

THE WORLD AFTER COVID-19

'A home-school approach with feature phones can benefit most vulnerable children'

Dr Safiqul Islam, Director, BRAC Education Programme, shares his thoughts with The Daily Star's Naznin Tithi about the challenges associated with school reopening, ways to recover children's learning loss over the extended break from school, and BRAC's education model for this crisis situation. This interview is part of an interview series by The Daily Star that aims to give readers an idea of what changes to expect in a post-Covid-19 world.

Once the educational institutions reopen, what will be the major challenges for schools? How to recover the learning loss caused by the long study break?

There are a number of challenges associated with school reopening. The supply, quality and use of masks—particularly for children, and especially for those who are poor or in early grades—will be an issue. This will require concrete policy. Design issues need to be sorted out by the educationalists and health experts. If a special design is needed, it would mean production of at least 30 million new masks. Among other things that need to be considered are: how long a child can use a mask inside the classroom, what the teachers will do, whether they will be using masks while conducting classes, and if so, what the guidelines for this will be.

Maintaining safe distance inside the classroom and doing so for a prolonged time is another important matter. In that case, how many children can be accommodated in a classroom? The number will likely vary from one school to another, one classroom to another, and from one grade to another. In some grades/classrooms, there are a large number of children (60-70).

For classes conducted in shifts, teachers may need to work for a longer period. The other issue is having proper toilet facilities for both boys and girls as well as for the teaching staff. So all this will require a standard guideline from the ministries and relevant departments which should be properly communicated to the teachers and parents. The information can be communicated through electronic and printed media, so that parents and school communities are fully cognisant of it.

Preparing the teachers for classroom teaching after an extended break will no doubt be challenging, but it is essential. Many teachers don't know what percentage of their students have had the opportunity to follow the TV-based lessons. There will be a learning gap between children who are following lessons and children who are not,

particularly those in the rural areas. In other words, the learning gap among children will be considerably higher compared to the pre-Covid-19 period.

The challenges would be much more difficult at the early grade level. With barely any class experience in the pre-pandemic period, these children would have a six months' learning loss to make up for (if classes resume from September/October, that is). How will they be able to complete this academic year and move onto the next grade? Even if some kind of remedial classes are conducted to address the learning loss, will it really work for the students of early grades, or will it only work for those in the higher grades?

Ideally, every school should make a quick assessment of the learning loss and develop a grade-specific response plan. However, a good way to go will be a combination of short, medium and long term planning.

How would you evaluate the government's response so far to ensure education to the 40 million students now stuck at home?

School closure was essential and the government acted pretty quickly to start its TV-based lesson initiative. A number of private TV channels stepped up to extend similar services to the children. We know that some of the channels are also conducting remote classes through internet and online platforms like Zoom, Hangout and so on. These are very appreciable initiatives. However, questions remain about the reach and effectiveness of such methods.

Available information suggests that almost 62 percent of the children have access to TV. However, only 25 percent of them watch it for learning purposes. A study by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) also shows that children's self-study time per day declined from 185 minutes in the pre-pandemic period to 115 minutes during the pandemic, and is positively associated with parental education.



Dr Safiqul Islam

The education budget maintains Bangladesh's record for having one of the lowest allocations in South Asia and among developing countries in terms of share of GDP and of the national budget. Why is our budget for education so low even after the damage done by Covid-19?

Some argue that it is the education sector's failure to convince the government to prioritise it, while others point at capacity issues related to utilising a larger budget. Some point out that if the private/family expenditure on education is added, then the total allocation would be higher. One can also say that lack of proper research on education and dialogue and advocacy with the policymakers is responsible for constraining our efforts to realise the need for increased allocation. This year, people expected a higher allocation for education inclusive of additional amounts that would be required to reopen schools, to accelerate technological integration across all important areas in the sector, and finally to give incentives so as to keep children in schools in the post-pandemic

period. The surcharge that the government added on phone/internet bills in this budget can be counterproductive to technological advancement in education, and by extension to the dreams for a Digital Bangladesh.

You have been leading Brac's education programme for many years now. Tell us about your experience of working with the children of most vulnerable sections of society during this crisis.

