

# Challenges Faced by Students with Illiterate Parents: Insights from Teachers – An Interview Study Using Thematic Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Although, the education system has done some work in the field of education for children with disadvantaged backgrounds in India, it has its own share of shortcomings. This paper qualitatively analyses the challenges of children with illiterate parents in private schools in India under the 25% reservation for the underprivileged through (RTE Act of 2009). Insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers from an English medium private school in Dehradun, India. Themes identified through thematic analysis were irregularity at school, inferiority complex, parents Illiteracy, additional academic assistance and the pandemic challenge. These findings emphasize that the capacity of disadvantaged parent/caregiver to provide a wholesome, nurturing and conducive environment is highly challenging in a country like India. The challenges include a combination of poverty, lack of education and skills, as well as social isolation. This paper suggests areas for policy implementations and areas for future research.

**Keywords:** Illiterate parents, education, India, teachers, teaching support

*“Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression.”*

– Dr. Haim Ginott

Children are central to civilization because they are our prospects; they are the possessor of the key to revolution. It is society’s responsibility to offer them a full-well-rounded education that shows them how to work together productively, how to inquire what is leading them, and how to be the substances of revolution. Access to education and guidance is not available to everyone. We need to understand in what ways children’s education is affected and what are the challenges they face in gaining formal education if they have illiterate parents. Research has shown that the home background plays an important part in a child’s coordination to literacy, but home background is an amalgamation of financial, communal, national and personal aspects (Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2005).

Each achievement of a child, whether language and learning, social development or the emergence of self-regulation, occurs in the context of close relationships with others. These close relationships are typically with parents or those who perform the caregiving role in the child’s life (Shonkoff, Phillips & National Research Council, 2000). A primary caregiver’s ability to provide a healthy, nurturing and inspiring environment for the children is pivotal (Chandrasekhar & Sharma, 2014). However caregivers in India, especially those living in rural

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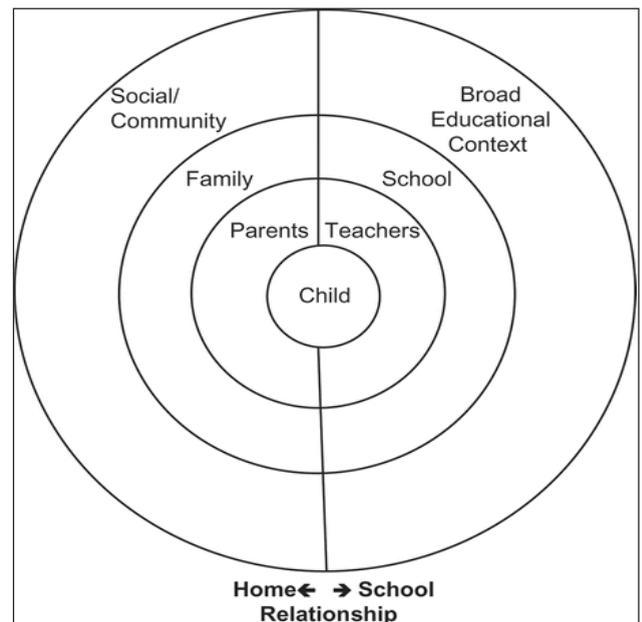


communities, face many challenges which include poverty, lack of education and skills as well as social isolation. Many families migrate from rural to urban areas to provide access to basic education to their children which is not available in many small villages across the country. These factors directly and indirectly affect the children’s ability to perform in their education. There are four migration areas: rural to rural, rural to urban, urban to rural, and urban to urban. Chandrasekhar & Sharma (2014) suggest that the primary reason for the migration is employment and access to quality primary and secondary schools, which in some states like Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan in India is a real problem. It is not surprising that these states also have a shortage of institutes of higher learning. Parental involvement in education is a concern both in developed and developing areas as this positively impacts educational access, retention and quality in the schooling to benefit children (Makunga, 2015). Much of the literature on parental involvement in the developed countries focuses on the role of parents both at school and at home, indirectly supporting their children’s academic development (Brown, te Riele, Shelley & Woodroffe, 2020; Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2005; Ejaz, 2009). Numerous studies have shown that parents are more likely to be involved with their children’s education at home rather than at school. In addition, this research demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between involvement at home and a range of school related outcomes including academic achievement, school engagement and social involvement (Brown *et al.* 2020; Driessen *et al.* 2005; Ejaz, 2009; Farris & Denner, 1991).

With the outbreak of COVID-19 India implemented complete closure of schools since March 2020. The pandemic has severely disrupted the education sector, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Around 32 crores (320 million) students are estimated to be affected by the pandemic according to UNESCO report (United Nations, 2020). The inevitable backlash of the lockdown is expected to increase the permanent dropout amongst poor and disadvantaged students due to financial struggles, lack of internet facilities, inability to attend online classes, and technological illiteracy (Jina, 2020).

### School-Home relationship and spheres of influence

According to Driessen *et al.* (2005) various terms like parental involvement, parental participation, school-home relations, educational partnership are used to refer to the cooperation between parents, teachers and schools. Internationally, the term ‘partnership’ is used to give form to the concept of cooperative relations between schools, parents and the local community (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Such a partnership is interpreted as the process in which those involved mutually support each other and offer their contributions to aid the learning, motivation and development of students. It is assumed that at least some of the objectives of the various institutions, such as support for the development and school carers of children, are shared, and therefore best reached by communicating and cooperating. The compatibility between the different spheres of influence is seen to be of considerable importance for the excellent development of children and partnership is observed as a means to attain this. The sphere of influences and their relationships can be comprehended by the given model of the school-home relationship (Fig. 1) as it depicts the closest environmental influences that effects a child’s development (Vostanis *et al.* 2012).



