

Understanding school attendance: The missing link in “Schooling for All”

Abstract

India is close to its goal of achieving 100 % school enrolment for children in the age group of 5–16 years. However, this does not correspond with universal school attendance. Not all children who are enrolled attend school regularly. Enrolment is, at best only “nominal” for them. In this study, we examine the ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ side factors behind low attendance by drawing upon a new dataset on adolescents in India- Understanding Adults and Young Adolescents (UDAYA) for Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Results indicate that girls and older students are more likely to be absent from school. Married girls were more likely to be absent than their unmarried peers. Engaging in unpaid work also deter children from attending school regularly, although surprisingly, there is no significant difference between children who are not working and children engaged in paid work in terms of absenteeism. Religion, affluence, and school type also have a significant influence on attendance. Surprisingly, absenteeism did not emerge to be significant when proficiency in math as a marker of academic performance is taken into consideration. Provisioning of infrastructure can be a particularly effective means towards increasing attendance, as can be the contribution of teachers when considered as positive role models.

Introduction

The annual ASER survey for the year 2018 indicates that India is close to achieving 100 percent enrolment for children in the age group of 5–16 years. At the all- India level, only about 5% of the children in this age group were out-of-school.¹ Predictably, there are inter-state variations, but almost all states have now recorded enrolment beyond 90 % (see Fig. 1 below). Close to 100 percent enrolment is recorded in states like Kerala (99.6 %), Tamil Nadu (99.4 %), and Mizoram (99.1 %). Even educationally “backward” states as Bihar (94.2 %), Madhya Pradesh (92.4 %), Rajasthan (93.9 %), and Uttar Pradesh (91.7 %) record enrolment rate in this age group in upwards of 90 percent.

However, unlike developed countries, close to universal enrolment in India does not correspond with universal school attendance (Alcott et al., 2018; Kaul et al., 2017; Bhattacharjea et al., 2011). We illustrate this in Table 1, which gives school attendance on the day of the visit of the ASER survey team to schools (both primary-I to IV/ V and upper primary schools- I to VII/ VIII) in rural India. Overall about 30 percent of children were not present, with variations across states ranging from 11 % in Gujarat to 40 % in Uttar Pradesh (ASER Centre, 2018). Low attendance, thus, is a pan-Indian problem, which merits serious attention from educationists, policymakers, and researchers.

Further, children are not only irregularly absent, there is chronic absenteeism too. In the US, chronic absenteeism is defined as being absent for 18 days or more (Rogers and Feller, 2016). There is no official/ administrative data source that allows us to cull out information on chronic absenteeism in India. In its absence, we draw on the nationally representative India Human Development Survey (2005–06 and 2011–12) to get a sense of the percentage of children who reported themselves to be absent for 15 days or more in the month preceding the survey. In the first wave of the IHDS (2005), about 7% of boys² and 6% of girls reported themselves to be absent for a fortnight or more. The corresponding percentage is 5% for both boys and girls in IHDS 2012. Studies smaller in scale focussing on specific geographic area confirms the evidence of chronic absenteeism- for example, a study in 10 schools in rural Telangana found that 76 % of the students had missed 10 % or more of school days and 56 % had missed 15 % or more (Amor et al., 2020, see also the studies cited therein).

Moreover, the Covid-19 outbreak is likely to worsen the problem of school absenteeism. The closure of schools has itself adversely impacted 320 million students in India³, and as schools re-open, absenteeism rates may get exacerbated as children keep away from them because of fear of infection. Indeed, a recent survey conducted by the Centre for Global

Development across Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan found that more than 6% of children reported that they are unlikely to return to school (Akmal et al., 2020). School enrolment without attendance signals that children are unable to access school meaningfully, and their enrolment is at best “nominal”. It is a form of exclusion (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2012) that must be addressed if the goal of “learning for all”⁴ (ASER 2016) is to be achieved. National Education Policy (Ministry of Human Resource Development and Government of India, 2020) and Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education too necessitate school attendance. It is also self-evident that if children are not in school, all policy efforts to improve the quality of education as envisaged in the various policy documents as well as the Right to Education Act (2009) are meaningless. Yet, there has been no systematic attempt to understand school absenteeism and the relative contribution of different factors. We hope to bridge this gap in the literature using the recently collected UDAYA (Understanding Adolescents and Young Adults) data by the Population Council. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 below details the importance of regular school attendance. Section 3 elaborates on the factors influencing absenteeism. Data and methods are given in Section 4, followed by a description of the results in Section 5. We end with a discussion and conclusion (Section 6).

Section snippets

Absenteeism as a form of exclusion

Enrolment is the first stage in a four-stage process of meaningful access to education (Humphreys et al., 2015: 135). Enrolment in school must be followed by regular school attendance which must in turn be followed by regular class attendance and finally, access to the curriculum to ensure meaningful learning. The paper focuses on the second stage- viz., regular school non-attendance of children when they are otherwise formally enrolled, without which the remaining two stages towards

A demand- supply framework to understand school absenteeism

Reasons for student absenteeism span a wide spectrum- family, economic and social marginalization, physical and mental health, behavioural and psychological factors, and societal norms. A framework that is often used to study the reasons behind absenteeism (as also dropout) focuses on the range of factors that emerge from the child’s individual and household background as well as the characteristics of the school in which s(h)e attends which are in turn situated in the larger societal and

Data

This paper draws on the UDAYA (Understanding Adults and Young Adolescents) data collected by Population Council on 20, 574 adolescents between the ages 10–19 in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP) to study a wide range of parameters such as education, schooling, employability, entry into marriage and motherhood, violence experienced in private and public spheres, gender norms and agency, access to media and technology, health and nutrition, parental engagement and entitlements associated with the

Descriptive statistics

Fig. 2, Fig. 3 illustrate the gender and age differential in absenteeism. Boys are more regular in attending school than girls. Absenteeism increases as children get older, with the gender differences widening further.

Bivariate distribution (Table 6) confirms that absenteeism is higher among married than unmarried women; married women without *gauna* appear to be between these extreme categories. Likewise, full attendance is higher among children who are not working than those doing paid or

Discussion

In this paper, we draw attention to the second stage of meaningful access to education- viz., regular school attendance. Our contribution to the literature lies in highlighting that universal enrolment in India has not translated into regular school attendance. We contribute by presenting an analysis of the factors behind low attendance by drawing upon a new dataset on adolescents in India- Understanding Adults and Young Adolescents (UDAYA) for Bihar and Uttar Pradesh using multivariate