

Education crisis will be more severe after reopening of schools

Rasheda K Choudhury, Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and former adviser to a caretaker government, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about the impacts of prolonged school closure and what needs to be done to better manage the present situation.

The government has decided to keep all educational institutions closed until June 15. Earlier, the PM said that schools might remain closed till September, if the situation did not improve. If schools remain closed for a long period, how will it impact our primary education sector?

The closure of educational institutions has been necessary to contain the spread of Covid-19 but it has also been very challenging for the entire education sector, from pre-primary to higher education. As in many parts of the world, some of the major negative impacts of a prolonged school closure for us would be learning loss, increased dropout rate, child labour, early marriage, early pregnancy, violence against children, and malnutrition, among other things. We know for a fact that some of these are already happening, but the effects will be more visible after the reopening of schools.

If the shutdown continues for a long period, the competencies we expect from children upon completion of their education cycle will be negatively affected. However, I think the most significant impact will be the increased inequality in learning as many hard-to-reach groups are now missing out on different government and other ongoing educational initiatives through state-run TV and online courses.

The government has been trying to make up for this loss primarily through four platforms—TV channels, mobile networks, online and radio. We have observed that despite some limitations, secondary-level lessons are being delivered in a better way through television, but lessons for the primary students are not being delivered in a child-friendly manner. Moreover, with only 56 percent of the population having access to television, the majority of children from poor households in remote, inaccessible areas and those belonging to the ethnic minorities and disabled groups are currently missing out on education.

But like I said, the challenges will be more visible after the reopening of schools. Over the years, Bangladesh has achieved enviable success in reducing dropout rate, particularly at the primary level—from 40 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2018. After Covid-19, the dropout rate will surely increase as those who are currently missing out on learning will be reluctant to go to school anymore. The livelihood challenge for families facing acute shortages of food and other necessities will be a major factor contributing to the increased dropout rate and child labour. Moreover, when the parents will have to make a choice between sending a boy and a girl to school, they may choose the son to attend the school

and try to marry off their daughter. Thus, early marriage may become more prevalent resulting in an increase in early pregnancy.

There are reports coming in through the media that because of livelihood challenges, hunger and many other emerging psycho-social factors that parents themselves have been experiencing, incidences of violence against children inside households are also on the rise. People and their government in every country recognise the multi-dimensional negative effects of prolonged school closure. How to effectively deal with these challenges is a million-dollar question now.

What measures should be taken to ensure that students do not drop out of schools because of the shutdown? Do you think continuing with the school feeding programmes and timely distribution of stipend will be enough to keep children in school?

Both the school feeding and stipend programmes have been playing a significant role in ensuring higher attendance at schools and reducing dropouts. The government should continue with these programmes at all costs. However, over the last 16 years, the stipend amount has been increased only nominally; it should be increased further. The stipend programmes should also have universal coverage to include learners in non-formal education (NFE), who primarily belong to the disadvantaged groups. Moreover, in order to reduce school dropouts after reopening, the vulnerable families should be provided with financial support.

What's your take on the reopening of schools?

Frankly, the current Covid-19 situation in the country is not favourable to reopening schools. We are in the third month of the outbreak. Globally, countries have faced the most severe impacts of the outbreak—both in terms of deaths and infections—in the third month. We can't put our children at risk by reopening schools when the infection curve is going up. We should wait until the situation is somewhat contained and all preparations are in place. UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank jointly formulated a set of guidelines in late April 2020 about reopening of educational institutions during and after the pandemic. Our decision makers and other authorities concerned should be making adequate preparations following those guidelines before deciding to reopen. For example, we need to produce millions of cotton-made, environment-friendly face masks, particularly for our students and teachers,



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before they go back to classes, and make sure that each and every school has proper WASH facilities.

What are some of the areas on which the government needs to focus more to better manage the current situation?

We understand that for now the government's top priority is to address hunger and poverty resulting from the global pandemic and the unprecedented shutdown. However, it is good to see that the government has already taken some initiatives to make up for the learning loss, and has been trying to address the challenges at different levels of education.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is already developing a very impressive three-phase response plan—short term (six months), medium term (12 months) and long term (24 months)—which is in its final stage. The plan includes students' improvement tracking, regular assessment, teachers' skills development, health-hygiene, protection of learners, among many other things. We hope the plan will be finalised and approved by the decision makers as soon as possible. Once it is approved, the government will need to focus on proper implementation and monitoring of the plan in cooperation with the school authorities, local communities, NGOs and other stakeholders. The plan should consider revisiting the syllabus and discontinuing unproductive national exams like the Primary Education Completion Exam (PECE).

The lessons currently being aired on TV for primary students have to be more attractive with provisions for learning through games, cartoons, etc. As nearly 30 percent of our primary students are first-generation learners, their parents are unable to help them with their education at homes. We can't expect, for example, a rickshaw puller to help his kids learn from the TV programmes, particularly when the

lessons are difficult to comprehend.

My suggestion to the policy makers would be to reach out to those learners through mobile phones who can't be reached through TV or other online platforms. Since 96 percent of our population has access to mobile phones—not smart phones but feature phones (which can download FM radios)—their networks could be used for providing lessons (that are already being given through TV or other platforms) to primary children for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening.

The mobile phone service providers should contribute here through providing free service to the unreachable children as part of their corporate social responsibility. BTRC can make such a suggestion to the mobile phone companies with specific guidelines for doing it. It would make a huge difference in primary education during the shutdown period if carried out with appropriate strategies and proper monitoring.

Where do you see our primary education sector once the pandemic is over or somewhat contained?

In terms of GDP, our investment in education is the lowest in South Asia. More allocations are needed in this sector—not only for stipend programmes, school meals, WASH facilities and health and hygiene, but also for increasing the quality of education, teachers' capacity building and improving the teaching-learning process. During the ongoing lockdown, primary teachers should be given orientation and training on online teaching. Since they are not much familiar with or prepared for providing lessons electronically, it has already become a big challenge. Teaching through TV or online with a focus on equity and quality could open a window of opportunity for Bangladesh after reopening. More investment will also be needed in research, assessments, data generation, analysis and monitoring. I sincerely hope that the upcoming budget will dedicate at least 15 percent of the total allocation for education, as per our national commitment to achieve the targets of SDG-4.

Considering the current and post-pandemic situation, the government should prioritise education along with other important areas like food safety and livelihood, employment generation and economic development. We may hopefully manage the adverse impacts of economic slowdown caused by the pandemic, but if we lose a generation of learners in education, it will be difficult to overcome the loss in years.