**Fig. 1:** The school-home relationship in the education of the child. Adapted from Vostanis *et al.* (2012).

Also, parental involvement practices, regardless of other practices executed at home or at school,

have been found to influence children's academic performance (Hill & Tyson, 2009). For schools, parents can serve as educational partners by supporting them in developing a student's full academic potential and tracking the quality of teaching and teaching facilities available in school. Thus, increasing or enhancing parental involvement has been identified as a central component in major educational policies and reforms worldwide. It is therefore suggested that parents, by their participation in their children's education, form the third link in the triangle with their children and their children's teachers in developing the necessary environment for the success of their children's education (Jaiswal, 2017).

### Background and contextual information

Literacy problems are the most dominant to all kinds of flaws in communal, financial and public milieus (UNESCO, 2014). India has a third of the world's illiterate population. During Independence, India's population was around 370 million and each Indian woman on an average had six children. The population was largely very young and more than 80% of the population was illiterate; the population multiplied rapidly, raising apprehensions about the sufficiency of food supply and development prospects in general. Around 1965, India's population was 500 million and in 2000 it touched 1 billion. Some problems such as food production turned out to be better than presumed, while others, such as lack of education and poverty, were worse than predicted. It is observed that in the 1970s still far more than half of the entire adult population had never received any formal education and that this unfavorable situation has changed only very slowly. Still, by 1990, half of the adult population had never been to school (Fig. 2) showing the evolution of one century of India's population by standard of education (Samir, Wurzer, Springer & Lutz, 2018).

Civilization is much more challenging when the literacy status of people is the center of concern. During recent years, no other issue has dominated the development debate as vigorously in India than basic education and made the judicial institution, the Supreme Court pass a judgement that the right to education must be seen in consolidation with right to life (MHRD, 2009). The Indian

Parliament amended the constitution, through the 86<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment, making the right to education a fundamental right for children between 6 and 14 years of age in India. Governments of different states like Bihar, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh that were already popularizing non-formal educational schemes, launched the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) aimed at educating all out-of-school children after the enactment of constitution 86<sup>th</sup> amendment act in December 2002 (Kumar, 2006). The Rights to Education (RTE) Act is an act of Indian Parliament which was enacted on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2009 and came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010 after further amendments such as the inclusion of 25% reservations for disadvantaged students in private schools (MHRD, 2009). The present study discusses the challenges of the students availing these 25% of reserved seats in private schools in the RTE act of 2009.

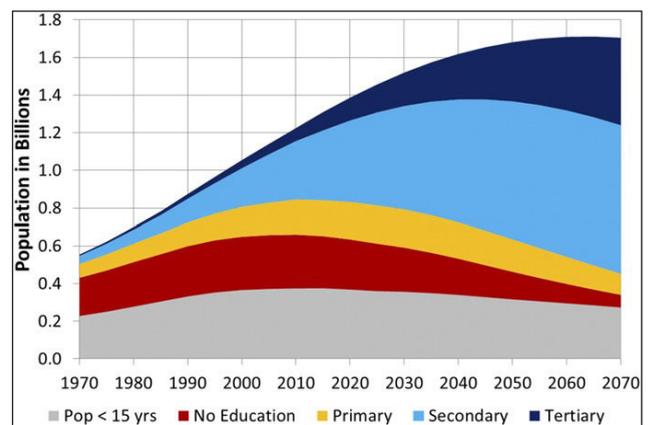


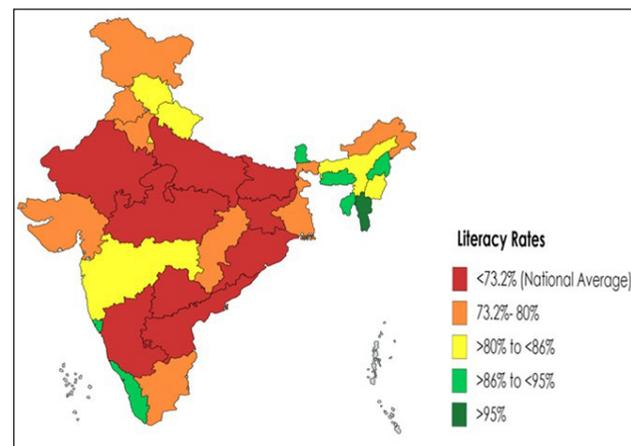
Fig. 2: India's population by level of education. Adapted from Wurzer, Springer and Lutz, 2018)

Currently in India out of hundred students, 29% of girls and boys drop out of school before completing the full cycle of basic education, and often they are the most marginalized children. The majority (75%) of the out of school children (OOSC) are concentrated in six states (Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal (United Nations, 2020). A report launched by UNESCO showed that only 29% of seats reserved for disadvantaged students in India were filled in 2013-14. The report provides a comparison of fill-rate of RTE 25% quota seats across private schools in 28 states, based on the analysis of District Information System for Education (DISE) 2013-14 data. The analysis of seat fill rate reveals huge variance across states. In Madhya Pradesh,

the fill rate was as high as 88% whereas in Andhra Pradesh (prior to the division of the state into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), it was as low as 0.2% (Chandra & Gap, 2019; United Nations, 2020).

### The challenges to parental involvement

According to LaBahn (1995), the parental involvement in their children’s education when the parents are illiterate could be challenging because of several reasons. Some parents do not want to go to school because of the stigma associated with illiteracy, they do not feel confident to talk to teachers, as they don’t know English (stigma of illiteracy). In addition, parents have to work to maintain the financial standing of the family. In particular, if there has been or is a personal challenge in the family (divorce, health, illness), they probably have trouble financially (LaBahn, 1995) (scarcity of time). Also, parents might have a bad experience or ill memories at school during their school life either having been victims of school violence or having failed in school (ill experience). Finally, it could be that the school does not care about the parental involvement in education, and in this case, parents feel unwanted at school (insensitiveness from the school authorities). When the school is insensitive to this alteration, the student/family could feel humiliated (Kim, 2009; LaBahn, 1995).



