

## THE CHILDREN OF THE PANDEMIC: AN ASSESSMENT OF WHETHER SCHOOLS SHOULD NOW OPEN?

Jitendra Paliwal<sup>1\*</sup>, Sandhya De<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Symbiosis Law School, Pune, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

### Abstract

In what came as astonishing to many, several European countries have decided to open schools once again even as the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. The need for reopening schools and putting children back into classrooms arose from the fact that access to education was scuttled for hundreds of thousands of students owing to a multitude of reasons- some do not have any access to internet, others do not have access to the technology through which they can access internet, i.e., smart phones or laptops. In some other cases, there is simply no place to sit and study; in several others, students live in an environment plagued with violence and schools are their only breathing spaces. Compelling as these reasons might be, the larger question of the safety of little children continues to haunt their parents and other kith and kin. Insofar as India is concerned, the Government of India or governments at the state level- none have permitted the complete reopening of schools. In the “Unlock 4 Guidelines” issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs on August 29, 2020, some relaxation has been granted with effect from September 21, 2020. Whereas many may argue that keeping schools and colleges shut is the wisest thing to do, since the lives of these children are far more important than their studies, several others would say that scuttling access to education could be far riskier. What then is the best thing to do? Should students be made to go back to school or should they be told to stay at home? Are online classes really proving to be effective or are they simply a redundant luxury of the elite? Is there a way to reconcile the two different streams of argument, i.e. can a way be found for safety of students to be guaranteed and at the same time, their education is not compromised with? Clearly, a Pandora’s Box is thrown open before us. This research paper is an effort at finding answers to some of the aforesaid questions. The author will, through the paper, try to ascertain a definitive, or if not definitive, a convincing answer to reconcile the conflict as to whether schools must be reopened and students be sent back. The author also tries to explore if the said answers are uniform for countries and continents around the world or different answers befit different nations, given their diversity and varying economic development.

The author mainly relies on secondary sources of research; however, incidental primary references may be made.

**Key words:** Education; Right to Education; COVID-19; Access to Education; Education Technology; Child Education; Safety versus Studies

### Introduction

*“Our Constitution fathers did not intend that we just set up hovels, put students there, give untrained teachers, give them bad textbooks, no playgrounds, and say, we have complied with Article 45 and primary education is expanding... They meant that real education should be given to our children between the ages of 6 and 14”*

- *M.C. Chagla, 1964*

A report by the United Nations Children’s Fund or UNICEF reveals some flabbergasting figures that must concern all countries around the world. As per the report, no less than 30 per cent of the 1.5 billion children who have been asked to stay at home owing to the COVID-19 pandemic were unable to access remote learning opportunities with the schools closed. The exact figures range somewhere around 463 million students, enough to leave everyone worried and concerned about the future. In a statement issued by Henritta Fore, the executive director of UNICEF, it was said, “The sheer number of children whose education was completely disrupted for months on end is a global education emergency. The repercussions could be felt in economies and societies for

decades to come.” This statement from the horse’s mouth should leave us even more worried.’ Yet another report from UNESCO suggests, about 23.8 million students may drop out of school next year as a consequence of the pandemic- something that should leave us worried even more.

Sadly however, there is not enough talk, let alone action, on this cause of worry. Whereas it is acknowledged without reservations that the health of the children is of paramount importance, the absolute ignorance can be disastrous for their future and the future of the country. Nonetheless, we do not find place to debate and discuss the said important issues specially of the children of age group between 6 to 14 years of age. The point here is not that other going on issues are not important; it is that other issues are important too- some not just for the present, but the future.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began spreading around the world, one of the first steps taken by most economies around the world, exceptions apart, was to impose a lockdown. At the time, the move seemed to be one of the most effective strategies to combat further spread, however, with the passage of time, it has been realized that the same may not have been so. After all, the surge in numbers continues to inflate, and the economy continues to struggle for survival. Many have argued that it would have been much better to have allowed the economy to remain open, but safety restrictions and precautions should have been strictly enforced.

The same argument is also floating around for almost all possible sectors. The UNICEF report mentioned above and several other data suggest that the pandemic has had the worst imaginable impact on the two extreme age groups- the youngest and the oldest. The elderly have had their issues dealing with isolation, cruelty and degrading mental health, whereas the younger ones have wrestled every day with the lack of education, or a disturbed state thereof to say the least.

