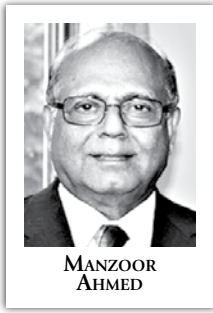


EDUCATION AND THE PANDEMIC

The ostrich syndrome is not the answer



MANZOOR AHMED

THE proverbial ostrich buries its head in the sand in the face of danger, assuming that if it cannot see the hazard, the hazard does not exist or will disappear. Denial of obvious problems as a response to them is thus known as the "ostrich syndrome".

Actually, ostriches don't bury their heads to avoid danger, but they dig holes in the dirt to make nests for their eggs and check on them frequently. Ostriches are more sensible than many humans, who refuse to see obvious problems and whose solution to problems is to pretend that the problems or risks don't exist.

Schools re-opened partially on September 12 after remaining closed for the better part of two academic years. The decision-makers' dilemmas in a difficult situation cannot be underestimated. Yet, it is not helpful if authorities behave as if everything will be fine if they pretend that nothing much has happened and schools can go back to a normal routine. The SSC and HSC exams have been held, albeit in an abridged form, the admission process and dates for the new school year starting in January have been announced, and schools have been advised to hold their annual exams. Most students will start a new grade in January, having missed most lessons from the previous two grades.

It is far from fine for these students. With minimal learning engagement in almost two years, were they ready for lessons for the new grade after being auto-promoted from their previous grade in 2020? Come January, will they be ready for their lessons after another virtual auto-promotion to the next grade? Students are attending school now for a very

limited number of hours and days since mid-September. And from what we hear, up to a quarter of students, especially girls, have not returned to school.

The pandemic has been an unprecedented global crisis, not just for the education sector, and the end is not in sight. An extraordinary situation demands an exceptional and bold response. It does not make sense to presume that the education machine could be restarted where it was left off in March 2020, as if the intervening 18 months did not matter. In fact,

have not reopened. Vaccinating all older students and keeping students, teachers and their families protected has not gone well. There are warnings about a new and more infectious variant of Covid-19, the Omicron, which have led to the re-imposition of general and schooling restrictions in many countries. The education minister said restrictions would be practiced in our schools again if necessary.

Welcoming school re-opening in September, 10 educationists of the country,

learning," September 25, 2021).

First, a rapid assessment of students' grade-level preparedness was needed. Simple tools for rapid assessment of core grade-level competencies in Bangla and mathematics at the primary level and Bangla, English, mathematics and science at the secondary level should be designed and applied in order to determine the students' grade-level readiness. The result should then be used to place students in an appropriate recovery phase—including accelerated learning activities for core skills—to bring them up to their grade-level readiness.

Second, prolonging the current school year and introducing a permanent September-June school calendar was recommended. Extending the current year to June 2022 would provide more time for the students and the school system to adapt to the new situation, assess students' preparedness, and avoid rushing to public and annual exams by December (which is happening now). There are also ample climate-related reasons to permanently shift to a September-June school calendar, with a predictable and long summer vacation between July-August and classes held during Ramadan with modified hours.

Third, scrapping the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE), the Junior School Certificate (JSC) and equivalent exams was urged. The energy and efforts of students and teachers should be devoted to recovering from learning loss, rather than preparing for exams.

Fourth, teachers needed support to implement learning recovery. Guidelines and orientation should be provided to schools and teachers regarding the implementation of a learning recovery plan, especially on: a) use of rapid assessment of grade-level student preparedness; b) pedagogic approaches for assisting students using results of the rapid assessment; c) instructional planning to focus

on core competencies aiming to help students become self-reliant learners; and d) providing socio-emotional support to students and communicating with both students and parents. Online platforms should be used extensively for the guidance and orientation of teachers, as well as to complement classroom teaching for the students.

This urgent appeal, however, has not evoked any reaction from the authorities. They are hell-bent on going back to the old routine, no matter how this has affected the students. The decision-makers have not been moved by the warning that, without the proposed steps, most students would not be able to keep up with their grade level lessons, their deficits would be cumulative and that they would be harmed permanently.