**Fig. 3:** State-wise adult literacy performance in India for 2017-18. Adapted from Chandra (2019)

### Challenges in education during pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has appeared as the largest upheaval in education system in history affecting almost 1.6 million students in around 190 countries (United Nations, 2020). The closing down

of schools and other learning places has affected 94% of the world student’s population in low and middle-income countries (United Nations, 2020). The situation worsened the pre-existing education disparities by decreasing the opportunities for the most vulnerable students those residing in poor or rural areas. Females, refugees, people with disabilities especially are facing challenges to continue their learning. It is estimated that some 23.8 million additional children and youth may drop out or not have access to school in 2021 (United Nations, 2020).

### Growth and literacy in India

In 1978, The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP), the first countrywide programme, regarded literacy as a way to give birth to elementary changes in socio-economic development. It targeted 100 million illiterate people within the age group 15-35 in the education centers around the country. Based on the findings of the NAEP, the National Policy on Education (NEP) in 1986 recommended the formation of a National Literacy Mission (NLM) to design and conduct literacy programmes, and consequently the NLM introduced literacy campaigns in 1990 endorsing a well-structured campaign approach (Jaitly *et al.* 2012). The objective was to provide functional literacy to illiterates in the age group 15-35 years. The initial literacy campaign was followed up with post-literacy and continued education programmes aimed towards preventing relapse into illiteracy, to register dropouts and enable non-achievers to upgrade their literacy skills. Additionally, to various adult literacy programmes, the literacy rate of population in 7-14 age bracket has been directly influenced by the implementation of a number of basic education development programmes within the 1990’s, thereby being directly conducive to the overall literacy status of population in 7+ age group (Chandra & Gap, 2019).

According to Jaitly *et al.* (2012), illiteracy in India continues to exist at a disturbing rate; poverty and unemployment being the major reasons. Amongst every ten people four are illiterate in India and there is not any effective effort to eradicate this tragic number (Samir *et al.* 2018). Some states (Gujrat, UP, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh) have proposed and started programmes of setting up primary schools in every village, but these are yet to be efficiently

executed (Fig. 4). To eradicate the issue of illiteracy, it is integral that education must be made free and compulsory at least up to the age of 14, which is the plain directive of the Constitution. But even where education is free in India, it is not compulsory. However, recently, in the District of Kerala 100% literacy was achieved through combined efforts of the public and the government (Thengal, 2013). Education begins at birth and continues throughout life. Consequently, the social effects of illiteracy can be seen throughout the entire life cycle. During early childhood, the effects of illiteracy can be noticed within the family unit as well as the socialization process. Later, during adulthood, illiteracy impacts an individual's social position, income and cultural capital. Adult illiteracy increases a person's present and future socioeconomic vulnerability, and is a significant factor in the reproduction of such vulnerability through children, passing from generation to generation (Jaitly *et al.* 2012).

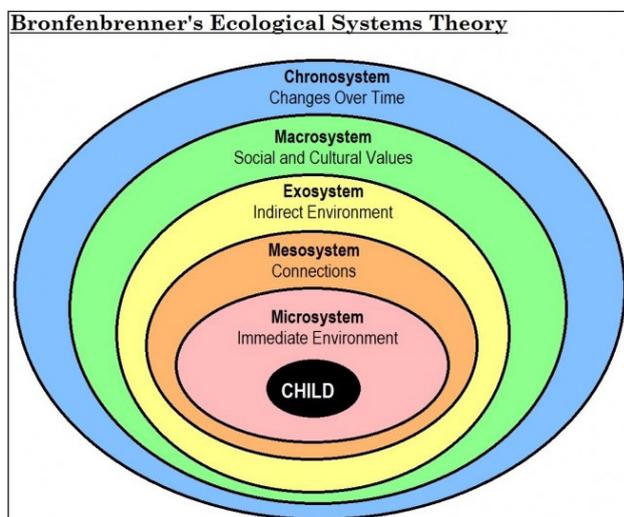


Fig. 4: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model.  
Adapted from Watson (2017)

According to census 2011 Kerala had 93.91% literacy compared to national literacy of 74.04% (Chandran, 1994). The Kerala Government has not only focused on children's education but also on adult education. The Athulyam scheme, the literacy mission, had traced people who had not completed their primary education and were given five months training and successfully completing the 4<sup>th</sup> standard equivalency test (Sharma & Kaur, 2017). Also, Kerala is a matriarchal society and the status of women in the state makes women less subservient than the women in rest of the country and more educated;

thereby breaking the vicious circle of illiteracy in the state (Chandran, 1994; Jeffrey, 2016).

The theory that guided this research study, namely Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory (1979) suggested that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but rather as a part of their family. Bronfenbrenner (1979) observed a child's development in the context of the systems of relationships comprising his or her environment. This complex system of relationships is affected by the miscellaneous milieu environment and culture. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed five theoretical structures which he termed "structures of environment" (Krishnan 2010).

The first level which is in the center is the microsystem; this is the setting where children interact with parents, caregivers and teachers. The microsystem is the innermost level, the one that is closest to the child, that the child is in direct contact with. The microsystem consists of contexts as family, playmates, day care, school, and neighborhood wherein the proximal processes occur. This layer has the most immediate and earliest influence on the child (Watson, 2017). In this study in the Indian context, children attend schools where teachers also form part of the microsystem as they are also in the immediate surroundings for the child growing up.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the mesosystem is the second level following the innermost level, and contains the connections between the family and school (the teachers). It focuses on the connections between two or more systems, essentially different microsystems, such as home, playmate settings, school, etc. For example, what happens in a micro system, such as the home in which a child lives, can influence what happens in the school or a playground, and what happens in a school or a playground can influence interactions at home (Krishnan, 2010). The significance of the caregivers in this study is that they have the abilities either to teach the child cultural, historical, life-experiences or they pass on skills attained from their own educational backgrounds.

The next layer, the exosystem, includes an extensive range of elements that the child does not experience directly but which has potential influence on the child's wellbeing (Krishnan, 2010). The system contains micro- and mesosystems, and thereby

impacts the wellbeing of all those who come into contact with the child. How children are affected by economic depressions, pandemic, policy changes falls under the scope of the exosystem and will aid in the understanding of children’s development to challenges they face influenced by the exosystem.