Now, it is instructive to mention here that whereas the degree of the effect of the pandemic on the students may vary from country to country and from one economic class to another, there is consensus, by and large, that most of the students around the world have faced the brunt- one way or another.

As the pandemic began to spread around the world at alarming rates, schools around the world moved to imparting education through the online mode. It is vehemently argued by many that the same was the best possible bet in such times, for safety of the students was the most important thing to do. However, in this process, a large number of students around the world were eclipsed from education or their access to the same was scuttled.

Some of the common reasons identified have been no access to smart phones or laptops or such other technology that would enable learning online; lack of or poor to very poor internet connectivity; little to no knowledge of using the technology required for learning online; loss of incentive to learn with schemes like Mid-day meal parrying; presence of limited technology to access online education which may cause some children in the family to use it and others to be refrained from it; violent or unhealthy family environment which the child would have escaped from when going to physical schools; and many other miscellaneous reasons.

In such a situation, some countries of the world deemed it fit to not continue online education anymore and reopen physical schools. Topping the list are European countries that have come out very strongly in favour of the reopening of schools, so much so that some European countries have threatened to levy fines in case parents are not sending their kids to school. Most countries, however, are not following this model and are choosing to have kids stay home.

A pertinent question therefore arises- what is the right thing to do? Should or should not be students told to come back to schools? Will it be a viable alternative for countries other than the European continent? Subsequent sections of the paper deliberate on these.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The primary objectives of the present study can be enlisted as follows:

1. To broadly determine reopening of schools by countries around the world the right thing to do.
2. To determine the potential feasibility to continue with online education vis-à-vis physical classes in times of COVID-19

The secondary objectives of the study can be enlisted as follows:

1. To determine if the reopening of schools is found viable in some countries, will they apply uniformly to other countries and regions as well.
2. To further determine if there is a better and more inclusive way than reopening of schools to ensure education for all.

### **Research methodology**

The present paper is an effort at a descriptive analysis of the state of education in countries around the world during the times of COVID-19. The author attempts to study how countries around the world have addressed the issue of unequal access to education since online education has become the norm. The author has mostly relied on the secondary sources of research. A good chunk of the author's research has been sourced from articles published by various national and foreign newspapers, The Indian Express; The New York Times; The Hindu; etc to quote a few. The author has also relied immensely on the data collated and made available by websites of Associated Press; British Broadcasting Corporation or the BBC; Al Jazeera; Reuters; etc to name a few. Data was also obtained from the various websites of the Government of India as well as those of other countries.

The primary sources relied upon by the author include the Constitution of India, the Right to Education Act as well as a report published by the United Nations Children's Fund or UNICEF that discusses about the number of students who have been deprived of learning during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Analysis**

So far, the author has studied literature relevant to the present context from India and abroad to formulate a general background to the study. Among content studied and analysed is the report of the UNICEF that makes for the foundational setting of the current paper. The data collected from the report and numerous other sources is now analysed with the central aim of achieving the primary objectives of the study. On the basis of the primary results, the secondary objectives have been pursued subsequently.

For the sake of avoiding any complexity, the author first details the initial response of countries in general to the pandemic vis-à-vis school education. The author then discusses, in a country-wise manner, the present response. Followed by the same, it is analysed as to which of the responses are likely to be more viable and why. Basis such analysis, the author will delve into findings pursuant to the secondary objectives as well.

### **Initial Response of countries to the Pandemic vis-à-vis school education**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, the number of challenges to the education sector was innumerable. Despite most countries declaring education as a universal basic right, a stark 250 million children were out of school, and nearly 800 million adults were illiterate. In any case, the ones in school too did not present a very rosy picture, with over 387 million pupils not knowing how to read.

However, worse came to worst with the pandemic. In the history of the world, nothing before presented a bigger disruption to education than the pandemic, with a nearly universal impact on learners and teachers around the world. These learners belonged to all levels of learning- ranging from pre-primary to secondary, technical to vocational education, universities, adult learning, and skill development centres and establishments.

