

We mustn't ignore a big crisis of education staring us in the face

: 11/17/2021



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4 min read . Updated: 18 Nov 2021, 06:06 AM IST [Anurag Behar](#)

Travels across India confirm pandemic learning losses that we cannot afford to leave unrecovered

In a dense jungle, there is a cluster of 21 villages. The nearest small-town is 20km away. Less than 20% of the population had received first doses of the covid vaccine in the cluster, and 23 government-school teachers from those villages decided to do something about it. They worked with the local primary healthcare centre, which is the basic operating unit for India's vaccination drive. Now, after about 6 weeks from that day, over 80% of the population has received their first dose. The group is intent on ensuring that the entire population is vaccinated and that everyone receives the second dose on schedule.

The group did not get together as a team for the vaccination programme. They have worked together for years, supporting one another to improve their teaching and schools. Engaged with the life of villages beyond education, as they are, they could not ignore the crisis brewing on vaccination; they had to act. They narrated this story in detail as we sat under the canopy of massive tree at the edge of the compound of a school.

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The village sarpanch was also with us. He described the teachers' efforts during the pandemic. They worked diligently to distribute rations—of what would have been mid-day meals had schools been open—to the homes of children. They did everything possible to tackle the pandemic itself. Including running an isolation centre during the cataclysmic second wave. And they tried to ensure that even while schools were shut, the education of children continued. Many of them taught small groups of students under trees, in courtyards, and on the steps of the village pond.

"Itni mehnat ke baawazood, bachchon ki padhai toh nahin ho pai theek se; kaise ho sakti hai jab school 18 mahine bund the," he said. Despite such hard work by our teachers, children were not able to learn adequately—and that is only to be expected when the schools are shut for 18 months. *"Bade logon ko ye seedhi si baat kyon samajh mein nahin aa rahi hai, ki 18 mahine ka nuksaan hua hai, abhi ek saal lagega bharpaai karne main."* Why are high officials unable to understand such a simple thing—there has been a loss of 18 months of education, so it will take at-least 12 months to recover. *"Aur yeh toh inn jaise teacheron ke saath hai, aap zaraa sochiye, jahaan itni mehnat nahin hui hai, wahaan kyaa haal hoga."* And this situation is with such dedicated teachers; imagine the reality where such efforts have not been made.

Hearing that the village had visitors from some distant place, he had come to the meeting aware that we were not government officials. A visit by any outsider, an official or otherwise, was so rare in that place that he wanted to appeal to us to convey his message, the *"seedhi baat"* or straight talk, to officials in the state capital who take decisions.

The teachers went around making estimates. The consensus was: 10% of children are at a stage where their lost learning can be recovered in 2 months sufficiently (not fully) to start the current year's syllabus, for 30%, it would take 6 months, and for the rest, it would take a year. And this after they have tackled even more basic challenges: Many more children are playing hooky as they have lost the habit of attending school, too many of those who do come to school have significant attention problems, and some students have just dropped out.

Earlier that week, we sat with a similar group of teachers in the state capital, and their estimates were identical. Through the week, we went from that large city to the farming heartland of the state, to the largest industrial city of the area and its hinterland, and then the jungles. The assessment remained the same. As they have remained across the country, as I gather from all the teachers I have met in the past few months as schools have restarted. The majority of students need a year to recover learning losses.

It is now clear that most states are doing little or nothing to recover the massive loss of learning that this entire generation of children is facing. To make matters worse, too many states are pressing teachers hard to test children and continue with the current class syllabus. Unless there is a sharp and quick change in the dispositions and actions of our states, we can anticipate the darkness that lies ahead. Not only for over 220 million children, but for our education system and the country as a whole.

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In an education system where the outcomes were less than satisfactory even before the pandemic, this inexplicable and inexcusable apathy will make things much worse.

The learning deficit for these 220 million children will accumulate over time, and by the time they leave school, the distribution of learning levels across these cohorts will be sharply behind pre-pandemic cohorts. This will affect their skill sets and life opportunities. But the impact will not only be on individuals and families. The country will have a work force and citizenry which is worse educated than a generation before. Every dimension of disadvantage that large numbers suffer will get magnified by this downward shift of the country's educational outcomes and workforce capability.

Its cruelly ironic that the transformative power and intention of the National Education Policy, 2020, is withering away because of lack of attention to the most obvious of matters—the '*seedhi baat*' that every teacher is dealing with every day in every school across India.

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