The fourth layer, the macrosystem, consists of an overarching pattern of micro, meso and exosystems. With reference to this study, it is viewed as a community where tradition continues to be vital. This can lead to misjudgment by children living in different cultural backgrounds. For example, children may be discouraged by comments from their peers who live a different lifestyle or develop inferiority complex from peers that hail from stronger backgrounds.

The final, most outer layer, the chronosystem, encompasses change or consistency along time, not solely within the characteristics of the person, but also of the environment in which that person exists. Events, such as a parent’s chronic illness, divorce, or change of residence due to employment, can have a more profound impact on young children compared to older ones (Makunga, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to gain insights from teachers regarding the challenges faced by students with illiterate parents in order to develop better educational strategies to increase the academic performance of such children. It will help to understand the challenges faced by students with illiterate parents/caregivers and how parent’s skill levels can improve to enable them in effectively engaging with their children’s education. The research question for this study therefore is: What are the challenges that students with illiterate parents experience? The study sought to:

1. Understand the challenges faced by students with illiterate parents by taking insights from teachers.
2. Explore the available and suggested strategies that can be employed to improve the academic performance of these students.

The study aims to provide information for education managers and policymakers at a local level under

the current educational scheme.

## METHODS

### Participants

In total 8 teachers from a Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) affiliated English medium school in Dehradun named ‘Gautam International School’ were interviewed. The teachers were well versed in the English language and had experience in teaching students from age group 6 to 15 including those with illiterate parents.

### Data collection method

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews as this method of questioning encourages participants to give their opinion and to provide examples whilst it also allows for clarification and follow-up questions where relevant. The interview covered basic information and was then divided into four sections: Understanding parent- child-school relationship and challenges involved, communication, education during COVID-19, and beliefs. All interviews were conducted over the phone in Dehradun, India due to COVID-19 lockdown. The interviews were recorded and the duration of each interview is outlined in table 1.

### Data analysis method

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis considering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and ease for analyzing datasets, which best suited our research. Transcripts were thoroughly read, coded with the research question in mind and themes were generated in an iterative process. Using thematic analysis, five themes including sub-themes were generated.

### Ethical considerations

Ethics approval to conduct the study was received from the respective institution (23389-MHR-Jun/2020- 25778-1). Before the interview started, participants were provided with a participation information sheet and were asked to sign a consent

**Table 1:** Duration of each interview in minutes and seconds

P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
40:11 min	36:58 min	40:25 min	50:16 min	40:10 min	39:40 min	36:58 min	40:14 min

form. The participants were not deceived and at the end of the interview were debriefed. Participation was completely voluntary.

## ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Five main themes were identified in the participant's experiences of the education of children with illiterate parents (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Main themes and branched sub-themes of challenges faced by children with illiterate parents

Themes	Subthemes
Irregularity at school	
Parent's illiteracy	1. Communication issue 2. Health illiteracy 3. Less importance to education
Additional academic assistance	
Inferiority complex	
The pandemic challenge	

### Irregularity at school

Irregularity at school is the habit of not regularly attending school without any valid reason or authorized permission. Truancy, bunking lessons, long uninformed leaves are all types of irregularities observed in students. Irregularity issues are the greatest concerns in regards to the disadvantaged students and appears to be a serious challenge in their academic achievements and related developments. Teachers confirmed poor attendance amongst disadvantaged students at school and poor health and hygiene were observed as the main causes for irregularity. "They have many health issues" (P1, l. 203-204). Another participant adds, "They are not healthy. Mmm.. yeah. They don't take healthy food. They're not hygienic enn that's why they are not healthy." (P8, l. 269-271). Discussing regularity issues with another teacher gave a different viewpoint as she stated, "The parents should note that what is the importance of education. That they have to go to school. It is not that they sit at home, they will go to tuitions, going to school is very important" (P7, l. 144-150). The above statement reflects that parents are seen as abettors in encouraging irregularity issues in case of disadvantaged students. We infer that illiterate parents do not understand the importance

of sending their children to school on a regular basis and in order to share their burden while they are away at work they put their parental responsibilities on their children. They expect them to learn through tuitions for their own convenience and in return overlook the all-round development provided by schools. The following statements by two other teachers shed more light in this regard: "50% will stay home for babysitting and all because they have got small brothers and sisters, younger brothers and sisters to take care of" (P1, l. 182-188). While the other shares: "If they are financially not strong, financially they are weak, then they struggle. So it is very aan, it is very difficult for them manage both together" (P8, l. 224-228). Two other teachers while sharing their views on irregularity express their serious concerns by stating, "One of the students he only came 14 days in the whole year" (P7, l. 137-138). This view was supported by another participant as she reveals "They go to their hometowns and sometimes they come after a month" (P4, l. 195-197). This sort of chronic absenteeism makes a student miss out on academic and functional curriculum. Compromising on health would lead to illness and eventually irregularity. Being a student and a young carer, which many are as they have to babysit their younger brothers and sisters, must be a tremendous pressure. It is like carrying a double-edged sword and the child may show signs of acute stress. Children feel overburdened by responsibilities at home and the work given at school. The personal pressure may lead to demotivation and/or disinterest in studies, thereby causing irregularity. Moreover, parents unemployment, dissatisfaction at job, family disturbances and other related financial issues can be regarded as reasons for the irregularities of these students. Our findings are in line with previous literature as it has been shown that disadvantaged students show enormous irregularity in their school attendance (BRIEF, 2011). As per the CBSE rule, a student in India must have 75% attendance every academic year to get promoted to the next class, however not many of the students with illiterate parents fulfil this criterion (Aggarwal, 2014). Academic under-achievement is the result of the adverse effects of absenteeism. In addition, loss of confidence in self-esteem due to under-achievement is observed in disadvantaged students which further affects interpersonal relationships and ability to

