Undertaking rapid assessments in the COVID-19 context:
Learning from UNICEF South Asia

unicef ✦
for every child

Rapid Assessment of Learning during School Closures across Six States of India in the Context of COVID-19

A Case Study

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to students' learning globally. In India, following announcement of the national lockdown in March 2020, schools across the country were closed to contain the spread of the virus.[1] By April 2020, it was estimated that over 247 million students were out of school in India.[2] The short- and long-term impact of prolonged school closure, including learning losses and unequal access to distance learning, could be large.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis and to promote learning during school closure, various State Governments in India initiated a variety of remote learning solutions. Given the urgency of the situation, rapid roll-out was prioritized over carefully examining what works.[3] This rapid assessment aimed to present the needs and experiences of parents, students and teachers with regard to continued learning, and identify barriers to access and effectiveness of solutions as well as promising innovations to support remote learning. The purpose was to provide recommendations for UNICEF teams, State Governments and the Government of India to better support students' learning in this context.

Implementation arrangements

The rapid assessment was conducted by the UNICEF India. Dalberg Development Advisors, a strategy and policy advisory firm, implemented the study, including qualitative data collection and data analysis. Kantar, a market research, survey and business consultancy firm, implemented the phone survey. The assessment covered six states of India, namely, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. States were selected to represent geographically diverse areas, with different levels of COVID-19 impact and educational capacity; and prioritized based on UNICEF's ongoing relationship with the State education departments and their buy-in in the study.

---

[1] Schools remained closed at the time the rapid assessment took place (August-September 2020).
[2] UNICEF (2020). "Urgent action needed to safeguard futures of 600 million South Asian children threatened by COVID-19".
[3] Dalberg and UNICEF India (2020), Rapid Assessment of Learning During School Closure in the Context of COVID-19.

The study was conceptualized in April 2020, and further designed and contracted in June 2020. Data collection took place during August-September 2020 (over a period of six weeks) and reporting in October 2020. The target population were primary and secondary school-age children, their parents and teachers. The approximate cost of the assessment was USD 125,500.

Data collection and analysis

This rapid assessment used a mixed method approach drawing on five data sources, which were applied through remote means. Quantitative data were collected through, first, telephone surveys with 5,029 parents of children (mostly aged 5-13 years), adolescents (14-18 years) and government school teachers using Computer Assisted Telephonic Interviews (CATI); and, second, through an online survey that reached 617 eligible youth U-Reporters (aged 14-18 years).[4],[5] Qualitative information was gathered via in-depth telephone interviews with a sub-set of 45 parents, adolescents and teachers as well as 31 sector experts and ecosystem players (from civil society, educational foundations, government representatives). Finally, a desk review of existing reports and datasets informed the study design (e.g. prioritization of questions and indicators) and enabled triangulation of findings.

The main research theme was how best to support student learning during school closures/partial re-opening currently and in the long term. While the quantitative survey focused on the perceptions of parents, teachers and students towards the experience of continued learning during COVID-19, the qualitative study gathered information on key stakeholders needs and wants; the landscape of interventions; and the perceptions of government/CSO providers of their reach, relevance and effectiveness. It should be noted that the survey assessed perceptions and did not measure the effectiveness of learning through standardized tests.

As the telephone survey had to be administered in a short time frame, it did not allow for an in-depth exploration of issues. The survey tools contained approximately 60 questions with a duration of 20-25 minutes. Designing the questionnaire was challenging in terms of determining the appropriate length of the interview, number of questions to be included, framing questions for different respondents (teachers, parents and children), and the number of answer options that could be responded to easily in a telephone/online survey. Moreover, asking teachers, who are a part of the government system, questions about the challenges they were facing was sensitive. Notably, the survey was administered in the local dialect rather than in the state language for better engagement.

The parent and adolescent phone surveys inquired about children's mental wellbeing, although the issue could not be probed in detail over the phone and therefore attributed to COVID-19. The issue of mental health was not probed in the qualitative interviews either, which was a missed opportunity. More sensitive topics, such as domestic violence, were not included in the questionnaire as respondents may not have been comfortable answering these questions in a remote survey, privacy could not be ensured, and rapport building was not possible.

