

What Awaits our Teachers when Schools Reopen

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Background

It has been almost two years since schools closed. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on children and teachers. The governments, state and central, have started waking up to the enormous damage done by school closures. While there is some discussion on the inherent inequality of online schooling, what is missing is a serious discussion on what awaits our teachers when they return to school. In an earlier essay on the reopening of schools after the pandemic (*Learning Curve, December 2020*), I outlined some of the challenges that teachers and educational administrators face. We now have a lot more information on the impact of school closures on children, the precarious existence of contract teachers, job losses in private schools and the immense pressure on teachers to teach online or through WhatsApp, distributing worksheets, running *mohalla* classes and contacting children at home.

Facts and figures

Barely one-fourth of the children in urban and eight percent in rural areas sampled in a recent qualitative survey were found to be studying online - a shocking statistic by any measure. This recent survey reinforces what we have known for some time now - online education is a luxury that very few in our country can actually access. Equally significant is that 90 percent urban and 97 percent rural parents want schools to reopen. While this survey focused primarily on deprived areas/communities - this is an urgent reminder that the government needs to start reopening schools -

right from pre-primary to class XII. An ASERⁱⁱ study done in 24 districts of Karnataka reveals a slight increase in enrolment in government schools (as many private schools shut down or parents could no longer afford to pay fees), a huge drop in reading and numeracy levels, with a discernible decline in foundational skills (ASER, September 2021). Given that we now know a lot more, what are the challenges our school teachers are likely to face when schools reopen?

National and international media has been reporting 'missing children' - those children who have just dropped off the education radar. They have not attended online classes and nor have they participated in local in-person classes or activities. Many of them have started working, sent on bondage as child labour, married off, taking care of children/siblings at home or joined their parents in their work. We have no idea of the number of such children in India. All the old 'out of school survey' reports have very little meaning in the changed COVID-19- related lockdown days.

It is now universally accepted that the onus of finding the children will invariably fall on teachers, school heads and what is left of the school management committees. The enormity of the problem eludes us and unless each and every state government starts a child census - going from village to village; urban ward to urban ward; local sweatshops; *dhabas*, brick-kilns, carpet weaving factories, metal/jewellery/stone cutting workshops to name a few. One way of doing this would be to organise parent-teacher meetings, track which

Proportion (%) of sample children who:	Urban	Rural
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Are not studying at all nowadays	19	37
Have not met their teacher(s) in the last 30 days	51	58
Did not have test/exam in the last three months	52	71
Are unable to read more than a few words	42	48

Source: *Locked Out, September 2021*ⁱ

children's parents have come and make home visits to those who have not. Delhi government did two weeks of class-wise parent-teacher meetings and tracked attendance closely. They had almost 70 percent of children's parents attend. The Department of Education and the Department of Labour, alongside the child-rights commissions need to start identifying the 'missing children' right away and help bring them back home and then to school. This needs to be done before schools reopen and needs to continue for at least a year, so that, as a society, we can make sure every single child is back in school.

Teachers' contribution

This is easier said than done. The hard reality is that the pressure on school teachers is going to increase with many states having either terminated or not paid their contract teachers (who constitute 13.80 percent in elementary and 8.40 percent in secondary schools in 2018ⁱⁱⁱ). In some states, like Jharkhand and several North-Eastern states, contract teachers account for more than 50 percent of the teacher workforce. The situation with respect to teacher availability is likely to be grim, especially when we expect a surge in the enrolment in government schools.

Getting children back to school is going to be an uphill task and this situation would be different at different levels. For example, let us take children who are 14 years and above. Motivating them to get back to school may be far more difficult than anyone can imagine. Working children, especially those who have not been to school for two years and were last in upper primary or secondary, may have not only forgotten what they had learnt but may also be under immense pressure to contribute to the family income. Given the economic distress faced by the poor in both rural and urban areas, the migrants, the daily wage labourers and informal sector workers – weaning the children away from work and getting them back to school may require more than just verbal assurances. The entire family would have to be taken into confidence to initiate a dialogue on schooling.

The problems faced by girls who have got married during the pandemic would be even more challenging. Revisiting and redesigning the residential bridge course model – (one that

was tried under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), or the *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV) model or the *Mahila Shikshan Kendra* model of the erstwhile *Mahila Samakhya* programme) – may become essential if we want young adolescent girls to come back to school. Interestingly, I hear many NGOs talk about the need for similar residential schools/programmes for boys – especially if we want them to get back to school. Accelerated learning programmes for a duration of two to three years may help them catch up on their upper primary level and complete class X.

The central and state governments need to make additional funds available to meet the varied requirements of the post-pandemic phase. One of the suggestions that have been discussed among NGOs is to imaginatively use MNREGA funds to get additional support for schools – and as this is likely to be for a year, or for a maximum two years, getting local educated persons to come into the school is an option that can be explored. Teachers of many low-cost, private schools are unemployed – this may provide such persons an opportunity, at least till private schools reopen, if they do. Re-introducing residential bridge courses/accelerated learning programmes; opening more KGBVs in rural and urban areas and for girls and boys; starting new schools or adding to the capacity of existing schools (to make place for children who have left private schools) and most importantly, hiring many more teachers at all levels, should be considered. The idea of the school-complex being the nodal point – as recommended in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – could be the fulcrum around which the planning and implementation processes could start.