make friends and may further lead to introversion (Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020). Physical illness, stress or mental health problems may also be related to school absenteeism and may constitute to other contributory factors which is reflected by dissatisfaction shown by teachers during interviews on how student's absence from school leads to negatively affects a child's performance (Hysing, Petrie, Bøe, & Sivertsen, 2017). Engagement in premature sexual activities, drug addictions, stress amongst young carers, are other related concerns are observed due to irregularity which eventually leads to dropping out of education (Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, & Kirk, 2003). Many researches reveal that the ill-effects of truancy and irregularity are not just limited to student life but its impact can be seen at later stages in adulthood as irregularity and irresponsibility at workplace (Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020; Malcolm *et al.* 2003). According to Rogers & Feller (2016), parents/carers often are not bothered about attendance of their wards and misjudge their attendance by comparing with their cohorts who could be equally or more irregular. Parents/guardians need to be motivated to improve student attendance through multiple messages during the school year (Robinson, Lee, Dearing, & Rogers, 2018; William Gladden Foundation & United States of America, 1989). Many studies reveal the importance of early interventions in parental belief and ingraining the importance of regularity in students' academic achievement is seen to be effective in improving regularity amongst students (ALBashtawy, 2015; Ansari *et al.* 2020; Bendel, Halfon, & Ever-Hadani, 1976; BRIEF, 2011)

### **Parent's illiteracy**

Parent's illiteracy is defined here as the incapability of reading and writing of parents and is the biggest challenge the disadvantaged students face as it is a hurdle in their learning and development. Illiterate parents are incapable of establishing required communication with teachers, assisting their children in doing homework, understanding the importance of education as well as maintaining a good physical and mental health. This theme is divided into the subthemes of communication issues, health illiteracy, and less importance to education.

### **Communication issues**

Inability of parents to timely respond to the teachers or school in order to understand the development of the student's academic performance and related information are considered communication issues. Inability to attend Parent-Teacher-Meeting (PTM) is part of these communication issues. On enquiring on communication issues a teacher shared her experience and quoted "Many times this problem arise for us because our children are so small that he is unable to show their diaries to their parents and mam parents are so busy in their life and the parents are not checking the diaries every time (P3, l. 410-416). Another participant stated that: "They do not want to attend the PTM also so I was thinking that for these kind of parents the teachers should visit their home so that the orientation could be done and we can motivate them to send their Ward regularly to school". (P1, l. 420-426). This shows that communication issues are real challenges for teachers when dealing with illiterate parents. Good communication between parents and school/teachers is key to a child's academic success and related developments. A missed communication can adversely affect the relationship between a teacher and parent/caregiver as expressed by one of the teachers as she feels hurt of being blamed for not calling the parent. "They keep blaming the teachers why didn't you call? Why didn't you ask me about my children?" And so on. (P8, l. 482-485). In case of illiterate parents, this communication is difficult to maintain for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, as stated by the teachers, it is because of the inability of these parents to read and write and so most of the times they do not even bother to check the student's diary for any information. The student themselves communicate relevant information to the parent, however there are concerns of reliability in these cases. Makunga (2015) highlights the importance of partnership and suggests different approaches to improve relationships between teachers and caregivers. Poor or weak partnerships between teacher and parent/caregiver may discourage them and make them feel worthless and unable to assist in their children's schoolwork. Makunga (2015) further suggests that visitation is an especially important element of a literacy promotion programme with students who

have illiterate parents. Such parents often avoid PTM out of embarrassment, therefore, the teacher must reach out to these parents through home visitation. The teacher should attempt to model behaviors during their visits which the illiterate parent can imitate easily and perform with their child. Parents and educators must also contend with other demands on their time and organizational policies and practices that restrict their ability to communicate and collaborate (BRIEF, 2011). In many families where both parents work outside the home, it makes it difficult for them to attend PTM. It is observed that in many places in general, parents seem to prefer a personal rather than a professional or business-like approach (Moles, 1993).

### *Health illiteracy*

Health illiteracy is defined as the incapability to understand the importance of basic health and hygiene. It also means the inability to attain and process information and services needed to make suitable health decisions. Teachers confirmed the impact of illiteracy on health and hygiene. One of the teachers signaled to this: "We can't say they're totally healthy. Actually, problem of personal hygiene is also there. Sometimes they come to school without brushing, without bath and we can't see that they are clean at all" (P4, l. 265-271). Another teacher shares her view on the mental and emotional health of the disadvantaged students by saying, "I think physically they're fine but somewhere mentally and emotionally the problem comes" (P7, l. 161-163). Another teacher puts her opinion on the health issue by giving a strong reaction, "No no no they're not healthy. They are not healthy mmm yeah. They don't take healthy food they're not hygienic enn that's why they are not healthy. We have to teach them." (P2, l. 203-204). These responses reflect the concerns, but at the same time emanates the fact how health and hygiene is ignored by the parents of these children. From a theoretical perspective, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory may be a useful conceptual framework to understand these associations. The theory posits that the social and economic environment impacts a child significantly (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A child learns through observation and vicarious reinforcement of others. As far as hygiene is concerned, children learn and practice what they observe from parents and others

in the family and neighborhood, providing reason for why these disadvantaged students don't realize the importance of taking bath and brushing their teeth while coming to school. It is observed that there is negligible importance given to health (food and exercise) as well as hygiene amongst these students. What is perturbing in the given situation is to acknowledge the threat of spreading infectious diseases through these children to other healthy children and the challenge for the school to prevent and minimize it. It has been observed that poverty results in a number of challenges which include: Lack of nourishing food, unavailability of clean drinking water, neat surroundings for living, are a few to mention (BRIEF, 2011). Research has shown that poverty links to health issues and illiteracy (ALBashtawy, 2015). Illiteracy has a high negative impact on health, education, economics and social integration. Health illiteracy represents a barrier in the quality of care and improving health outcomes in disadvantaged populations (Knighton, Brunisholz, & Savitz, 2017) as is also shown in our findings. According to ALBashtawy (2015), personal hygiene among children is considered as the best tool to improve community strategies and intervention practices to tackle the many communicable and infectious diseases. School nurses, school staff and parents must understand the importance of their role in teaching the children how to practice good personal hygiene.

