the past two years, the prolonged closure of schools till recently due to the pandemic has reversed the educational gains made in the last decade. This is especially relevant to the socially and educationally disadvantaged children who gained access to education in private schools through the quota for them under the RTE Act, 2009. Section 12(1) of the Act directs private schools to reserve 25% of seats for children from economically weaker sections. Children in this quota are admitted at the entry-level and the cost of the next eight years of their education is borne by the government. Thus, the impact of closures of schools has a direct relation to the economic status of the children i.e. the difference between the haves and the have nots. Consequently, there have been high dropouts especially for children from the socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds because the parents of these children lost their employment which forced the children to contribute towards the sustenance of the family.

Subsequently, the government of India adopted the National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP) on July 29, 2020, which deals with issues like Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children aged between 0 and 6 years. Nonetheless, there continue to be concerns even regarding such changes especially during the ongoing pandemic. To illustrate, concerns regarding the quality of education; equal access to education and increase in privatisation, etc., continue to highlight the lack of harmony between the central and the state governments. Further, this disharmony is manifested through unaddressed issues like improper planning; rigid guidelines; budgetary bottlenecks; about state spending and hinders the goal of spending 6% of the GDP on education under Section 26 of the NEP 2020. To add to it, the NEP 2020 seems to have ignored the troubles of students from these communities as it only mentions the pandemic once under the section on the digital section.

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In India, around 320 million students have been affected due to Covid-19. Further, the shift from physical classrooms to virtual lectures had not only affected the students, but also teachers due to frequent interruptions in internet access and lack of information literacy which refers to the ability to find information as well as analyse the relevance of such information. This impact on the students and teachers can be understood from the fact that the imposition of e-learning modes of education without providing the supporting infrastructure has affected the various factors that are related to class participation that raised concerns regarding the future of those children who have inadequate or no access to the internet.

What this signifies is the multiplicity of issues that the government in India must deal with, ranging from connectivity issues, lack of infrastructure, cost of data, financial costs, regulations, the digital gap, the cultural leap for teachers, students' self motivation and self-organisation skills, and *most* importantly, as the schools have now opened, the investment required on infrastructure to ensure physical distancing. Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the parents, it is a common belief among the parents that online education has increased stress for their children, both psychologically and intellectually, as the balance between study time; playtime and me time is non-existent. This has been a major drawback of the online classes due to the lockdowns imposed because of the pandemic. These challenges assume significance because like in traditional learning environments, a parent's role and impact on his child's success are extremely important.

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The need of the hour is to integrate online teaching in a way that takes into consideration the needs of students and teachers as well as parents even in the absence of a pandemic. One of the major drawbacks in the Indian education system has been the absence of taking into consideration the structural bottlenecks involving issues of gender, caste, location, illiteracy, linguistic diversity and income levels while developing the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems.

Overall, a holistic and inclusive approach involving subsidised internet access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds needs to be adopted. Most importantly, a multi-sectoral collaboration needs to be initiated by the central and state governments to ensure internet connectivity in these unprecedented times as the risk of another wave might be a possibility. The focus should also be on addressing the well-being and welfare of children by the removal of livelihood insecurity and ensuring security against economic and social oppression by addressing their everyday needs like health and education.

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