During the crisis, in order to address the students' inaccessibility of the government's televised lessons, we came up with a Home School approach through the use of feature phones. Curriculum supplementation has been made by adding content such as psychosocial elements and preventive measures against coronavirus. Teachers have been trained virtually to deliver lessons in a group of 3-4 children, preferably from the same neighbourhood. Classes are held 1-2 times a week for 15-20 minutes. This is far from adequate, but it at least helps children to be connected to the world of learning. Teachers who come from the same community can be accessed if a child needs additional support. Special attention is given to disabled children. Most parents are relieved to see that children are connected with the teachers. Children are also happy, because it is almost fun for them to learn through a phone. It is a new experience for them. However, there are challenges such as the call time cost that is equivalent to almost Tk 50 for a 20-minute class for 3-4 children in a group. There is evidence that many parents forget to leave the phone for schooling. Quite often, teachers need to give them a heads-up.

Attention is given to virtual monitoring. Progress and problems are shared with the headquarters staff through virtual meetings twice a week.

Is online education the ultimate solution? Is it practically feasible for Bangladesh?

Technology is important but not a panacea. It will only be helpful and rewarding if it is

properly aligned and blended with the inside-classroom and outside-classroom learning assignments. Children and teachers need to be prepared to use technology. A tablet, or a smart phone, or a projector can facilitate and add value to lesson plan development, data management, learning outcome related analysis, and performance of each child in their interest areas. Technology can immensely benefit teachers' development. However, it is equally important to consider the need for technological penetration across the country, stable services and costs.

How do you see the future of our education sector post-Covid-19? Should there be a rethinking in how we teach children, what we teach them, and what education should entail to create well-balanced, productive, innovative human beings?

A curriculum that would be based on the lessons learned from the pre-pandemic period to the mid-pandemic new normal. Things that didn't work well in the pre-pandemic situation include poor learning outcome of a large number of children, inadequate provision for children engagement in the learning process, low level of analysis of teacher learning, overemphasis on textbook materials, under-emphasis on creativity and art and craft, insufficient library facilities, etc. The quality divide we had in the pre-pandemic situation is also not something desirable for Bangladesh going forward. The BIGD study showed that our children have problems with using waking hours during Covid-19. They have to be prepared for the unforeseen challenges that may come our way once again after this pandemic is over. We are living in a vulnerable and uncertain world, so it is important that, through education, we help our children to grow and develop as responsible human beings, leaning on empathy, collective work, collective response, courage and ability to cope with challenges. We need a better world and we need to do our part to contribute to that world.

Reimagining an inclusive society



LAILA KHONDKAR

ON March 12, 2020, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine organised a discussion titled "Discrimination and Racism During Coronavirus Outbreak". There, Jabez Lam (Manager, Hackney Community Services) mentioned that the centre had received reports from the Chinese and East Asians in London about abuse and harassment since the Chinese government announced the lockdown of Wuhan city from January 23. Since then, there have been many shocking incidents of physical and verbal abuse that people from the Chinese background faced in the United Kingdom, the USA and many other countries across the world. They suffered discriminatory attitudes and behaviours in educational institutions, public transports, workplaces, etc. Many people wrongly associated the Chinese with Covid-19, blaming them for the disease outbreak.

Discrimination and stigmatisation have often been common during epidemics. For example, gay communities were stigmatised as a source of HIV infection for a long time. It took decades of campaign to address the misperceptions. People with HIV/AIDS suffered from rights violations in terms of employment, travel, insurance, immigration, etc. In 2000, when I went to South Africa for the first time to engage in a research project on HIV/AIDS, some people back home were concerned that I might get infected. Their fear was due to the rumours about deliberate attempts by some to infect others with HIV for which there was no evidence.

The Chinese were also considered a source

of infection during the SARS outbreak, while Africans faced discrimination during the Ebola crisis. In each epidemic, people try to find an "other" group to blame for "causing" the disease while the focus should be on the disease or virus itself.

In Bangladesh, there have been a number of incidents of stigmatisation and discrimination during the present pandemic. People in some neighbourhoods resisted establishing medical facilities for treatment of Covid-19 in their areas. Healthcare professionals and Covid-19 patients faced eviction threats. Some were forced to self-isolate by flatmates while they had common cold. Many do not feel comfortable in disclosing their condition when they test positive for Covid-19 due to fear of discrimination. These are just a few examples.

Why should we be concerned about discrimination during a public health crisis? Firstly, it is a serious violation of human rights. Moreover, it affects the prevention and control efforts. For example, many people felt hesitant to go for voluntary counselling and testing due to the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and that happens in case of other infectious disease outbreaks also. Jonathan Mann led the WHO's Global Program on AIDS at the early stage of the epidemic and was the first director of the Francois Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University. He explained that the groups that suffered marginalisation, discrimination, and stigma (e.g. gay people, injecting drug users, sex workers) were at increased risk of HIV infection and they face further marginalisation after getting infected. Marginalisation is at the root of many epidemics, including Covid-19. In several countries including the United Kingdom and the USA, people from Black and ethnic minority groups have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19, which can be tied to the structural inequalities,

racism and discrimination they have endured for many years.