### *Less importance to education*

This sub-theme shows how illiterate caregivers see no value in education for various reasons. For some, education's role is to instill self-reliance and independence in children, for others it is just being promoted and passing through classes without any substantial gain and knowledge. The children suffer in terms of the desired encouragement and support that is essential for learning. Hence, this attitude can be seen as a challenge for these disadvantaged children. One of the teachers mentions "They don't really want to know how the child is doing in the school, if he's getting good marks or not. I mean they are hardly bothered by it" (P5, l. 206-210). Here the unconcerned attitude of parents towards the studies of their child are indicated. The teacher also indicates the lack of encouragement by illiterate parents for their child. P1 states something similar

indicating disinterest of parents in the performance of their child, "They don't even bother what his ward is doing in school or whether they are going to school or not. They are least bothered about it" (P1, l. 312-316). P8 emanates this by stating, "She said my mother is going out of station, so I am doing household work. So I'm unable to complete my work" (P8, l. 335-338). P4 complains by saying, "The problem is in their reading, their writing and they come to school without completing their homework. Sometimes they don't have the books with them. These are the types of problems which we are facing with such students" (P4, l. 139-146). The last two statements indicate parents don't pay any attention to the completion of homework or other assignments of the children. It also shows that children are kept over-occupied with household tasks and there is lack of a positive learning environment. Parents/caregivers must understand what to expect from their children at a particular age and the idea of schooling should be priority. Parents/caregivers also need to understand the importance of encouragement and support for boosting confidence and enthusiasm as well as infusing interest towards studies in their child. They must allow their children a dedicated time for extra studies apart from school and support them to stick to the regime.

It is argued that home should be recognized by caregivers and their children as an educational environment to the children staying in it. A child should be provided with the right learning environment and proper support at the place where he lives (Brown *et al.* 2020). It has been observed that illiterate people have less awareness of duties towards their children such as providing security, supervision, care and education and they also are unaware of their rights of free education for children, health benefits, subsidies by government etc. so they fail to fulfil their responsibilities (Thengal, 2013). In line with our findings, parents fail to encourage their children to perform well. Also, they fail in instilling the importance of good health and hygiene. This means that disadvantaged children not only face direct struggles but also face greater obstacles in terms of social inclusion difficulties, precarious living, health issues, some of which are related to financial challenges. However, there is a contradictory study by Ejaz (2009) that suggests

that unschooled parents support their children in many significant ways. They provide financial, emotional and moral support and supervise their children's activities like any other parent with a good financial and educational background and that disadvantaged parents have high aspirations for their children. Contrary to assumed expectations, they support and encourage their children, and the children perform satisfactorily at school (Ejaz, 2009).

To conclude parent's illiteracy leads to challenges like communication issues, health illiteracy and giving less importance to education that are the biggest barriers faced by the children in gaining education and making every effort made by government and society futile. This needs to be addressed for effective learning.

### **Additional academic assistance**

Additional academic assistance can be understood as additional help and support in academic training other than that offered by school/teachers and parents. The incapability of illiterate parents to provide academic support to their children leads to the dependency of these children as well as their parents on some additional help. This can be help from a coaching institute, a tutor or even peers. Extra classes provided to weaker students by the school can also be considered part of additional academic assistance. However, the challenge is the unaffordability for this assistance by the parents of quota students who avail 25% of the reserved seats in private school.

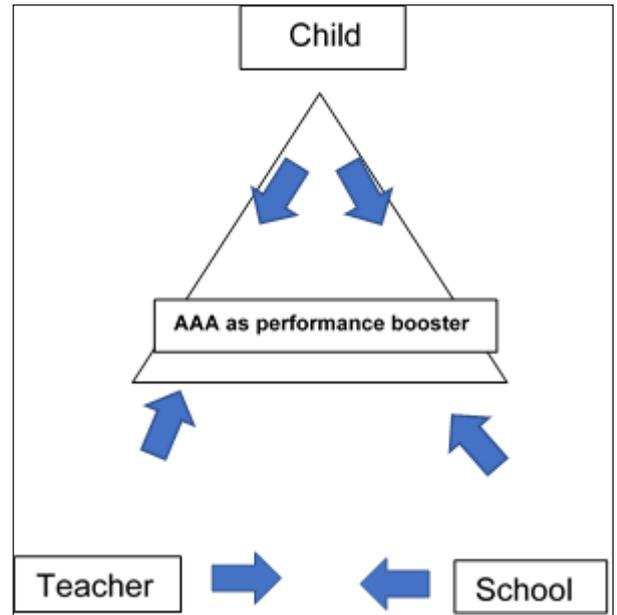
P1 says that "The parents are not able to understand what work has been given to them so the children do it on their own and sometimes many mistakes they commit in the work" (P1, l. 109-114). Other teachers add to this viewpoint, "They don't know anything. So even if I write, give them any notice to their students, their child, they're not able to read that because they are dependent on their tuition teachers" (P6, l. 82-87). Parents are completely dependent on the tutors for the academic evaluation of their child. "If we are talking about the illiterate parents it totally depends on the tutors and they totally depend on the teachers, but they are not taking interest in their wards studies" (P8, l. 602-606). However, teachers follow a sensitive approach towards these students and motivate them on a regular basis. "Such students need extra time to

complete their work and I also talk to the parents that, to check their notebooks. At least check their notebooks and tell their wards to at least try to do some efforts to complete their work.” (P4, l. 645-651). This academic support is also provided by the tutor to the parents by supporting them in attending the PTMs; “Sometimes the tutors come that I teach him or her in exams. Parents also come with them” (P2, l. 538).

The experience of illiterate parents in assisting their children in doing their homework deals with a lot of complexity. Dependency on tutors or teachers for the assistance in doing school work is clearly indicated by the experience shared by these teachers. The situation is dilemmatic for both parents as well as students as these parents belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds and it is difficult for them to afford tuition. However, the situation is crucial because they compulsively require an added assistance. While some parents manage to arrange affordable tuitions for their children, others manage guidance either through extra time given by teachers or through peers. The remaining end up compromising on the quality of their home assignments and manage it themselves to the best of their capabilities, which is insufficient and may lead to added frustrations, demotivation, lack of interest and an inferiority complex thereby leading to introversion and irregularity. Additional academic assistance acts as a performance booster between the triadic link of parent-child-school, enabling each to perform better (Fig. 5).

