We, as a nation, are failing our children

There is grim news on education. But the silver lining is that the pandemic forced innovation. Build on it

This was the week that my household of primary school-going children in New Delhi was waiting for; 21 long months after they closed, schools were finally re-opening. India has the dubious distinction of one of the longest pandemic-induced school closures across the globe. After foot-dragging for months, several states, including Delhi, finally authorised reopening primary schools in November.

It is a measure of how little we value schooling that we found ways to prioritise festival gatherings, election campaigns and every other conceivable form of Covid-19 "inappropriate behaviour" with remarkable alacrity, but kept school gates firmly shut throughout most of these 21 months. Every stakeholder, from government to schools, parents in urban digital bubbles and media-savvy "experts", has played a role in this perfect storm, choosing to ignore scientific, educational and the realities of India's deep digital divide.

For residents of Delhi, the excitement was short-lived. We had barely dusted off school bags when the annual pollution season led to another bout of school closures. One has to ask why the Delhi government waited till the most predictable event on the calendar to reopen primary schools, without an action plan. Most children are breathing this foul air, regardless of whether schools are open or closed. And if the goal was to reduce traffic, then closing private offices, rather than schools that are, in any case, operating at 50% capacity, could have been considered. But then, we are not a country where government prioritises schooling.

Delhi's trauma aside, as schools in many parts of the country slowly reopen, they must confront a new reality. It is well understood that school closure will have resulted in significant learning deficits. But policy solutions to bridging these first require us to confront the significant changes that Covid-19 has brought to our education landscape. It is not business as usual, as the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for rural India reveals. Two headline findings are worth noting.

First, there has been a dramatic change in the pattern of school enrollments as financial distress has caused a shift away from private to government schools. Private school enrollment in the age group of 6-14 dropped from 32.5% in 2018 to 24.4% in 2021. Government school enrollment increased from 64.3% to 70.3%.

In the face of this, the shift is more pronounced among children of relatively better-off parents. ASER uses education of parents as a proxy for economic status. In 2018, a mere 44.4% of children of parents who fall in the "high" education category were enrolled in government schools. This number is now 61.7%.

Increased enrollment raises the critical question of financial resources. Is there enough money and basic infrastructure for schools to respond, especially as education budgets have been slashed through the pandemic? The policy challenge is not just about increasing spending, but also equity, as ASER cautions that there will be variation in attendance and fluctuation in enrollment. All parents may not revisit their children's schooling needs as parents.

In such a dynamic situation, school financial needs will best be assessed locally. At a minimum, districts, and ideally, schools, ought to be given greater spending autonomy. This is the antithesis of the current policy where financial decisions are taken remotely in New Delhi and state executive. If schools are to act as mediators, perhaps for the first time, school boundaries have been transgressed and parents, regardless of educational background, are now active participants in the teaching-learning process.

Classrooms in India have long been victim to a pedagogy that chases syllabus completion and aligns itself to curriculum expectations, rather than what children know. Two years of school closure has rendered the curriculum redundant. ASER emphasises this. Classrooms need to go back to basics (foundational literacy and numeracy) and allow children to reconnect and catch up. This is where the pandemic experience can and must be leveraged. The nascent experiments with expanding the teaching-learning universe and parental outreach show that even reluctant government school systems can innovate. We failed to prioritise and scale these approaches through the pandemic.

With schools reopening, there is an opportunity for governments to design a policy that brings these experiences into classrooms, with parents as partners through a concerted state-to-state campaign to rebuild foundational skills.

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