Because the rapid assessment included data collection among vulnerable groups, in particular children, ethics was an important consideration. UNICEF sought approval from an Internal Review Board (IRB) for the study through an existing Long Term Agreement (LTA) with the Board, which facilitated a quick review in just eight days. Field teams were trained in UNICEF's guidelines on ethical research during COVID-19. Protocols to refer children in distress were followed and those who needed support were given details of the child helpline number. An internal Technical Advisory

---

[4] U-Report is a social messaging tool and data collection system developed by UNICEF, which sends SMS/online polls and alerts to its participants, collecting real-time responses, and subsequently publishes gathered data. In March 2021, there were 544,717 U-Reporters in India, of whom 66% were aged 15-24 years. https://india.ureport.in

[5] A total of approximately 4,000 responses were received in the U-Report survey, of which ca. 15% were selected for analysis based on the following criteria: respondents were aged 14-18; belonged to one of the six survey states; were studying in school; and, had used some form of learning tools or materials.

Group (TAG) was also established to provide quality assurance on the methodology and findings.[6]

Furthermore, a gender lens was applied throughout the study: the list of key informants who were interviewed was gender balanced wherever possible; the survey/interview guide was gender-neutral and could be administered and responded to by both genders; and the data were disaggregated by gender. However, the quantitative data did not indicate significant differences by gender or vulnerable groups on several key indicators, and the qualitative interviews with parents and adolescents further confirmed the quantitative findings. A limitation of the study is that it could not specifically capture the challenges faced by girls perhaps because adolescent girls may not have had access to a mobile phone, or parents may have supervised them while they spoke to the enumerators. Moreover, caregivers may have given socially acceptable responses. A learning is that the qualitative study could have collected the voices of girls through group calls/focus group discussions

and a time-use study with adolescent boys and girls could have been included to gain better insights. The involvement of a gender expert on the design of the survey tool and interview guide could have strengthened the gender focus in the data collection.

Overall, the telephone surveys elicited a good response (see below) as respondents were not working during the lockdown and were willing to share their views. Fielding the survey with adolescents was not a challenge; they were able to respond to the questions and discuss their experiences in the pandemic situation. Parents were keen to participate as issues around children's education in the context of the pandemic were very relevant at the time. As the survey was based on self-reported information, there was a possibility of social desirability bias in responses. Also, some parents were concerned that the information would be shared with the school but were willing to participate when they were informed that the information would be kept confidential.

Photo Credit: © UNICEF/ Panjwani/ 2020

---

[6] In line with UNICEF's procedure for quality assurance in research and UNICEF's Standard Operating Procedures, an advisory committee was established given the study has a value for over USD 100,000.

The use of different data sources, both quantitative as well as qualitative, allowed for mixed data analysis and quick validation of emerging insights and recommendations. However, some opportunities were missed to take full advantage of a mixed methods approach and implement each method robustly. First, the qualitative study could have been conducted after the quantitative survey so findings from the quantitative survey could have been probed in-depth in the qualitative study. Second, several contextual issues could have been further probed during in-depth interviews with a larger sample of key informants, which would have provided deeper insights on the survey findings and a broader, more holistic perspective. Furthermore, a limitation of the assessment is that the interviewed government stakeholders provided macro-level information but were too far removed from the community to provide insights on the situation on the ground. The assessment should have drawn on a variety of government/school stakeholders at the state, district, block and community levels (e.g., school education department secretaries, SCERT officials, district and block education functionaries, community members), who would have provided a more complete picture, and these findings could have been triangulated with information from parents, teachers and adolescents.

There were also some limitations with regards to the mixing of the quantitative data collection methods. A challenge was combining the online U-Report survey and the phone survey in terms of identifying the domains to be covered in each survey (the U-Report survey can only cover a couple of questions as compared to a telephone survey) and analysing the data in combination as the two surveys used a different sampling methodology and covered a different demographic profile (U-Reporters are a digitally knowledgeable group with access to the internet). Given that the final U-Report survey sample was also small, the data were ultimately not referenced in the final report. Another limitation is that the teachers surveyed were not necessarily from the same geographical areas as parents and adolescents who were interviewed in the phone survey; hence, the data from the two surveys could not be correlated.

Sampling

For the parents and adolescents phone survey, Kantar's existing national database, covering nearly 750,000 households/contact numbers of people from diverse backgrounds across India, was used to construct a sample frame that was four times the target number of respondents in each state. Only those respondents in Kantar's database who had indicated their willingness to participate in later surveys were considered for this assessment. Teachers were randomly selected from a list of government school teachers provided by the State education departments. Getting the teachers data from the State Governments took time as they did not want to provide access to the entire state teacher database. Most State Governments provided a shortlist of teachers from which a sample could be drawn, although in the case of Kerala and Madhya Pradesh teacher lists could ultimately not be obtained. This may have been possible if there would have been more time to gain further government buy-in.