Our findings are supported by Makunga (2015) showing that illiterate parents/caregivers are unable to offer assistance which discourages their children from learning, and children lose interest and eventually drop out of school. Also, it is observed that parent’s involvement in doing homework is significant. It includes a variety of activities, ranging from the home environment that is supportive of learning to model of interactive behavior between parent and child intended to increase the child’s understanding of homework (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* 2001). However, families may require additional support to maintain positive functioning of the family (Makunga, 2015). According to Sujatha (2014), the private tuitions act as a popular practice in parallel to the approved system of formal education to supplement academic support in order to overcome

school inadequacies. Popularity of private tuitions in schools in India clearly reflects the inefficiency of the education system and the biggest sufferers of the system are children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. A ban on private tutoring and the need for the improvement of quality of education in schools is suggested by other research (Sujatha, 2014).



**Fig. 5:** The performance booster link (Additional Academic Assistance (AAA) is considered to strengthen and boost the performance of the triad link between the parent-child-school)

It is also observed that access to private tutoring depends on children’s socioeconomic conditions. Children from wealthy families were more likely than other children to participate in tutoring courses outside of school Zhang & Xie (2016). In addition, Zhang & Xie (2016) posit that parents who achieved higher education are also more likely than less educated parents to arrange private tutoring activities for their children. In fact, although often designated as “shadow education” and thus observed as auxiliary to formal schooling, private tutoring is constantly gaining popularity. However, one must acknowledge that parents contribute through important ways within family environment, such as accumulating cultural capital, expecting and encouraging children to obtain more education and supervising and helping children with their academic task and also arranging additional help (Zhang & Xie, 2016). However, this study provides an additional viewpoint to the concept of parallel

education by highlighting the advantages of additional academic assistance and recognizing it as boosters to the parents-child-teacher relationship. The biggest concern in the given situation is the fact that these illiterate parents are financially weak and so additional assistance would be an added financial burden for them. It's a dilemmatic and vexing situation for both student as well as the parents.

### **Inferiority complex**

For this study, an inferiority complex is defined as feeling inferior or not as good as others and low self-esteem plays a key role besides low confidence and introversion. Teacher 8 talks about confidence: "In my class there is one student her parents are illiterate and when I ask question in class she is hiding she hides herself in the class" (P8, l. 370-374). This shows that disadvantaged students have extremely low self-confidence as they do not want to face any questions in the class. Similar to this, P1 and P2 say that "In the class they hardly perform well because they're not confident enough they are not taking too much interest in class" (P1, l. 367-370). "They lack confidence in comparison to the children of literate parents. They lack confidence" (P2, l. 457-459). What is concerning here is that despite being amongst children of the same age, the children with illiterate parents are somehow not comfortable speaking their mind. Is it because of better academic performance of the other cohorts or is it because of their low confidence? An interesting insight was shared by one of the teachers who shares the following incident where the child shows no confidence with writing English: "The student about which I was talking about he thinks that I cannot do anything in English in English exam he wrote letter in Hindi (P7, l. 247-248). This highlights that disadvantaged students do not have confidence in the English and find it difficult to learn. Sharing another experience P4 says, "They compare their boxes their bags their tiffins also, that what other children are bringing in their tiffins, what are they having in their lunch" (P4, l. 479-482). This reflects the fact that children do not only compare clothes or stationery with each other, but also compare the food that they eat. It is very natural for a young child to have fascination for new and attractive things and when you have children belonging to higher income groups, then comparison is very

natural. It's important to understand the mental and emotional plight of a young mind who is living a deprived life but everyday witnesses other children enjoying every possible blessing of life. Where one is struggling for the basic necessities of life like food, shelter and education the other is struggling for sustenance.

Research has shown that parental education is a strong indicator of parental functioning that is reflected in child's well-being across diverse communities (Ejaz, 2009; Makunga, 2015). The family in which the child grows up markedly influences the child's attitude and behavior. The child imitates his parents as a model for adjustment in society. If the parents are well educated the children are trained to adjust. They show immense confidence due to their secure environment (Kaur & Kaur, 2013). It is easier for the child to adjust according to the requirements of the surrounding environment (includes school). Most disadvantaged students have a low self-image and they are passive and negative thinkers which affects their academic achievement and their study habits in school (Bendel et al., 1976). Success or failure can generate the feeling of competence or incompetence in disadvantaged students and similarly can generate comparisons. These students can either improve their performance by their willingness to continue to learn or give up (William Gladden Foundation & United States of America, 1989).

### **Pandemic challenge**

The pandemic challenge for this study can be defined as the challenges due to the unexpected shutdown of the schools during the coronavirus outbreak in 2020. The sudden closure did not leave any time for schools to prepare an education policy to combat the situation specially amongst the underdeveloped and disadvantaged children in India. According to UN (2020), approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, these economic disasters are likely to have a greater negative impact on children from communities that are marginalized on the basis of their caste, tribe, gender and religion. The disadvantaged students have been negatively impacted by this pandemic with a far higher intensity than other regular students. Unavailability of gadgets, no network

