

22 India (Telangana): Remote learning and village learning circles for disadvantaged students

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Type of intervention: governmental

Website: <https://www.tswreis.in>

General description

As a result of the spread of COVID-19, a strict national lockdown was announced in India on 22 March 2020, during which movement was limited to only essential services. All students at schools run by the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS) were sent home the next day from their residential schooling premises. On 20 April 2020, less than a month after the school closures, the TSWREIS schools began to deploy remote learning strategies to ensure the children they serve, who were already at a disadvantage as they belong to marginalised communities, were able to continue their learning.

TSWREIS is an autonomous body under the Scheduled Caste Development Department of the state government of Telangana. It runs residential educational institutions with the primary objective of providing high-quality education to children of scheduled caste communities in Telangana. Scheduled castes are one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised socio-economic groups in India.

The TSWREIS educational institutions follow a “plate to slate” approach: their residential schooling provides holistic support to students spanning education, food, sanitation and clothing, among others. Its schools reserve 75% of seats for scheduled caste communities and the remaining seats for other

marginalised groups (e.g. scheduled tribes, backward classes). TSWREIS is an autonomous organisation which provides it a high degree of operational independence.

As of 2020, TSWREIS runs 268 English medium residential educational institutions serving Grade 5 to undergraduate level programmes, supported by approximately 7 800 teachers. Of these 268 institutions, 65% (174 institutions) are entirely for girls, including 30 tertiary education colleges for women. TSWREIS thus supports approximately 150 000 students, of which roughly more than 100 000 are girls.

Within less than a month of the school closures, TSWREIS began to deploy its remote learning strategy to ensure the children it serves were able to continue their learning. TSWREIS used innovative yet simple methods such as mobile phones (e.g. WhatsApp and phone calls) as well educational television lessons to support student learning and teacher training during the lockdown. Once the lockdown was lifted and small gatherings were allowed but school had still not resumed, student-led [“village learning circles”](#) were started by students with the aim of ensuring students without access to other forms of remote learning (e.g. mobile phone or TV-based lessons) were not left behind.

The main components of the strategy are discussed below.

Providing learning materials to disadvantaged students. WhatsApp was used by teachers to share lesson guidance, worksheet activities and lesson videos to students as well as for training teachers and providing guidance to parents. Later, TV lessons were provided to ensure that educational continuity could be provided to the TSWREIS student body, which includes some of the most marginalised socio-economic groups in India.

Student-led physically distanced peer learning in village learning circles. To ensure students without any other way of accessing remote learning lessons were not left behind, older students and peers within communities took the initiative to start in-person, student-led village learning circles. These started as the lockdown was lifted in India when small gatherings were allowed but schools had not resumed. Village learning circles are [student-led lessons](#) for peers or for younger children in groups of five to ten, including students beyond the purview of the TSWREIS schools. Students used any space available to them to conduct lessons in homes, churches, temples, community centres, panchayat offices or even [fields](#). TSWREIS has set a goal of having 50 000 village learning circles before schools reopen to ensure educational continuity for all its students.

Involving community leaders and teachers in the learning circles. In many cases, [community members and religious leaders](#) have come forward to support students with spaces for circles. To encourage and strengthen these village learning circles, teachers living in communities have started to lead village learning circles as well. The success of village learning circles has now made them a critical part of TSWREIS’s institutional remote learning strategy to reach all of its students.

Providing teacher training and supporting parents. During school closures, TSWREIS also brought forward remote initiatives to train teachers in preparation for the upcoming school year as well as to equip parents with the support and guidance they needed to cope with this difficult period and support their children’s well-being.

Main problems addressed

The main problems addressed were:

- ensuring education continuity during lockdown through mobile and online tools
- ensuring education continuity and enhancing learning when small gathering with physical distance were allowed
- engaging teachers and the community in supporting students’ learning
- providing teachers and parents with support and guidance during the pandemic.

Mobilising and developing resources

The initiative was made possible by several existing resources, including human resources that help to repurpose existing resources and develop new ones.

An existing education TV channel. TSWREIS included an educational TV channel, T-SAT, that it had been using regularly to communicate with its 268 educational institutions once a month. T-SAT is the satellite TV network operated by Society for Telangana State Network (SoFTNET) under the aegis of the Department of Information Technology, Electronics and Communication of the government of Telangana. This was leveraged to deploy regular TV lessons for students during the school closures under the programme name “[Gnaana Deeksha](#)”, and students were able to watch live as teachers presented their lesson on TV. As of July 2020, TSWREIS partnered with a national channel, Doordarshan, which has wide reach across the state and deploys lessons under the programme name “[Gnaana Deeksha 2.0](#)” (Government of Telangana, 2017^[1]).

