

# In the midst of white noise

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# DH



# DECCAN HERALD

**Meaningful education is a complex socio-human endeavour that can take place only when humans interact with each other; a mere enhancement of internet connectivity will not help.**

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When the academic year began in 2019, Masoom (name changed), a grade five student in a state government school in Bengaluru was identified as a potential drop-out as his learning level was well below the required grade standards. Assessments indicated that in most learning areas, he was at level 1 (roughly corresponds to first grade) at best. Nandini, my colleague who engages directly with schools, worked intensively with this 10-year-old and by the beginning of 2020, that is in about eight-nine months, he was almost at the grade level, learning alongside his peers and participating in class discussions.

Cut to July 2021. Masoom was part of the bridge course that the education department had launched. He was now enrolled in grade seven and had not been to school for more than a year. He had received no formal education during the end of his fifth grade and the entire year that he was enrolled as a sixth grader. Now at the cusp of entering the seventh grade, when my colleague assessed him, to her astonishment, his learning had regressed; not to where he was in early 2020, but all the way back to level 1.

This is the kind of tragedy that has unfolded silently in India over the past 16 months, where schools have been shut for this entire duration, leading us to face an unprecedented education emergency.

### **How is the world responding?**

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, very little was known of Covid-19 and in order to protect their population, most countries went into a complete lockdown; and to protect our young, schools were among the first to be ordered shut.

By April 2020, governments across 195 countries shut down schools in this pre-emptive effort to reduce transmission and protect children, which as per UNESCO, has impacted the lives of almost 1.6 billion children, youth, and their families. An ongoing multi-agency survey of 143 countries reveals that schools were fully closed across all education levels for 79 instruction days on an average — ranging from 53 days in high-income countries to 115 days in lower-middle-income countries. All studies done during the current pandemic have unanimously found that there has been learning loss across all countries, independent of the duration and nature of school closure.

Today, most countries have their schools open for all classes, including pre-primary. This has been done based on research evidence and the knowledge we now have about Covid-19. One evidence that health experts around the world have a consensus on is that children are less likely to catch Covid-19, and even if infected, the likelihood of it turning into a serious condition is very low. However, a handful of countries including India, are reluctant to go with this evidence and have kept schools closed, thereby putting children, particularly from the already marginalised groups, at greater risks.

### **Perils of remote learning**

Since the pandemic-induced lockdown happened during the school and college academic year across most countries, there were immediate solutions that countries sought, to continue and complete the academic year in early 2020. Education technology (Ed Tech) solutions were offered by many firms, which were instantly adopted and even branded as the ‘new normal’.

However, no one cared to note that sufficient evidence was already available to reliably conclude that all remote solutions, digital or otherwise, were grossly inadequate to be a viable alternative to regular classrooms.

Disregarding the evidence against Ed Tech, remote learning environments primarily using ‘internet based digital mode’ (online education), were established even in India. Many stakeholders felt providing access to a digital device would be sufficient to get children back into their ‘learning’ journeys. But nothing could have been farther from truth.

Hence, we have seen how students with digital devices in their possession were using railway stations and other public spaces far away from their homes to access stable internet connection; recently, a private national television channel broadcast an episode on the travails of ‘online education’ for children in our country, which among other things, also highlighted the absurdity of keeping schools closed. It showcased children in the Malnad region of Karnataka, located amidst the Western Ghats, going together to hillocks surrounding their villages to get internet connectivity on their phones; the children walked together, rode bicycles and were even being dropped off by parents to

these points where, ‘together’ they searched for that elusive internet connection. The same children could very well have been in schools, but that was not the case and tragically continues not to be so.

Ed Tech advocates continue to argue that if the government invests in ensuring internet connection across the country, the problem of connectivity would be solved. What they do not understand is that the process of ‘meaningful’ education is a complex socio-human endeavour, which takes place only when humans interact with each other in a natural way and merely enhancing internet connectivity is not going to help. That is the reason why even in the most developed education systems, ‘online education’ does not provide adequate learning outcomes.

A Netherlands study that was conducted before and after lockdown to evaluate the impact of school closures on students’ learning finds that, despite a ‘best-case scenario’ with a short lockdown, equitable school funding, and world-leading rates of broadband access, students made little or no progress while learning from home (‘online education’); and even here learning loss was most pronounced among students from disadvantaged homes, reiterating that online education seriously compromises both equity and quality.

The bottom line from all researches on this topic is that any Ed Tech can be at best an aide to a learning environment, but it cannot drive learning. This is an undisputed fact and even a Parliamentary Standing Committee in India has recognised this ‘truth’ in a report that was tabled in the two houses last month. This infallible truth can be appreciated best when one comprehends that the aim of education ought to be holistic development of all children.

### **Should schools reopen?**

A recent house-to-house survey by economist Jean Dreze and his team across Dalit and Adivasi hamlets of Latehar district of Jharkhand indicates the dire straits our marginalised children are facing ‘on the ground’. He recounts that ‘there was no trace of online education, most children were unable to read a single word, and all parents were desperate to see schools reopen’. Given this reality, it is not surprising that an overwhelming majority of parents as well as teachers want schools to reopen as soon as possible.

UNESCO has collated data from all countries and it is clear that India’s school closure is among the longest closures anywhere in the world. Very few countries have closed schools for more than 60 weeks as we have done.

The detrimental effects this has had is catastrophic. It is well researched that even when schools are shut for short periods, there is a learning loss — hence we have the term ‘summer loss’; it is because of this phenomenon that when children come back to school after summer vacations, there is usually a short program called the ‘bridge course’.