to patchy-unreliable network, ineffective online classes to technical illiteracy all contribute to the pandemic challenge. In response to the challenges faced due to COVID-19, P5 says, "They don't have these Android phones, you know" (P5, l. 536-537). This was a common statement given by almost each teacher in this study, and P1 goes even further by stating: "They're not having Android phones, so nearly you can say that 40% students are not able to attend these classes" (P1, l. 617- 620). This indicates the inability of the disadvantaged students to attend online classes because of the unavailability of the required gadgets. This could also be an issue of additional expenses for data and can also be related to the network issues, especially in a country like India. It is important to note that India stands 89th worldwide on internet speed and stability (Jindal & Chahal, 2018). The government of India is taking initiative to develop digital infrastructure, but more efforts need to be done in this direction. According to the report of World Economic Forum, only 15% of the households have access to the Internet. In addition, the content offered by most of the online courses is in English. Hence, those students who are not able to speak English struggle with the availability of language content (Jindal & Chahal, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of confidence is also seen in online classes, this time for all parties involved, P5 says: "Online classes, not all of them are comfortable" (P5, l. 564-565). This statement reflects the inconvenience of parents related to the concept of online classes, as perceived by a teacher during the interview. This could be a clear case of technical illiteracy. However, it was inferred that not just the parents but also the teachers who are struggling with the technical illiteracy are contending with the situation, thereby, leading to compromising on the quality of education. "It was never before, we never paid attention to online classes" (P7, l. 490-491). This shows the lack of technical literacy which has a negative effect on the effectiveness and satisfaction of the online classes. "They just want the school to reopen soon and their kids start going to school but they're not able to do anything right now" (P4, l. 900-904). "I think syllabus should be shortened" (P7, l. 623-624), giving evidence to the fact that teachers themselves are not satisfied with the way the online classes are being conducted.

Initiatives are needed to cover the economic impact

on disadvantaged families to disincline people to the use of child labor along with monitoring techniques set up to ensure children remain in school, whenever they re-open (Gautam & Sharma, 2020). There is a circumstantial reason for disadvantaged parents to involve their children in household activities, specially girls. Girls may be required to assist in additional household responsibilities as parents devote extra time to work and their additional labor hours to cope with the economic disaster. Gautam and Sharma (2020) further suggest that as a result of reduced mobility due to the lockdown, the young children may be facing mental stress and trauma that requires attention when schools re-open again. From this, we can see that when these children are deprived of necessary encouragement and support, in such a context, collaborative effort between the public and private sector as well as the civil society is important as well as challenging for educational and social rehabilitation of deprived children. In addition, poor experiences with educational technology during the pandemic will make it harder to perform well academically. Also, it is expected that there will be a severe social and educational exclusion (Brown, te Riele, Shelley, & Woodroffe, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

In order to maximize children's potential and academic performance at school, it is integral to have caregiver's/parent's involvement and interest in their child's education which eventually helps strengthening and supporting teachers/school efforts in the learning and development of the child. It is also essential for school to establish a pleasant and amiable environment for the students learning as well as welcoming surroundings for the parents irrespective of their financial and literacy levels. It is important to realize that the involvement of parents should not be limited to just the home assignments but also in supporting and encouraging the child and providing them with a surrounding that is wholesome for fast learning and overall development. They should understand the importance of giving children extra time after the school to review and revise as well as practice what they have learned in school instead of involving them in house chores. Parents and teachers together should bring into practice a good health and

hygiene regime for these students and train them to keep themselves and their surroundings clean and reiterate the importance of good health and hygiene to the children. The government should also do its part to support these parents through proper employment, providing concessions, health support, regular counselling and authorized additional academic support. In this manner society can make a positive impact on the life of these disadvantaged students.

This research showed the necessity for a sensitive approach towards the needs of the disadvantaged community, especially children. The findings of this study will aid in reforming and shaping of educational policies in India and similar developing countries for better efficiency in the field of education.

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 has aimed to provide structural changes in the education system in India to make India the global knowledge superpower by establishing equity and inclusion (NEP, 2020). The purpose of NEP is a framework to guide the development of education in the country. An attempt has been made to develop conscious awareness of roles and duties and inclusion of community participation which would minimize the exclusion of students on the basis of language, class and disability. This will motivate students to learn more about the diverse culture of India, its knowledge system and tradition and also to sensitize them on human values, empathy, tolerance, human rights, gender equality, inclusion, and equity which will develop respect for diversity.

The results of our study provide some significant insights and contributions towards the objective of the NEP which highlights that teachers must be at the center of fundamental reforms in the education system (Ministry of Human Resource and Development, 2020). Also, it focuses on inclusive education and provision for all students from all sections of life. The study points out the challenges in implementing the policy and provides relevant information on the gaps between policy making and its affective implementation and aims to utilize education as the greatest leveler of all inequalities in society.

### **Recommendations for future research**

It is recommended that future research engage with

those responsible for educational development and policy making along with the students in challenge and people assisting them.

- ❑ Explore the causes of unemployment, lack of infrastructure and the challenges which disadvantaged parents face specifically in order to provide essential learning and formal academic education to their children at least up to 14 years of age. Also, make provisions for their families basic physical and mental health support.
- ❑ A proper follow-up on regularity needs to be done. Schools should report monthly attendance of these disadvantaged students to the education department. Defaulters should be traced immediately and every effort should be made by the government to understand and help them with the reason of their irregularity.
- ❑ A group of ‘peripatetic’ or ‘itinerant teachers’ should be deputed who specialize in health care (mental/physical), individual tutoring, special education in order to pay regular visits to schools and help with counselling teachers, parents as well as disadvantaged students as practiced in Malawi and Uganda (Lynch & McCall, 2007). Upgraded teaching techniques should be provided to teaching staff and timely feedbacks should be acquired by them to be used to further amend and reform related policies.
- ❑ The number of dropouts is expected to increase manifolds post-pandemic. It can be seen as an emerging crisis in the field of education.
- ❑ Last but not the least, special attention should be given to establishing authorized additional academic assistance by government. We must recognize the significance of additional support for these disadvantaged students in addition to that offered by schools in order for these disadvantaged students to be competitive with other cohorts and boost their performance.

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### **Educational Impact and Implications Statement**

Teachers face many challenges when working with children who have illiterate parents. This study interviewed eight teachers from an English private school in India to gain insights in their experiences in the field of education for children with disadvantaged backgrounds and who have illiterate parents. Results showed that the main challenges consist of irregular attendance of the children at school; children having an inferiority complex compared to children with literate parents; dealing with and supporting illiterate parents in their support of their children; providing additional academic assistance and the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. These findings emphasise the need for policy implementations in education to provide a nurturing and conducive environment for all.

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