Mobile and digital technology. Alongside WhatsApp, an existing [mobile app, T-SAT](#), and an existing YouTube channel, [T-SAT network](#), were used to make TV lessons available as on-demand content. Content was uploaded within less than 30 minutes of the completion of the live TV broadcasts, thereby providing students who were unable to watch the live TV lessons with immediate access to the lessons.

Mobilising teachers. Existing TSWREIS teachers were leveraged to create the educational TV lessons. Pedagogically strong teachers were selected by the TSWREIS academic team to develop and present lessons. The academic team further trained these teachers to equip them to present lessons via television, which requires different skills than classroom-based teaching. Before each TV lesson, teachers sent the content to the academic team who provided feedback. The teachers then gave a practice presentation of the lesson to the academic team who gave further feedback to improve it.

Engaging the expertise of other stakeholders

- **Principals and regional co-ordinators.** School principals and regional co-ordinators (who co-ordinate multiple TSWREIS schools within a region in Telangana) were leveraged to train and support teachers as they deployed WhatsApp-based lessons for students.
- **Administrators and technicians.** In-house administrators and technicians with expertise in broadcast media and TV were leveraged to support the speedy deployment of educational TV lessons for students.
- **Academic team.** The in-house TSWREIS team of academic experts was leveraged to identify, train and support teachers and academic subject experts to develop and present TV lessons.

Fostering effective use and learning

TSWREIS deployed a three-pronged approach to encourage the use of its remote learning response and so is more likely to lead to actual learning. The approach was aimed at each of its key stakeholders: students, teachers and parents. This was rolled out in phases to ensure the speed of response was balanced with the quality of the response.

Support for students

In Phase I, students were divided into groups of 10-15 and a teacher was assigned to each group. Teachers were tasked with sending lessons, worksheets and videos via WhatsApp. Students were required to complete worksheets and send them back to teachers, who would provide regular feedback. Teachers were also requested to call students and provide them with one-on-one support, when needed. Phase I was deployed for Grades 5-10.

Phase II involved the roll out of remote learning lessons deployed via educational TV and was additionally deployed for Grades 11 and 12 and undergraduate level students. Education TV lessons went beyond purely academic subjects to ensure a more holistic approach. For example, sports lessons were offered on topics such as exercise, diet and stamina, with sports experts supporting their delivery. Music teachers also shared lessons via WhatsApp. Students had to send pictures and videos of them practising the sports and music activities they were assigned.

In Phase III, four multi-grade lessons per week were broadcast on the governmental TV broadcasting network, Doordarshan, for 30 minutes each, allowing for far greater reach. At the end of each TV lesson, students were assigned activities or homework to complete. It is also in Phase III that peer learning in the form of student-led village learning circles started, with students teaching other students, especially those without access to remote learning.

Support for teachers

Teacher training on the flipped classroom method via WhatsApp. Teachers were trained on TSWREIS's "Freedom School" model, which is based on the flipped classroom method. This involved a ten-day teacher training virtual workshop via WhatsApp as a pilot for roughly 100 teachers. The "Freedom School" model is a largely discussion-based classroom that aims to encapsulate greater equity between teachers and students in the classroom. Training material and worksheets were shared with teachers every morning around 10 a.m. during the ten-day period. Teachers were required to send back their completed worksheets to their trainers via WhatsApp around 4 p.m. daily. Around 8 p.m. each night, trainers would return these worksheets to teachers along with feedback and a review of their work.

Teacher training to improve English communication via WhatsApp. Data from a regular pre-pandemic teacher observation inspection were used to identify roughly 200 teachers who needed improvement in their English communication, lesson delivery and language content. Teachers were sent listening tasks in English via audio files on WhatsApp. They were required to send back scripts of the audio file to their master teacher trainers who sent back feedback to help them improve.

Video conferencing training to prepare teachers for the next academic year. Teacher training was also conducted via online video conferencing tools such as Zoom to prepare teachers for the next academic year. This was rolled out to more than half of TSWREIS's teachers (roughly 5 000 teachers). It consisted of a 6-day long training course of 1.5 hours a day, conducted in two separate batches to accommodate all teachers. Almost all teachers were involved, including those teaching art, crafts and music. Partnerships with other organisations such as the [Aga Khan Academy](#) and Aavishkar were leveraged for this online teacher training.

