

Don't pretend the pandemic didn't happen and schools never closed

: 9/22/2021



The two boys were lounging on the skeleton of a wrecked tractor, with a pile of stones between them, which they were throwing at a pillar about 25 feet away. Focused on competing, they didn't notice that I had to walk across through their line of fire to reach the school. They stopped only when I called out to them. Which class are you in? I asked. We don't go to school. How can you not go to school? Well, we just don't. Why? We work and earn now. Which class are you supposed to be in? Class 7. Have you gone to school at all after it re-opened? Yes, but it's a waste; we don't understand anything that is going on; we had better earn and play. Is that your school? Yes.

The school had restarted after 17 months of shutdown. From Classes 3 to 8, I asked the same question and heard the same answers. What do you remember from when you last came to school in March 2020? Very little, if anything. So, what are you doing now? Copying the text from a book. Do you understand any of this? Not really, since we have even forgotten most of what we had learnt two classes earlier; all this is now impossible to comprehend. What are you going to do now? Our teachers will tell us.

Outside the classrooms, two teachers and the head-teacher waited. They had wanted me to make an independent assessment of the situation, and so had not accompanied me inside the classrooms. What are you going to do now? I asked them. We don't know; we have been instructed to recover 17 months of lost learning in 1 month. How will you do it? We can't, it's impossible. So, what are you going to do about it? We don't know.

As I was leaving, the head-teacher said, "Can you please explain to higher-ups that our response cannot be worse, more irresponsible; we are failing all children of our country, we may as well shut down the education system."

From that school, I went to a community meeting in a nearby village to discuss the progress of covid vaccination. The Block Education Officer was there too; he was supporting the vaccination drive actively —arranging camps at schools, organizing teachers to help mobilize the community, and more. At the end of the meeting, as we chatted, I asked him about plans to recover lost learning from the past 17 months, now that the schools had opened in his state. “We don’t seem to have any plan, sir. We have repeatedly informed the higher officers of the dire situation. They are all sympathetic. But we can’t understand why no systematic action is being taken.”

Children haven’t been to schools for 17 months. Apart from this loss, they have forgotten what they knew when schools closed. How can schools be restarted as though life has been normal for the past year-and-a-half? Too many states are adopting this approach, mostly paying lip-service to attempts at recovering this massive loss. Very few states are responding adequately. And all this when everyone in the education system knows the stark reality.

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Teachers engulfed by this crisis are helpless. Their voice is clear to anyone who cares to listen. We conducted a field study with 363 teachers with over 10,000 students under their charge. Their views were

consistent.

First, in-person classes are critical for actual learning, which children have missed for too long. In addition, many basic abilities gained earlier have been lost. For example, in primary classes, children have forgotten how to describe a picture in their own words, read text with understanding, write simple sentences, and the ability to perform basic mathematical operations.

Second, as schools reopen, teaching must account for the actual learning level of each child and not start with the regular curriculum for that class. Given the extent of learning losses, an assessment of foundational abilities across all classes will be necessary to enable the recovery of lost learning.

Third, the curriculum will need changes. A curricular load reduction will allow for a focus on foundational abilities with meticulously planned attention to all key competencies. This must be done from Classes 1 to 12. A variety of teaching and learning materials will be required to enable classroom efforts.

Fourth, schools will have to respond directly to other related issues, such as a break in the habit of school attendance.

Fifth, autonomy in the classroom, support from the administration and time and patience are needed for teachers to help children recover their lost learning. All other steps, including curricular and pedagogical changes, will not be useful unless teachers are given sufficient time to work on recovering learning losses in their respective classrooms.

We have no idea how many of our 250 million school children will drop out of school, enmeshed as many are in circumstances that we had not imagined 18 months ago. We must not let that happen. A nationwide effort, on the ground, has to be undertaken to get all kids back to school.

And then everything must be done to recover the lost learning for all our children. Nothing short of a sustained and coordinated mission will suffice. Even I, as accustomed as I am to the ways of our education system, am mystified by why this blindingly obvious problem is being acted upon only by a few states, while many go on as though the pandemic didn't happen and that our schools were never shut.

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