By half way the month of April 2020, 94 percent of learners were already affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries. As a response to the pandemic, most governments around the world locked down their populations and closed their schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus.

### **How responses changed?**

While most countries around the world continue with keeping the schools shut, at least five European countries are paving the way for reopening of schools. It is imperative to mention, however, that these five are not the only countries that have opted for opening of schools. The list includes 20 countries in total, but results here can be extrapolated to understand the situation in other countries too. Following is a country wise study:

#### **France**

France was one of the few countries that began reopening schools since the month of May itself, on a voluntary basis. However, a number of school-linked infections started to surface, which led to immediate closures. In late June, once again, schools were reopened and the same was made “obligatory”. There were no social distancing rules for the littlest ones, a one-meter rule for primary schools, and a mask mandate for older children in cases where social distancing was not possible. However, school holidays kicked in shortly afterwards, so the correct impact assessment could be seen only in September, once schools reopen again.

#### **Germany**

A few German schools did reopen partially during the spring; however, they are all fully reopening now after the summer break. In Germany, states have their own timing for summer breaks. The north-eastern state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania was the state with some of the lowest cases completely opened schools.

There's a big debate around whether kids should have to wear masks at school. In Berlin and Brandenburg it is compulsory to wear masks, though only in corridors, canteens, and stairwells. In North Rhine-Westphalia, masks will be compulsory in the classroom, too—but only until the end of August. Germany's federal education minister, Anja Karliczek, would simply prefer everyone to wear masks in school buildings. In Schleswig-Holstein, doing so is not compulsory.

#### **Italy**

Italy kept schools closed even after its initial lock-down ended, justifiably so as it was one of the worst hit countries in the world. It now plans to reopen schools on September 14, 2020. As per the new norms, classes will now have to be smaller to allow for social distancing. 50,000 temporary teaching staff are supposedly going to be brought on board to make this possible, with federal funding, and some school districts are building a sawing many desks apart so children do not need to be too close to one another.

#### **Sweden**

Sweden never closed schools through the course of the pandemic, much to the surprise of many. The country also did not collect any data on the possible interconnection between the surge in numbers and the opening of schools. However, at the moment, the country does not plan to close the schools to reopen them again, stating the same might have disastrous impacts. The list of countries that never shut schools also includes Nicaragua and Taiwan, and they too had no data compiled to study impact assessment.

#### **United Kingdom**

Schools in Scotland are set to open very soon. It has been confirmed by the authorities that the number of COVID-19 cases in Scotland that can be linked to schools is roughly 0.8 per cent of the total number. Now,

schools are encouraged to ventilate their classrooms as much as they possibly can. Social distancing is not mandated for the kids in primary schools, however, older children are to be discouraged from having any physical contact.

Insofar as England and Northern Ireland are concerned, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson has pressed for opening schools fully in September. The same was also envisaged in the month of June, but the plan had to be dropped in light of shortage of staff and spatial implications of trying to organise smaller classes. A number of Welsh schools were reopened towards the end of the month of June, with the added qualification of classes being made smaller and staggering them in a way that only one-third of the students were present at one time. However, it is further provided that all schools will open in early September or halfway the month.

## **India**

In an order issued by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs on August 29, 2020; No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A), all activities have been permitted to be started again, except the reopening of schools and colleges in the country. The order provides that online education must not only be continued, but also encouraged. Being an order passed by the Central Government, the same shall be applicable throughout the territory of India.

The order, however, does not put a blanket ban on the opening of schools and colleges, and instead provides for some relaxation with effect from September 21, 2020.

From September 21, 2020, the following shall be permitted, subject to the decision of the states:

- i. 50 per cent of the teaching and non-teaching staff may be permitted to be called to schools at one time for the purpose of online teaching, tele-counselling and allied work. An SOP must be issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in this regard.
- ii. Students from classes 9 to 12 may be permitted to go to schools to seek guidance from teachers on a voluntary basis only. This will be permitted only if the written consent of parents has been obtained before in writing.
- iii. Skill or entrepreneurship training in institutes such as Industrial Training Institute, National Institute for Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development, National Skill Training Institutes, Short term training centres registered with the National Skill Development Corporation or State Skill Development Missions will be permitted.
- iv. Higher Education Institutions of technical or professional nature may be opened, however, only for students of PhD and Masters programmes who may have to do research work.