Teachers of all levels from classes I to XII need to be made aware of the kinds of problems, challenges, and opportunities that they have in the post-pandemic phase. This places a huge demand on district and sub-district institutions, like the Block Resource Centre (BRC) and Cluster Resource Centre (CRC), where teacher educators, resource persons identified by SCERT and NGO workers with experience in child-centred teaching-learning can be identified. The state governments need to gear up at least a few months in advance to prepare dynamic and interactive training modules to help teachers plan to respond to the different needs of children. Mindless cutting of topics from the curriculum is not what we need. Teachers need to help each child start from where they are and

help them move up the learning ladder, slowly and gently. Recent efforts to design foundational learning programmes may be very important so that teachers not only have the freedom to respond to the situation in the classroom, but also are given at least a six-month lead time to enable their students to make up for the learning loss.

Suggested solutions

One of the biggest challenges we face is the mindset of educational administrators and teachers. The one-way communication with children has not worked and is not likely to yield any positive outcome. Engaging with each and every child requires a radical shift in the way we approach learning. Some administrators are talking about time-bound foundational skills modules. The experience of NGOs that are working on foundational literacy and numeracy has demonstrated that a pre-designed module is not the answer. Using a mix of stories to read to children and children reading to each other, engaging with ideas and activities can motivate them to enjoy the process of reading and writing. Similar activities in mathematics, science and local history and environment during the lockdown could also help children connect with each other and with the learning process.

Once this process has been initiated, all school teachers need to set aside the first couple of weeks or more for talking to children, listening to their experiences, taking stock of where they are in different subjects and create small groups of children at similar levels for every subject and draw up a plan to help them navigate learning. Children are bound to be not only at different levels in different subjects, but some children could be more traumatised than others. This is particularly true in the case of children who have moved schools – from private to government, from a city/town to a village or from one city to another. Children cannot be expected to go back to ‘normal’ from day one. This means that teachers would have to meet at least ten to fifteen days before school reopens and plan the activities with care.

All teachers may not have the ability/skill to be focused on the needs of children, the problems they face, handle each child with sensitivity and most importantly, enable them to start enjoying being in school. In the short and medium term, state governments may have at least two teachers in each class – even if that means appointing more teachers or reaching out to local resources to

teach in class. We may need at least two teachers for a group of 25 children – if we are serious about working with each child, starting from where he/she is. Equally, regular activities may be required to help children articulate their fears and apprehensions, talk openly about their experiences and gradually understand that their experiences are shared by so many other children. While the term ‘mission mode’ has been criticised a great deal, what we need is an intensive phase of activities so that teachers and children can navigate the difficult phase of getting back to school, reconnecting with their peers and friends, engaging with teachers and the teaching-learning process. There is indeed a lot that children need to adjust to.

Several international experts have been talking about a ‘hybrid’ model – where person-to-person interaction is supported by online or electronic resources. Here again, it is important to keep the age of the children in mind. While something like this may be quite useful in secondary/higher secondary levels, it may not be an option in primary schools across the country. To begin with, rural elementary schools face the additional challenge of poor infrastructure, erratic electricity supply, lack of computers/projectors to use in the school. What may seem doable in urban areas, may not be feasible in rural areas, as what works in the one may not work in the other.

Taking immediate steps

All this essentially implies that we need to start right now to bring teachers on board and make them a part of the planning process. Start discussing these issues, encourage them to articulate the challenges they anticipate and encourage them to visit households to get a realistic picture. It is really distressing that governments announce school reopening dates and expect teachers to carry on as usual. In many states, secondary schools have opened and the feedback from children in urban areas is that many of them could not learn effectively either through the online mode or through worksheets and homework. The levels vary a great deal even in classes X -XII. If this is the situation in urban areas, then we can well imagine the situation in rural and remote areas.

Disregarding the voices of teachers has never yielded any positive results. Making them partners in identifying challenges, searching for solutions, planning how the challenges can be overcome, drawing up detailed context-specific plans and

making sure adequate human and financial resources are allocated, is the way forward. There are no easy short-cuts or ‘magic bullets’; we need to plan systematically with teachers, school heads

and administrators as partners for each and every school complex; and define new roles for parents as partners in re-energising government schools.

Endnotes

- i Nirali Bakhla, Reetika Khera, Jean Dreze, Vipul Paikra. 2021. Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, 6 September 2021.
- ii ASER: Annual Status of Education Report.
- iii Vimala Ramachandran, Deepa Das, Ganesh Nigam and Anjali Shandilya. 2020. Contract Teachers in India: Recent Trends and Current Status. Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

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Azim Premji University, Loss of Learning During the Pandemic, February 2021
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Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, September 2021
Several initiatives by state governments and NGOs in 2020 and 2021



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