The sample of the phone survey was designed to be evenly spread across the six study states and to provide a 95% level of confidence and 5% margin of error. Around 500 parents of children (5-18 years) and ca. 300 adolescents (14-18 years) were sampled in each of the six states. Stratified systematic random sampling was used to select respondents, using gender and rural/urban stratification to approximate an equal split for these categories. Respondents were selected across multiple districts (and towns and villages within each) in every study state to avoid clustering errors. Soft quotas were pursued to include a total of 700 migrant and vulnerable families across the states.[7] People with disability were not explicitly targeted in the survey but were included in in-depth interviews. Parents of children with a disability were purposively selected from Kantar's existing database (i.e., four families; one each in Bihar,

---

[7] Vulnerable households were sampled through a focus on Scheduled Tribe/Scheduled Caste households and Below Poverty Line households available in the Kantar database. For migrant households, eligibility questions at the start of the survey were used to screen for them.

Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat) based on a preliminary review. The teachers' survey was conducted in only four states (see above), with a sample size of around 200 teachers in each of the four states.

To recruit U-Reporters, UNICEF state offices shared the U-Report survey with their networks, and the survey was kept active for a certain period of time on the internet. Outreach for the survey was also done in colleges through volunteers from the National Service Scheme (NSS)/National Cadet Corps (NCC). Initially, the U-Report survey was planned for only the six study states; however, as respondents from other states were keen to participate, the survey was opened to all states. While approximately 4,000 survey responses were received, only ca. 15% were considered for analysis because the respondents were aged 14-18 years, lived in one of the six states, were studying in school and had used some form of learning tools and materials. The sample size of U-Reporters in the study states, which ranged from 32 in Gujarat to 334 in Uttar Pradesh, was not large enough to allow an analysis across the key indicators.

For the qualitative interviews, parents and adolescents were purposively selected from telephone survey respondents as well as by team coordinators from their community. Coordinators, who had moved to their home district during the lockdown, were asked to identify and recruit respondents from their area for in-depth interviews. In each study state, targets were set with different categories of respondents (e.g. families without smartphones, families in rural/urban areas, families in government/private schools). Local recruitment had a higher response than recruitment through the telephone.

The sampling strategy had a number of challenges and limitations; some of which were mitigated. First, whilst the use of an existing database for the adolescent and parent telephone survey provided a ready sampling frame, allowing for a quick selection of respondents and roll-out of data collection, there may be some bias in the sample frame as the database may have been created for a different purpose. For example, this led to an overrepresentation of families whose children go to private schools. To improve the generalizability

of the findings, population weights were applied on the sample from the parent and adolescent survey, resulting in equal representation from urban and rural areas, gender parity and greater focus on government schools.[8] It also allowed rebalancing the state distribution in line with their population sizes.[9] Second, the shortlists of school teachers provided by the State Governments as sample frames may not have been representative of the teacher population. Each State Government prepared the shortlist differently and it was not always clear how the list was developed.[10]

Furthermore, the teacher survey only covered government school teachers, and therefore does not represent all teachers. Weights were also applied on the teacher level data but just to recalibrate the sample for state level populations. Third, households without phones were not included in the phone survey, thereby possibly excluding the most vulnerable populations, especially women and girls, who have less access to phones. Nonetheless, the quota for vulnerable and migrant households ensured that the perspectives of some vulnerable groups were included. Finally, it was a challenge to reach the intended sample for the telephone survey in a time-efficient manner: a number of inter-locking quotas had been set for the survey, targeting migrants and Scheduled Tribe parents took time as they had to be called multiple times to complete the interviews, and in some cases the contact numbers and names of teachers did not match in the database.

Partnerships

While this was a UNICEF-led rapid assessment, it drew on the research expertise and data collection capacity of Dalberg and Kantar. Dalberg did not just function as data collection implementing agency but provided technical oversight and managed all aspects of the assessment, including designing and supervising the survey and analysing the data.

The TAG provided a platform to involve and leverage additional expertise. Members of the TAG included a representative from UNICEF's regional education team, a member of UNICEF India research team and an external sector expert on school education. Their expertise and feedback strengthened the study design, survey tools, and analysis of findings and recommendations. Specifically, the education expert who had worked with Government, provided the perspective that would be of interest to the government and the expert of UNICEF Regional Office brought in a regional perspective.

Some states were hesitant to partner on the survey due to concerns related to the study design (e.g. small sample size at the state level) and because the findings could be politically sensitive. Three of the six states initially selected were replaced due to State Government concerns regarding the survey. It took time and on-going engagement by UNICEF to get the State Governments' buy-in for the assessment.

