

Learning loss from Covid-19

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on heroic assumptions often in the absence of credible data and many intervening variables that cannot be quantified at least in the context of developing countries. Nonetheless, even speculation, based on reasonable assumptions, extrapolation of data and informed judgement are useful in indicating magnitudes of the problems. The precision of quantification is not the point; the numbers, even as orders of magnitude, help to draw public attention and raises public awareness about the problem, then otherwise.

The numbers cited for learning loss and economic loss fail to capture the suffering and trauma of personal and social losses, mental and emotional health effects, the struggle to overcome the adversities, and the short and long-term impact on life and educational performance of the students. There have been reports of a surge in early marriage of girls and higher levels of child labour, and increased family violence and tension



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as effects of the pandemic.

The education responses to the pandemic, how these have been carried out and what can be surmised about how these measures have worked can further illuminate the depth of the problems and challenges of the education system as much as the quantified estimates of learning and economic loss.

Education response so far to Covid-19
Bangladesh was one of the few countries

that kept schools closed non-stop for over 18 months. Health and education experts argued against the "one-size-fits-all" approach irrespective of the infection rates, variation between Dhaka and the rest of the country, and diverse local conditions. The argument from the authorities has been that, given the problems of bringing the population—including students—within the vaccination net, and the difficulties in preventive measures, testing, isolation and treatment of those who may fall ill, a strict approach was necessary in Bangladesh.

The hard line adopted to keep students safe, however, was a contrast to actions seen in respect of helping students catch up and cope with the learning loss. Surveys and studies have documented that most students could not or did not benefit from the distant-mode TV and online lessons, student "assignments", and teacher contacts.

Schools re-opened on September 12,

▲ **The quandary for the decision-makers to balance student safety and minimising learning loss cannot be underestimated.**

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2021, after the loss of the better parts of two academic years. Again, applying the one-size-fits-all formula, schools everywhere allowed only the grade five and grade 10 students to attend for the whole week; the rest could come for a day or two for limited hours. With a minimal engagement in learning for almost two years, students who were auto-promoted from their previous grade in 2020 were not likely to be ready for lessons for the new grade when schools reopened. Then, with little regular classroom instruction, they were auto-promoted again to the next grade in January 2022. It means that a student who was in Class 3 in March 2020 is in Class 5 in January 2022 without acquiring the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy.

As noted, even when schools functioned in pre-Covid days, the majority of Class 5 children did not acquire the grade-level basic competencies in Bangla and math. The education authorities' logic appears to

be—if most children don't learn much when schools operate, it really doesn't matter that they missed 18 months of class.

The cumulative effect of the prolonged closure and loss—students moving up from grade to grade without acquiring the basic skills and without a rescue and recovery strategy—cannot but cause a longer-term harm for students' ability to learn and perform in school. This generation of students will grow up with a debilitating handicap, except the privileged ones whose families can arrange special private tutoring support—unless a remedial plan is put in place for all in the system. A generational danger in education is looming, which is not receiving the attention of policymakers.

Many private schools outside the government's subsidy net (known as MPO) have not reopened. Vaccinating all older students and keeping students, teachers and their families protected have not gone well. The super-infectious variant of Covid-19, the Omicron, has now arrived. It has led to the re-imposition of general and schooling restrictions in many countries including the neighbouring states of West Bengal and Bihar in India. The education minister said restrictions would be imposed in our schools again if necessary.

With hindsight on how the education system and the students have fared, and looking ahead to a possibility of living with some form of Covid indefinitely, it can be said that not enough has been done to unlock the digital potential and making the blended approach to integrating the distance mode into regular teaching-learning. The majority of institutions cannot say that they are significantly in a better position than in 2020 in using the distance mode or applying the blended approach. This is true for all types and levels of education with some variations. The two ministries of education have not been able to act in a unified way or infuse a sense of urgency

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