One can imagine what this loss would be when schools are closed for not two summer months, but a massive 60 months. There are some indications on this in studies during other times such as the Ebola crisis, during teacher strikes or natural calamities; for example, a school closure of three months in Pakistan due to an earthquake in 2015 was calculated to have led to a loss of 1.5 grades in learning. Findings during the Ebola crisis showed that nine to 14-year-olds were 54 per cent less likely to acquire foundational reading skills compared to those whose schools were not closed.

The US is among the only developed country, which has had a long school closure and many studies have taken place on the effect the closure has had on children's learning; a prospective analysis last year using data from five million Grade three to Grade eight students projected that students could return to school with 32–37 per cent less progress in reading than they would have achieved in a typical school year; and the predictions were even higher for math, with losses estimated between 50–63 per cent.

All these predictions have turned out to be correct. Azim Premji Foundation's extensive study across five states in India found that between 82 per cent to 92 per cent of children on an average have lost at least one specific language and math ability from the previous year across all classes; these foundational abilities such as reading with understanding, performing addition and multiplication are the basis of further learning – their absence will impact not only learning of more complex abilities but also conceptual understanding across subjects as children progress through school.

Therefore, we should also be wary that this learning loss could also result in school dropouts in the future as many children will be unable to understand what is being taught. A World Bank study in 2016 found that after a seven-month school closure in Liberia due to the Ebola virus, the drop-outs were up to 25 per cent. Ethnographic analysis of such situations has also shown that children even lost interest in school-based learning.

In low income as well as developing countries, schools also protect children from many ills of the society. Schools are not just centres of learning, but are also a support system that provide nutrition and social security. Therefore, when schools are shut, children have lost out on this protection too, putting them at a high risk of violence, abuse and mental and physical health issues. From sexual abuse to lack of nutritious food, children in India have faced tragic circumstances during our school closure.

### **Abuse and violence**

A Lancet report states that the pandemic put an estimated 370 million children across 50 countries without school meals; of these nearly a third are in India where 115 million children are reported to be at the risk of severe malnutrition. Let us acknowledge that without schools, the 'world's largest mid-day meal programme' has also been paused, which is pushing back our progress on nutrition and health of children by decades, if not by an entire generation, as these are gains that are not easy to come by and do not happen overnight.

If basic nutrition and health is getting affected on one end, there are abuses of child labour, child marriage and trafficking on the other. According to a recent report by CHILDLINE 1098, 'India saw a 50 per cent increase in the calls received on helpline for children, requesting protection from abuse and violence, since the lockdown began'. Data shows that Karnataka has seen a sharp increase in child marriages, from 1,779 reported cases in 2019 to over 2,262 cases reported between February and November 2020. Hence, in a country like India, the argument to open schools is not purely educational, but also has to do with the overall protection of our children. Hence, it is nothing short of an emergency.

If neither the education nor the health and nutrition argument would force our country to act, hope at least the potential economic disaster would make everyone sit up and take note. The World Bank and Education World have presented in their reports the potential economic loss due to the almost complete shutdown of our education system, which includes around '1.4 million anganwadis, 55,000 private pre-primaries, 1.5 million K-12 schools, 41,901 colleges and 1,028 universities', at over USD 400 billion in the country's future earnings.

### **Teach the children, not the syllabi!**

Most countries are making an investment towards addressing learning loss, with specific interventions. UNESCO reports that over two-thirds of countries have reported implementing remedial measures to address learning gaps for primary and secondary school students when schools reopened; most were high- or upper-middle-income countries. Around 41 per cent of countries reported extending the academic year while 42 per cent reported prioritising certain curriculum areas or skills.

It should be amply clear to everyone that schools should open for all grades and when schools re-open, it cannot be business as usual. 'Teaching the syllabi' cannot be the operative word, rather 'teaching the children' will have to be the foundational principle. This would mean, children will have to be taught from where they currently are in their learning journey. Of India's 250 million school children, around 20-30 million children could be close to their grade level given their advantages of coming from middle-class homes (especially upper) and hence having better access to various resources such as personal tutoring and support of family members to add to whatever they have grasped from 'online education'.

However, for the remaining 220 million children, the learning has been haphazard — some have been able to acquire some concepts and skills whereas some others have got nothing — most of them will be in the same class when schools re-open. This will create a heterogenous multi-level learning group in every class; these are situations that public school teachers are familiar with, but the current situation is graver than what they would have experienced in the pre-pandemic days, and the private school teachers will struggle to handle this. Hence, teacher support is of utmost importance along with a curriculum re-configuration. Both these areas are marked by NEP 2020 as crucial for our educational reform and there is no better time to initiate them.

## Reconfigure

The curriculum will have to be redesigned and areas of learning prioritised. Key learning outcomes for each grade must be defined — this exercise is not a simple reduction of text-book chapters or the syllabus but is a well thought out re-configuration of the curriculum by identifying outcomes that are necessary for further learning as well as the socio-emotional development of children. What is realistically possible to accomplish must be carefully considered and stage-specific priorities must be identified. The time is perfect to begin implementing the new structure for school education based on child's development and reducing subjects, as NEP 2020 says, to 'their core essentials, to make space for critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning'.

Other than the curriculum and pedagogic reform, NEP 2020 focusses heavily on teachers as it acknowledges them as 'torch-bearers'. Teachers are central to good education — the pandemic has taught this lesson to those who were unwilling to acknowledge it — and in times like these, their role is even more important.

As we celebrate yet another 'Teachers' Day', it is important to put into action what the policy proposes regarding teachers. The time is apt to do this as both, 'teacher autonomy and teacher support', are crucial to meet the immediate requirement of mitigating the learning loss and addressing the education emergency we face. While we gear up to fight the emergency, we must ensure adequate availability of teachers in each school, make them allies in this situation and support them in building the capability to handle it. Teachers will play a proactive role in battling the impact of this crisis — let us vouch to support them.

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Education  
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teachers