### **1. Should schools reopen?**

After having learnt the initial and subsequent response to the pandemic vis-à-vis school education, the author now endeavours to weigh whether schools should reopen or not. For the sake of convenience and ease, the author will present both sides of the opinions and then present a conclusion. In conclusion, India's peculiar stance will be weighed separately.

#### **a. Arguments in favour of reopening schools**

As detailed above, several countries around the world are now reopening schools. The same is a result of some compelling reasons, some of which are listed herein below:

- i. One of the lesser discussed reasons why a compelling need was felt for the reopening of schools was the fact that children belonging to the lower income families might actually be going hungry during the pandemic. The number of students belonging to poor families tend to rely upon schools for at least one time worth of meal. With that taken away, it is highly likely that many children are not able to meet their nutrition

requirements and are in fact left malnourished. This in turn is a risky slope to travel, for the same children may get prone to many other diseases in time to come other than COVID-19, and may also not be able to contribute how they should be contributing to the economy as well as to themselves and their family. No wonder, their cognitive abilities stand risked with their nutrition requirements not being fulfilled. Schools accordingly must reopen and regular food must be served.

**ii.** It is also understood that children around the world may be going through abuse at much higher rates than before the pandemic. With members of the household staying home with children, domestic violence against women and children is likely to have gone up by many times. With open schools, teachers would be able to spot early signs of abuse and report to the concerned authorities. Now, children stand at the risk of suffering this abuse repeatedly and continuously. Accordingly, schools must reopen so students get the breathing space they do not have at home.

**iii.** The most important reason why schools have to reopen is the sheer denial of access to education to a big chunk of students. As suggested in the UN Report cited above, a whopping 463 million students simply do not have the means to study through the online mode. Remote education is simply not an option for the poorest of the poor. It is impractical, almost insensible to imagine that people who may hardly have access to food would have the resources or the skill set to access remote education. The digital divide that exists in so many countries can simply not be ignored.

The example of Sub-Saharan Africa suits the best here, with over 50 percent students not being able to access remote learning. Methods such as online education, TV, etc has not worked at all.

On top of that, there are numerous other perils of online education. Students may tend to develop problems with eyesight. Others may even get too engrossed in the virtual media to stop doing any physical work at all.

**iv.** The fact that various reports have now established that the corona virus is not likely to affect younger children further adds to why schools can be reopened. There is enough evidence to suggest that children rarely develop severe symptoms from COVID-19.

#### **b. Arguments against reopening of schools**

**i.** It is extremely difficult to make little children understand and follow the norms of social distancing. In fact, to expect them to be able to wear masks for longer durations too is far-fetched.

**ii.** The risk of infection spreading in the community is actually very high with the reopening of schools. This is because children generally show no symptoms of the virus. As such, it may not become apparent as to which children are having the virus and which are not. Consequently, the virus may spread from the children to adults, such as teachers or caretakers as well and thereby to the community.

**iii.** The risk of the virus spreading from one child to another can also not be overemphasized. Whereas the virus does not show symptoms in most cases, it does exhibit them in some, and that may lead to problems.

#### **Findings and Conclusion**

##### **1. General position**

After studying the response of countries vis-à-vis reopening of schools during the pandemic and subsequently weighing the pros and cons of reopening of schools, the author's research suggests that there is more merit in the argument that schools must be reopened. However, it is no wonder that if schools do reopen, the safety measures and precautions that are to be taken must be a notch higher than any other place. The research and reports suggests that with time passing, the stain of the virus is not as powerful as it was initially. The chances of the virus affecting a child in any way are very bleak. On the contrary, the largesse of the problems that a child may face being at home, with their being no access to remote learning, food or other problems discussed above,

it is in the interest of the child that he be allowed to return to school. Accordingly, in response to the primary objectives of the research, it is concluded that schools must be reopened and online education is not a feasible alternative given the numerous issues that surround the same.

