

Bridge the glaring gaps in learning

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On May 25, 2023, the results of classes X and XII of the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education were announced. While the performance of class X students' had improved marginally from the previous year, the outcome for class XII was disappointing and raised many questions. The pass percentage was very low—just over 55 percent. What went wrong? Why did the result fall so short?

While these questions require deeper multifactorial analysis, a key consideration that must be accounted for is the enduring impact of Covid-19 containment measures and the ways in which their imposition has thrown our schooling system out of gear. MP Board's class XII results have implications for classrooms across the country and point to a gaping hole that needs to be crucially plugged.

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It is widely documented that the sudden shutdown of schools and the thoughtless shift to the online mode of teaching adversely impacted students' well-being—physically, mentally, and emotionally. With their schools closed and regular teaching and learning disrupted, all students—from primary to secondary levels—experienced varying degrees of learning loss. Their teachers continue to grapple with it today.

The return to in-person teaching presented a new set of challenges for teachers and students. For the latter, it was particularly hard. They suddenly found themselves a few classes ahead. It was assumed that they would pick up from there, and little was done to ease their return to full-time physical classes. A well-thought-out policy response from the state could have helped bridge the learning gap and prevailed upon schools across the country to smooth this transition for students.

Concerned educationists cautioned, and some schools and teachers went the extra mile to address the emergent difficulties, but the onus of coping with these unprecedented shifts largely fell upon the students.

This year's board examinations were among the first in the state to be held out of the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the results are telling. The Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education caters largely to students from lower-income families. Moreover, in smaller towns and villages of the state, where institutions aligned with other affiliating boards, such as the CBSE or the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations, are mostly absent, there is no option for students but to study in schools recognised by the MP Board.

In a country beset with immense socio-economic inequalities, the consequences of online teaching and assessments can be deeply disturbing and disempowering. Differential access to new information and communications technology by students of different regions, socio-economic backgrounds, and genders across the urban-rural divide is, by no means, a surprising reality.

Residing in a less-developed state, such as Madhya Pradesh, students, particularly from vulnerable sections and areas, would have found it difficult to cope with the sudden closure of their schools, the adoption of an online mode of teaching, poor internet connectivity, and the unavailability of technological tools and gadgets to access it. As a knee-jerk reaction, online teaching and assessments were introduced at both the school and college levels without taking any concrete measures to overcome the critical issues of access and the digital divide. The constraints of continuing online education for long periods, coupled with widespread institutional apathy and indifference, proved to be acutely pressing for a large number of students.

The MP Class XII result is an urgent wake-up call. Our children's education commands a limited place in the visions of our policymakers, and we need to question this lack.

Merely axing portions of existing syllabi now, in the name of content rationalisation and reduction of students' workload, is not going to help. We will have to think of other constructive solutions to enable students to regain their lost learning. We must acknowledge the disconnect that the sudden switch from classroom to online education bred and the problem of differential access that it posed. We will then have to appraise what and how much has been lost and work consciously to reincorporate it into our present curricula. In other words, students will have to be brought up to speed with key topics and concepts that were earlier taught online for them to be able to keep pace with their current learning levels.

A much-needed corrective strategy can be to design bridge courses that creatively condense lost knowledge and communicate it. We cannot deny or dismiss the disruptive impact of the past two years on our schooling system. Making good on it requires a concerted investment of time, effort, and energy; otherwise, we will have to pay a heavy price in the form of our students' futures.

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