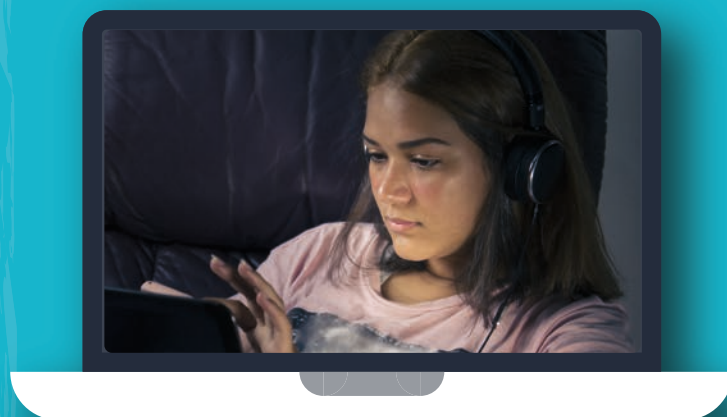
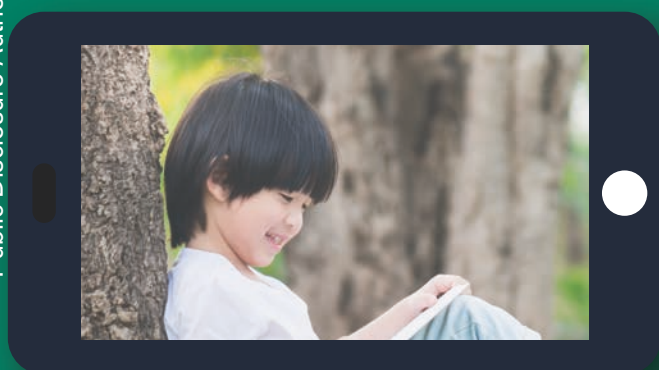
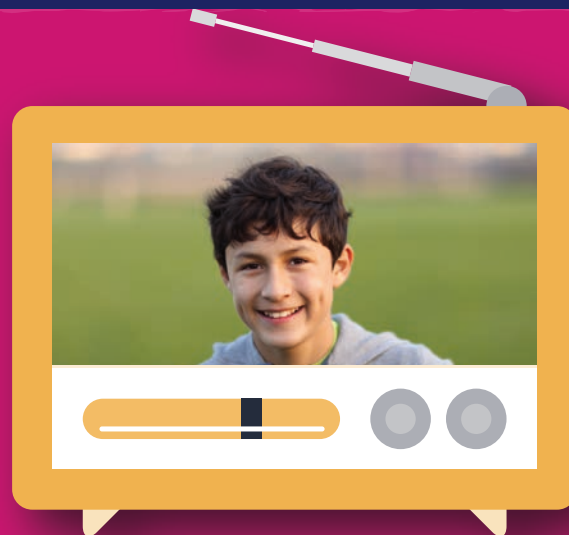


Education continuity during the Coronavirus crisis

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

Sharon Zacharia



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## General description

As a result of the spread of COVID-19, a strict national lockdown was announced in India on 22 March 2020 in which movement was limited to only essential services. This led to all students at schools run by the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS) being 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 are 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 in India. It runs residential educational institutions with the primary aim of providing high-quality education to children of Scheduled Caste (SC) 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 amongst others. Its schools reserve 75% of seats for

The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.



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Scheduled Caste (SCs) communities and the remaining seats for other marginalised groups (e.g. Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes). TSWREIS is an autonomous organisation with greater operational independence than state schools, which come under the direct purview of the Telangana state government.

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

Within less than a month of the school closures in India, TSWREIS began to deploy its remote learning strategy to ensure the children they serve were able to continue their learning. TSWREIS used innovative yet simple methods such as mobile phones (e.g. WhatsApp and phone calls) as well education television (TV) 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 begun, 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 its strategy are as follows.

*Providing learning materials to disadvantaged students.* WhatsApp was used by teachers to share lesson guidance, worksheets 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 form 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 begun. Village Learning Circles are [student-led lessons](#) for peers or for younger children in groups of 5-10, including students beyond the purviews 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 thousand Village Learning Circles before schools reopen to ensure educational continuity for all their 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 have now made them a critical part of TSWREIS’s institutional remote learning strategy to reach all 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 wellbeing.

### Main problems addressed

The main problems addressed were the following:

- 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 already had an education TV channel, T-SAT, that it had been using regularly to communicate with its 268 educational institutions once a month. 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”.

*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 education 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 some different skills than classroom-based teaching. Before each television lesson, teachers sent the content to the academic team who provided feedback. The teachers would then give a practice presentation of the lesson to the academic team who gave further feedback to strengthen facilitation.

### *Engaging the expertise of other stakeholders*

- *Principals and Regional Coordinators.* School principals and regional coordinators (who coordinate 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 education 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 make their remote learning response used and more likely to lead to actual learning. The approach aimed at each of its key stakeholders: students, teachers and parents. This was rolled out in phases in order 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 one 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 to 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, 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. each day during the 10-day period along. 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 was 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. Teachers were required to send back scripts of the audio file to their master teacher trainers who would send 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 the TSWREIS 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 in this, including those teaching art, craft 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 amongst others.

## Implementation challenges

*Reaching students without internet access.* Mobile phones and education television were selected as the remote education delivery modes since these had the highest penetration in the communities served. However, TSWWREI estimated that roughly 20% of their families did not have smartphones, roughly 40% did not have internet connectivity at home and roughly 10% did not have access to television. This made it more difficult for TSWREIS to reach all their 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 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 coordinators 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 3-minute short lessons that encapsulated the main content of lessons. These were stored onto 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 education 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 academic team of in-house academic experts reached out to teachers who were willing and able to take on the task of development and delivery of TV lessons and ensured that these teachers were continuously supported.

## Monitoring success

In order to monitor the success of the initiative, teachers provided regular reports via WhatsApp to school principals who in turn were required to provide these weekly reports to regional coordinators 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 spot checks at random 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 regular monitoring of these, including in-person visits from Regional Coordinators. Guidelines were provided to student teachers to ensure circles are following COVID-19 health protocols.

Once in-classroom schooling re-starts, 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 can be used by small organisations but can also be scaled across states and national education systems as is happening in the state of Telangana 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 re-open, these interventions and solutions may no longer continue as part of daily operations, but they will be maintained as standard emergency protocol.

## 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 also. It is not enough to support students without supporting parents as parental guidance at home has a big impact on the wellbeing of students.
3. **Use simple yet innovative ideas such as WhatsApp virtual workshops** in which teachers are given training material and worksheets each day to complete, they 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 their students had access to smartphones, internet and/or TV in their households. 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 making phone calls to those students who did not have access to any other mode of education delivery.

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