It is necessary to get away from the unfortunate mindset that prevails, which is that the schools and the teachers need to conduct their lessons and "cover" the syllabus within the set number of class hours in the school calendar. What students learned, or if they learned at all, was their own business. Meanwhile, a formula has emerged with a set pattern of public exam questions, which could be answered by memorising guidebooks in coaching centres or with private tutors. This formula, plus a little bit of a liberal approach to marking tests, would ensure a high pass rate in public examinations—real learning be damned.

The golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence this year is an occasion for taking a retrospective and prospective look at the progress and challenges in many fields, including education. A longer term view, however, can hardly be taken unless the education system stands on its feet now and survives this month, this year or the next.

Rifat Shahpar Khan is professor emeritus at BRAC University.



It is not helpful if authorities act like everything will be fine if schools go back to normal and we pretend the pandemic didn't happen. PHOTO: STAR FILE

the plan to bring all students to their classes and start the normal instruction routine did not work out.

Many private schools outside the government's subsidy net (known as MPO)

including myself, jointly recommended four urgent steps as part of a learning recovery and an accelerated learning agenda in response to the special situation (*The Daily Star*, "Four urgent steps to put students on track for

The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by persons with disabilities

RIFAT SHAHPAR KHAN

THE Covid-19 pandemic has caused serious distress for many people worldwide. Persons with disabilities—an estimated 6.5 percent to 16.2 percent of the population, one of the most marginalised groups in Bangladesh—are no exception. But they remained virtually invisible in the public discourse and policy decisions around supporting vulnerable people during the pandemic.

Covid-19 proved to be highly stressful for persons with disabilities and their caregivers, predominantly women, who had to struggle to fulfil the unique needs of their children with disabilities, without much support from anyone else in or outside the family during the pandemic. This was the case of 16-year-old Korimun, who cannot speak clearly and uses home-grown signs. She was fearful of her mother going outside or leaving her alone during the pandemic. Eventually, her mother lost her job as a part-time domestic worker and had to migrate to her village with Korimun.

"I am scared, people die... boys and girls, everyone dies of Corona"—this is how Julekha (22), a young woman with communication and psycho-social difficulties, expressed her understanding of Covid-19 in a study conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) in partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in 2021.

The pandemic has affected people with different types and degrees of disabilities differently. In the same study, 16-year-old Eemon, who has a visual disability, said, "We are very ill-fated that our education has come to a halt for the past two years." Eemon had to join a courier service as a worker to support his family, as other members faced income loss as a result of the pandemic. It is highly unlikely that he will go back to his much-loved school, even though schools have reopened.

These stories demonstrate that the pandemic's impact on persons with disabilities was as great as that of the general population, but

the former group is likely to suffer more because of their disabilities. The pandemic has been particularly difficult for children with various types of neuro-developmental disabilities, some of whom were earlier enrolled in schools. School activities were the only scope for socialisation and stimulation for many, which worked as their much-needed psycho-social therapy. The school offered activities as simple as singing, mingling, dancing, taking part in sports and art classes, which help them learn self-dependence and care in their own ways, and kept them fit physically and psychologically. For at least 18 months, since March 2020, these children have been deprived of these invaluable experiences.

Classes on national TV or online were not designed to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities either. Not all children, with or without disabilities, have the access or the knowhow to participate in these online classes. But the digital divide has exacerbated the negative impact of the pandemic on this already marginalised group of children. The digital divide also deprived many children and adults with disabilities of access to much-needed healthcare and counseling services that were, during the pandemic period, only available online.

The ways persons with disability need to interact with the environment sometimes enhanced their vulnerabilities to the pandemic. In the aforementioned study, 32-year-old Deepon, a person with a visual disability, explained: "People who can see can maintain physical distance, but in my case, I bump into others. Suppose someone is coughing or sneezing. Other people around him may move away immediately, but I can't. As it happens, sometimes, people cough on me."