Support for parents

Parents were also provided support and guidance on how to support their children effectively during this lockdown period. Specifically, parents were given guidance on "future parenting" including, for example, how to support children during the difficult and confusing COVID-19 period, psychological development of children and career guidance, among others.

Implementation challenges

Reaching students without Internet access. Mobile phones and educational television were selected as the remote education delivery modes since they had the highest penetration in the communities served. However, TSWWREI estimated that roughly 20% of its families did not have smartphones, roughly 40% did not have Internet access at home and roughly 10% did not have access to a television. This made it more difficult for TSWREIS to reach all its students. In addition, there is often only one mobile phone in the family, which typically belongs to the head of the household. This limits the amount of screen time that can

be used to support TSWREIS's students to continue their learning at home. To mitigate these challenges, teachers used phone calls with students who did not have access to the Internet, WhatsApp or TV lessons to support them more directly. School principals and regional co-ordinators were tasked with monitoring to ensure that teacher support reached all students.

Distribution of learning resources. To ensure further distribution of learning resources, TSWREIS teachers began recording short three-minute lessons that encapsulated the main content of the lesson. These were stored on pen drives and distributed to different regions with TSWREIS students.

The demand on teacher resources. Another challenge faced by TSWREIS at the teacher level was the transition to educational television for teachers. TV lesson development and delivery were challenging and time consuming and some teachers were unable to put in the additional time required due to their own personal challenges at home supporting their own families. To tackle this, the team of in-house academic experts reached out to teachers who were willing and able to take on the task of developing and delivering TV lessons and ensured that these teachers were continuously supported.

Monitoring success

To monitor the success of the initiative, teachers provided regular reports via WhatsApp to school principals who in turn were required to provide reports to regional co-ordinators twice a week. These reports captured updates regarding remote learning programmes including lessons conducted, activities provided and student participation. Feedback from key stakeholders (students and parents) was also collected during random spot checks to understand the effectiveness of these strategies.

Weekly schedules were developed for student teachers to follow when leading village learning circles and structures have been put in place to ensure the regular monitoring of these, including in-person visits from regional co-ordinators. Guidelines were provided to student teachers to ensure circles are following COVID-19 health protocols.

Once in-classroom schooling resumes, TSWREIS aims to conduct summative assessments to assess the overall impact of remote learning strategies. This will be used to adjust the curriculum and lessons to be conducted to ensure students are supported and learning loss is minimised.

Adaptability to new contexts

This model of supporting students via mobile technology using WhatsApp and education television as well as conducting teacher training and providing guidance to parents via WhatsApp can be used as part of a remote learning strategy in a range of contexts. It is being used by small organisations and by several states in India. The model of the village learning circles can also easily be used in other contexts, including beyond the pandemic, although perhaps with less monitoring.

Once TSWREIS schools reopen, these interventions and solutions may no longer continue as part of daily operations, but they will be maintained as standard emergency protocol.

Box 22.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

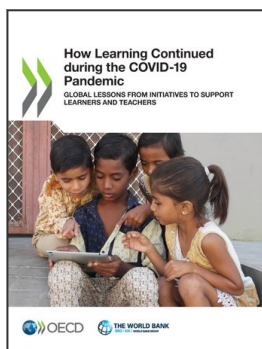
1. For greater educational continuity and reach within a short time span, use simple existing technology already readily available to most stakeholders; for example, mobile technology using WhatsApp and television.
2. Ensure all key stakeholders are supported, including students, teachers and parents, as they form an ecosystem, meaning that support given to one type of stakeholder impacts other stakeholders as well. It is not enough to support students without supporting parents as parental guidance at home has an important impact on the well-being of students.
3. Use simple yet innovative ideas such as WhatsApp virtual workshops in which teachers are given training material and worksheets every day to complete, which are returned to master teachers and feedback is provided to them the same day. This is a simple way to ensure teachers are being supported and training continues during the school closure period using simple technology.
4. Ensure that there is a plan to support all students. For example, TSWREIS identified that not all its students had access to a smartphone, Internet and/or TV. Even when they had access to a phone, this was for a limited amount of time per day. Thus, TSWREIS deployed learning content across a variety of modes so that students could use the mode that best suits their needs. Additionally, teachers were tasked with phoning those students who did not have access to any other mode of education delivery.

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