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CHILDREN AND SCHOOLING IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

When someone in the family falls sick, all normal routines and arrangements are affected. And then, the deeper problems that lay hidden under the momentum of routine lie exposed and revealed. The same applies to an epidemic. The term currently used is ‘pandemic’ because it covers the whole world, but one cannot forget that even a universal illness manifests itself in regionally specific, local ways, exposing the problems to which societies had become accustomed. In our case, the pandemic has revealed the limits of our wherewithal to look after the collective needs of children during a calamity. A child in the family has a radically different status from that accorded to children as a collective entity in our country. The pandemic has revealed that society and state institutions prefer to ignore the conditions under which the family copes with the demands of childhood.

Children’s education and health are two major domains in which welfare policies of the modern state are expected to support and enhance the family’s role. In both these domains, the policy framework reflects a minimalist stance, both in terms of financial investment and institutional strength. In policies as well as in their execution, there is considerable diversity and disparity among the States. The overall picture suggests that childhood is of peripheral concern. Gains made in this context have proved difficult to sustain.

When the Right to Education (RTE) Act was promulgated over a decade ago, it seemed like a breakthrough. This perception was grounded in the structures and procedures created under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan during the decade preceding the RTE. These structures were not perfect, but they marked a new beginning in the direction of local autonomy and devolution of power. These fragile structures required nurturing on a long-term basis. Neglect and decay set in quite soon in regions where the system was weak to begin with, and then came COVID-19. Several recent surveys show that the pandemic has left the entire system ravaged. Even something as basic as a meal for the youngest age group ceased. Teaching switched wholesale to the online mode, leaving it to the family to cope with the demands hidden in this medium. A flat discourse pervaded the ethos, offering few choices or clues to enhance them.

India was unique in the fact that even the very youngest age group was covered by online teaching. With the reopening of schools, the outcomes of prolonged exposure to digital devices in confined spaces have started to be revealed and documented. The vast majority of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds could not access online teaching for reasons totally beyond their control. And among those who did have access to online lessons, rates of comprehension and progress were quite low.

Studies show that academic losses are compounded by emotional problems. A survey carried out by the Vipla Foundation has traced the kinds of stress children experienced at home. Exposure to domestic violence, prolonged hours in front of TV, especially among boys, and addiction to digital sources of entertainment are among the various outcomes of COVID-19 confinement.

Systemic recovery will undoubtedly prove arduous. The time required for recovery will depend on imagination and resources. A significant beginning has been made in Tamil Nadu. A committee chaired by Professor R. Ramanujam has been asked to prepare a three-year recovery plan and a new curriculum. A major problem this committee will need to address is the

addictive effect of prolonged online teaching. Devices such as the smartphone induce small children into a seductive bond that may not be easy to shake off. Restoring children's innate desire to relate to the world physically and socially surrounding them will constitute a major step towards educational recovery. This will demand de-addiction from digital instruments.

The COVID experiment of exclusive dependence on digital machinery has resulted in a radical expansion of its market. It has also permitted digital activism to mutate into an ideological doctrine of progress. The Ramanujam committee may not find it easy to deal with this doctrine. Its believers and new recruits must be persuaded to listen to child psychologists and teachers of young children. Their voices, feeble though they are at present, offer the best promise of healing our injured system.

It was not a strong and resilient system to begin with. Its key functionaries — the teachers — had little say in decisions and no autonomy to do their best. Distrust in the teacher cuts across the deep divisions that characterise the system. On one side of the divide are government schools of various types, with differential levels of funding but common norms of governance. On the other side are private schools ranging from shoestring budget schools to the well-endowed, elite institutions. What sustains this straggling order of institutional outfits is the grand national fantasy that even an inadequate system such as India's can generate a sufficient number of good doctors, judges, teachers, engineers, civil servants and so on.

No description can capture the differential realities of experience that COVID-19 imposed on this vast range of institutions. Nor is there a comprehensive study to tell us how parents belonging to different socio-economic classes coped with their anxieties. We now know that financial constraints have forced a considerable proportion of children studying in private schools to shift to government schools. What this shift implies for the children and for the schools they will now attend needs more than speculation. Indeed, the shift itself remains a raw reality. In a recent webinar, Professor Shantha Sinha, former head of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, spoke about the astonishing demand faced by parents who wanted to transfer their children from a private to a government school. As many private schools run entirely on the strength of the fees they collect, they had to close down during COVID-19. The digital record of children's enrolment maintained in some States continues to show their names in a private school. Seeking a transfer requires deletion from this record. Prof. Sinha said that many private schools in her region demand recovery of the COVID-19 period fee for granting deletion of the child's name. This is just one instance of the hundreds of bitter experiential facts we will need to gather from every part of the country in order to prepare a post-COVID-19 recovery plan of any credible and practical value.

For now, the best we can do is to browse through a new United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report titled "No Teacher, No Class" (https://bit.ly/31HJFKi), and heed its sane recommendations. Prepared by a team of scholars at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, this report tells us that India is facing a shortfall of at least one million school teachers. The report makes several key recommendations. The first is: "Improve the terms of employment of teachers in both public and private schools." Some of the other recommendations are: value the professional autonomy of teachers, build career pathways, and, above all, recruit more teachers. If sound, research-based advice is what we need for rebuilding the system, it is available in this excellent report.

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