"Self-isolation is very difficult, and perhaps almost impossible for some persons with Down Syndrome or intellectual disabilities"—stated a mother, whose child thrives in socialising and has trouble remembering to keep her distance from others or keep her mask on. Despite her best efforts, her child was infected with Covid-19. Inadequacy of physical therapies has also affected the quality of lives of persons with disabilities,



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Persons with disabilities remained virtually invisible in the public discourse and policy decisions around supporting vulnerable people during the pandemic.

leading to aggravated physical difficulties due to the closure of services during the lockdown.

The BIGD and LSHTM study also found that persons with disabilities were more vulnerable to domestic violence during the pandemic, since many family members faced double the stress—financial worries along with the heightened demand for caregiving. Covid-19 also increased the security risks for girls and women with disabilities, particularly with neuro-developmental, sensory and/or psycho-social disabilities. A single mother interviewed in the study explained that when she lost her job as a domestic worker in Dhaka, she had to move to her village with her daughter, who has multiple

neuro-developmental disabilities. In Dhaka, she at least knew the people around her. Now, she always remains worried about who might harm her child.

In many cases, persons with disability were the first to lose their job when businesses downsized as a result of the pandemic. On top of that, it is far more difficult for them to find a new job. Nadia, a wheelchair-bound woman who lost a teaching job is now desperately looking for a job that will offer her a wheelchair-accessible environment, which is very hard to find in Bangladesh.

Even before the pandemic, persons with disabilities disproportionately faced poverty, negligence, violence, and other forms of vulnerabilities. Society has largely failed to meet their special needs, and Covid-19 has worsened their crisis.

However, a positive is that the government came up with guidelines for prioritising persons with disabilities for Covid-19 testing, treatment and vaccination. It also increased the coverage of disability allowance during the pandemic, although only a fraction of persons with disabilities in the country benefit from it, and payment was often delayed during the pandemic. Also, the allowance amount of Tk 750 per month is vastly inadequate to sustain them. Even though persons with disabilities faced multifaceted challenges during the pandemic, there was no special allowance for them, or any other initiatives to meet their special needs during this difficult period.

How a society protects and cares for its most vulnerable populations is an indication of how much progress it has made, and persons with disabilities are definitely one of the most vulnerable population groups in Bangladesh. The pandemic has re-emphasised the need for a robust support system for them—fulfilling their economic, social and various other special needs—so that they can have a life of dignity, like others. Now is the time to bolster the demand for a truly disability-inclusive society, making sure that no one is left behind.

Rifat Shahpar Khan is Research Coordinator at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD).

"People who can see can maintain physical distance, but in my case, I bump into others. Suppose someone is coughing or sneezing. Other people around him may move away immediately, but I can't. As it happens, sometimes, people cough on me."

QUOTABLE Quote

T. S. ELIOT
American poet (1888 - 1965)

Half of the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't mean to do harm. But the harm does not interest them.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Small setback
- 5 Pillow covers
- 10 Company symbol
- 11 Messed up
- 12 Heaps
- 13 Virgil hero
- 14 Media muzzle
- 16 Highlands wailers
- 20 State without proof
- 23 Courtroom oath
- 24 Magna cum—
- 25 Mushrooms and truffles
- 27 Travel stop
- 28 Christmas tree trim
- 29 Follow behind

DOWN

- 1 Metal waste
- 2 The Big Easy, informally
- 3 Overly eager
- 4 Retire
- 5 Get some shuteye
- 6 Painter Matisse
- 7 Wonder
- 8 Soccer's Hamm
- 9 Kin of blvds.

- 32 Handsewn toys
- 36 "Romeo and Juliet" setting
- 39 Like abysses
- 40 Makes blank
- 41 Place
- 42 VCR inserts
- 43 Croquet setting

- 11 Sheriff's star
- 15 Latest fad
- 17 Bowling targets
- 18 Border
- 19 Potting need
- 20 Landed
- 21 Turner of movies
- 22 Breathing need
- 25 Locate
- 26 Way too early
- 28 Forum garments
- 30 Stood
- 31 Bowling spots
- 33 Luke's sister
- 34 Lewd look
- 35 Tater
- 36 Horse healer
- 37 Period in history
- 38 Drake's music

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	M	O	G		P	O	L	S
M	A	N	E	D	S	A	R	A
U	N	C	L	E	A	L	I	B
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