As far as the secondary objectives of research are concerned, the author is inclined to conclude that indeed, it will not be feasible to apply a one size fits all formula and open schools everywhere. Instead, it will be much better an alternative to open schools in a phase wise manner. Areas where the virus has not spread as much or where it has been controlled may actually consider opening the schools with all due precautions in place. The role of the government here becomes supremely important. The Establishment must release guidelines to be followed by all schools, for which, cue may be taken from the five European countries that have gone for reopening. Insofar as the second secondary objective goes, it is concluded that online education may be adopted partially now, till reaches to each segment of society. Specially with reference to the children of age group between 6 to 14 years of age. Because its fruits are being borne only by the rich and the elite, however, innovative ways of pedagogy must be considered to curtail the spread of virus even as the schools reopen.

### The Indian Position

The author analysed the Indian position in particular in light of the recent order issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs on August 29, 2020 (*Supra*). In the light of forgoing discussion, the recent Indian position analysed as follows:

- **Firstly**, as noted and discussed at length above, online education is not reaching a vast majority of students, with the problem being further worse in developing and underdeveloped economies. Amid such a situation, the need of the hour was to find a way out to help such students, instead of insensitively continuing with online education that benefits only a select few. Interest of the underprivileged and venerable segments need to be taken into consideration.
- **Secondly**, the clause that students between standards 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> will be allowed to go to schools to take guidance and an order to the effect that students would be permitted to go to schools for practical experiments and activities would have been more welcome. Though possibility that, it will be highly unlikely that parents would be willing to send students to schools for taking guidance. It is to note that it is not only students from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> standards who need to be brought back to school, but even the younger ones. Students between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standards already have their foundations built, whereas the even younger ones are still in the process thereof. The damage of keeping little children away from the schools could have far worse consequences than keeping the older ones.
- **Thirdly**, from a legal standpoint too, the Right to Education Act, 2009 provides for free and compulsory education to children between 6 and 14 years of age. There is need to help children between such ages to continue their education, especially those belonging to the poor and marginalised sections of the population, the Right to free Education of these many students stands unrealised. As discussed earlier online education for those may violation of the fundamental right of free education.
- **Fourthly**, the provisions of fundamental rights under Part III and various principles forming a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined under Part IV of the Constitution of India cannot be ignored when we are restoring to the normal circumstances.

Article 41 of the Constitution of India provides that the State shall take endeavours to and make provisions for securing inter alia the Right to Education, within the limits of its economic capacity and development. At the moment, not just with the reserves that India has maintained over the years but also with the PM Cares Fund, education for all must be made a priority and state must do everything in its capacity to ensure that the poor and the marginalised who do not have access to online education do not go unnoticed and adequate arrangements are made for them too.

Likewise, Article 45 provides that the State shall endeavour to provide free and compulsory education to children up to the age of 14 years, which is also the mandate of the Right to Education Act and Article 21-A of the Constitution. Clearly, the instant principle is also not being abided by. The recent most order also provides an option to students to go to school to seek guidance from teachers, but no such provision has been made for younger children. Accordingly, the bracket that is the worst affected and is simply not getting any relief vis-à-vis education children below the age of 14 years. More needs to be done to cater to their needs as well.

Article 46, that provides that the State shall promote the “educational” and “economic” interest of the weaker sections, and especially the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, is the farthest from seeing the light of the day in the current state of affairs. As discussed above, with online education being pushed, the weaker sections are being taken further away from education. Thus, immediate action must be taken to preserve the interests of the weak and vulnerable.

In light of all the observations made above, it is duly submitted that schools in India must reopen with immediate effect. The Government has both a legal and a moral duty to ensure that not a single child goes unaddressed in this pandemic. It is ex-facie apparent that online education is not serving the weakest of the weakest in the quintile. At the same time social realities in a diversified countries shall also be of paramount consideration. Accordingly, schools must reopen, even if in a phased manner and not all at once. This also entails that as per the mandate of Article 41, the state must utilise its vast economic capacity to ensure the aforesaid. In fact, any further delay in ensuring education for our students can be disastrous for their future and the future of the country. On the contrary it may improve the mental health of the little children. Adequate safety measures, thorough planning and strict implementation of health guidelines coupled with the desire to ensure that education reaches all is the only saving grace for our children, “the children of the pandemic”.

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