Agility/timeliness

This model demonstrates that a short timeline does not inhibit robust study design and QA/ethics processes to be followed. Overall the assessment was conducted in a relatively short time period (four months from signing the UNICEF-Dalberg agreement to the presentation of the final report), balancing a short timeline with methodological rigor. The qualitative interviews with key sector experts proved to be particularly valuable to understand in a rapid way what was happening on the ground.

Nonetheless, the timeline was ambitious given that there were a number of activities to be completed. It was challenging to meet the tight timelines and to generate evidence quickly before schools opened. The time required to complete some activities was underestimated, such as data collection in the context of the pandemic, and incorporating feedback

---

[8] Enrolment data from the District Information System for Education (DISE) were used to make the analysis representative of the six states, controlling for gender, social category, region (urban versus rural), grade (primary versus secondary), type of school (government versus private school), social category and state population.

[9] As an equal sample size was drawn from each state, not controlling for different state demographics would have skewed the results towards smaller states.

[10] For example, the Gujarat list was based on regional representation, Bihar shared a generic list of 700 teachers and Uttar Pradesh did a random selection of 1,000 teachers from their database.

from the TAG at different stages of the study.[11] Furthermore, it took time administratively to initiate the rapid assessment and get State Governments' buy-in for the survey.[12] During this preparation phase, three states were replaced in the study, and it took time to get the governments of the replacement states on board.

Photo Credit: © UNICEF/ Kolari/ 2020

Furthermore, trade-offs had to be made between timeliness and coverage and scale of the data collection. While the study moved fast and the findings were presented according to schedule, more states and teachers could have been covered in the assessment if more time had been available. Another trade-off is that there was not enough time to popularize the U-Report survey and reach a larger sample of U-Reporters. Therefore, a learning from this assessment is that timelines need to be sufficiently realistic; phone surveys take time as people may not have the time or may not be available to respond to the survey, may have other pressing concerns (e.g., getting back their jobs/ livelihoods), and fatigue can set in when responding to a phone survey, especially among vulnerable populations.

Use of findings

Some State Governments agreed to participate in the survey and gave their permission for the assessment only if state-specific findings were not publicly shared. Consequently, state specific data are not being disseminated and therefore limits their use. State policy briefs were disseminated among State Government counterparts, and national report without state specific findings was shared with the Secretary, Ministry of Education, Government of India. The overall findings were furthermore presented to organizations that were consulted during data collection.

The State Governments used the findings in the development of guidance for remote learning and their planning processes. For example, the Uttar Pradesh State Government incorporated the recommendations of the rapid assessment in their guidelines for moving back to remote learning when COVID-19 infections surged again in the first half of 2021, in particular for teachers to regularly engage parents and for small-group, face-to-face classes to be organized with children outdoors. Other State Governments used the findings to inform their planning documents and strategy proposals for schools reopening or addressing the digital divide among students.

Summary learnings

The strengths, challenges, learnings and innovations related to the implementation of this rapid assessment are summarized in the table below.

---

[11] The contract with Dalberg was extended by two weeks for analysis and reports to be submitted, and because data collection took longer than planned.

[12] The discussion with Dalberg started in April 2020 and the ToR was issued in the first week of June 2020.

Table: Continued learning, India, rapid assessment: Summary Learnings

Strengths

- Strong collaboration with an experienced technical partner enabled robust study design and implementation.
- The study was implemented rapidly across six states covering perspectives of multiple stakeholders through mixed methods.
- The phone survey achieved a good response.
- The study paid particular attention to the inclusion of vulnerable groups in data collection (although the most vulnerable may not have been reached because of the remote data collection modalities).

Challenges

- The sample frames for the phone surveys did not represent fully the population distribution, which required ex-post recalibration of the sample.
- Obtaining government buy-in required time and confined the publication of the findings.
- Due to time constraints, the U-Report survey achieved only limited sample size, and therefore its data remained underused.
- Remote data collection did not allow for in-depth exploration of issues and coverage of sensitive issues.
- While a gender lens was applied, gender issues could have been explored more, guided by stronger involvement of a gender expert.

Learnings and innovations

- A short timeline does not inhibit robust study design and QA/ethics processes to be followed.
- Review and feedback by the TAG enriched the study.
- Phone surveys do not allow for an in-depth exploration of issues and need to be supplemented with a well-designed qualitative study.
- The use of sample quotas can enforce representation of certain harder to reach groups in the survey but requires increased survey effort and time.