While faced with a deadly disease, people try to cope by blaming someone outside their own social circle. Mass media plays an important role in disseminating information during a public health emergency. The way the media frames a narrative as well as the images it uses influence public perceptions. Today, social media gives a platform to almost everyone to share what they want to and thus,

prejudice against certain groups, which gets amplified during a crisis, and this leads to racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

I think our policymakers should recognise the discrimination during any epidemic and confront it. They need to debunk myths and dispel rumours circulated through various channels, design effective public health communication strategies, and implement rigorous awareness campaigns. The responsibility of the media in terms of

panic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed many issues related to every society ranging from inequality to what happens within households. But let us not forget about the discriminatory attitudes towards various groups of people in our societies in everyday life. Due to my work in Bangladesh, I have met families who have for years hidden their child with disability inside their home, as they did not want to face criticism from their neighbours. Haven't we all heard insensitive jokes and comments about people with mental health issues, ethnic minority groups, refugees, etc.? The list goes on.

Having the right legal and policy frameworks in place is vital to a society where all men, women and children can realise their potential. But we need attitudinal changes and should learn to respect everyone despite their identity including health status. Only then shall we be able to create an inclusive society that believes in the inherent dignity of each human being.

Covid-19 has given each of us an opportunity to reflect on various aspects of our lives and the world. At a personal level, we felt very vulnerable, and we have also witnessed genuine compassion and a renewed sense of community in many places. To what extent our politics, economy, society and environment will change as a result of this collective experience is yet to be seen. Whether we are going to have a fairer, greener and more just world will depend on the macro-level socioeconomic policies and decisions on investment priorities. Will we remember our shared humanity, be more empathetic to fellow human beings, and become better prepared to protect their rights in any situation including future pandemics?

Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.



Having the right legal and policy frameworks in place is vital to a society where all men, women and children can realise their potential.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

in many cases, misinformation spreads very quickly. Covid-19 is a new virus. Various ideas about its origin and other aspects have been circulated through different channels—each person picked up the story that they wanted to believe in. Many people have inherent

presenting the issue is very important. Each citizen also needs to be conscious and make sure they don't believe in or help spread fake news. They have to be media-literate and identify reliable sources of scientific information to avoid unnecessary fear and

QUOTABLE Quote

ELIE WIESEL
(1928-2016)
American author.

Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Javelin's kin
- 6 Toy store section
- 11 Labor group
- 12 Left, on a liner
- 13 Mail, as payment
- 14 Book category
- 15 Symbol
- 17 Unrefined
- 18 Masseur's need
- 19 Grounds
- 22 Opposing vote
- 23 Designated
- 24 Hoarse
- 25 Some time
- 27 "East of Eden" son
- 30 Bing Crosby,

DOWN

- 1 Tempt
- 2 Lack of vitality
- 3 With adeptness
- 4 Spring shape
- 5 Amuse
- 6 Comic bit
- 7 Clumsy one

8 Fifth president

- 9 Gofers' work
- 10 Worries
- 16 Spotty ailment
- 20 Relate
- 21 Bond, for one
- 24 P lookalike
- 25 Mideast region
- 26 Aussie marsupial
- 27 Winding dances
- 28 Zealous
- 29 Singer Gore
- 30 Casino game
- 34 "The King and I" heroine
- 36 "Put - happy face"
- 37 Great weight

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

L	O	F	T	S	A	S	K	E	W
O	P	E	R	A	L	I	N	D	A
S	T	A	I	N	F	L	U	I	D
T	O	D	O	I	C	E	S		
U	G	H	S	R	O	C	K		
R	O	E	B	E	H	O	L	D	S
S	O	R	T	A	I	N	E	R	T
A	D	D	O	N	T	O	D	U	E
T	U	R	G	E	H	U	M	P	
T	E	S	T	A	L	E	S		
O	N	T	O	P	E	A	T	E	R
E	V	E	N	T	S	T	E	V	E
S	Y	R	I	A	S	H	R	E	D

BEETLE BAILEY

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!
A CARD? THAT'S IT?
WHAT DO YOU GET FOR THE GIRL WHO HAS EVERYTHING?
I'LL WRITE YOU A LIST

BY MORT WALKER

I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU TOOK MOM'S PHONE WHILE SHE'S IN THE SHOWER!
IT'S SO SNEAKY! SO WRONG!
IT'S LIKE SOMETHING I WOULD DO!
THAT OUTS DEEP?

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT