

The class divide that threatens to thwart our educational goals

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Online education is ineffective for children because of the nature of education

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The digitally-enabled must empathize with the rest for us to secure the future of all Indian children

Which class do you go to? I asked him. I don't go to school, he said. Why? Why should I go, I like to play. Before the pandemic, you were going to school? Yes, class 3; now the school is shut any way. But today they have opened, so why won't you go? I will not go. With that, he lost patience, riding his cycle recklessly fast in the monsoon slush of clean mud just outside the school compound. I went in.

On that first day of school after a 16-month hiatus, 50% children had been called from a few batches, with classes held in an open corridor. The state had let panchayats decide whether or not to open local schools; this one had decided to re-begin. I sat with class 9.

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When did you last come to school? I asked. March 2020. What class were you in then? Class 7. What do you remember from class 7? Squeals of laughter ricocheted across the group, with two boys at the back actually rolling on the ground. The serious types, right in front, tried to comfort me: Thoda to yaad hai, sir, we do remember a bit.

In the past 15 days, I have had 20 similar conversations with children in schools which have started, if only partially, across several states. The ‘learning loss’ from school closures of the past 17 months is obvious without even talking to children, but if you do, you cannot but be astounded by the absence of any systemic effort to recover this lost learning. This learning loss is the product of two factors: what should have been taught and learnt in the past 17 months and what children knew in March 2020 but have forgotten because of an extended school break.

This learning loss in all its severity was anticipatable and is apparent now. Even if you observe children cursorily, you can see it. The phenomenon is much written about and researched, but the point needs to be made clear. If children don’t go to school for 17 months, they will not learn what they should have learnt in that period and will also forget much of what they knew earlier.

Why is it then that most states are preparing to start or are starting schools as though this learning loss did not happen? Even the few states that are trying to address this matter are doing so in a grossly inadequate manner. Not recovering this lost learning undermines all future education of our children. Do we need any fancy reasoning or research to understand that if a child has not learnt the class 6 syllabus and forgotten much of what she knew in class 5, she cannot learn the class 7 syllabus; the loss will get compounded with each year beyond. Why then this travesty with the future of over 200 million children?

The education ministers of two states and administrative leaders of a few more, of the 15 that I have some feedback from, are acutely conscious of this crisis and are far from apathetic. But, as of now, even they have not been able to act with the comprehensiveness that is required. I hope that at least these people will get their act together before schools open. But what is going on?

The inflexibility and poor coordination of our system is stalling the alignment of all elements needed for the recovery of lost learning as top priority. Such a sudden, all-encompassing crisis has never confronted our system ever before. Both these are part explanations. As is the poor grasp of many leaders of the scale and depth of this emergency, fed by their disconnection from ground reality along with an unwillingness to listen to those on the real frontline.

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But, with Indian education ablaze with a crisis which even the deaf can hear, blind can see, and the heat of which would awaken the dead, how can the country be this delusional?

The answer is not complicated. Our actions and inactions, and narratives, are undergirded by a class divide.

Of India's 250 million school children, perhaps 20-30 million children have continued with a semblance of education in these 17 months. Online education is ineffective for children because of the nature of education and how they learn; nevertheless, middle-class homes (especially upper) have better access to digital tools, which are augmented by personal tutoring and other learning resources. Critically, these students also have the support of family members. So, their loss of learning has been less. Even more importantly, these children go to schools that are well resourced; parents expect these schools to ensure that a substantial part of the loss is recovered with the extra efforts that their resources enable once they reopen.

India's top 10% are not engulfed by this crisis as far as they understand. So, most of them either don't notice or are apathetic to the ravaging of the educational future of 210-220 million children. Many are proactive in countering actions towards the most fundamental requirement for any solution in this situation—that after schools open, many months or perhaps the entire year must be spent on recovering lost learning. They raise the bogey of a 'lost year'. In this cruelly ironic equation, the lost future of 210-220 million children becomes a non-issue.

The catastrophic deepening and hardening of every aspect of inequity and injustice in our country because of the pandemic is for all to see. Not doing everything to recover this lost learning for 210-220 million children will be an outrageous exacerbation of this tragedy. And we will all be complicit.

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