The Q&A of school shutdown

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The massive scale disruption due to the pandemic has raised many questions. Within the larger set of questions of the economy and health are many that are related to children and their education. The system reacted to the threat by shutting down schools and within days, solutions to lessen the blow of the crisis were evolving. In the beginning it was not clear how long the schools would be closed. When Indian schools had just shut down, schools in China and some European countries were already opening with caution. There was hope of early opening but the crisis dragged on. The Standard Operating Procedures written up in preparation of school opening have still not been used. Over a period of time people got fed up of staying at home and economic compulsions started forcing unlock processes to unravel. The medical fraternity gathered more information about treatment and the fear of COVID seemed to subside almost to the point of scary carelessness even in the middle of a raging pandemic. Anyone wandering around in the villages of India could see that life was coming back to the old normal. Even in the cities the talk of the 'new normal' seemed to become less and less common and limited to the upper classes.

Yet, schools did not open, even selectively, in rural areas. This could have been done by taking the parents into confidence and with proper precautions. I had felt from the early days of the school shut down that the responsibility to open and run schools should rest with the village panchayat based on certain safety criteria. This can be done even now but for some strange reason the decision to open schools is still centralized although in most states teachers are visiting schools regularly if not daily. In fact, if it was not for the teachers visiting schools, families would not have received the quota of mid-day meal grains, as well as school textbooks and other learning materials that ASER 2020 Wave 1 has recorded. This was an opportunity to try out new models of school that were more community based but the establishment lost a golden opportunity. ASER 2020 Wave 1 shows how a very large proportion of mothers, fathers and siblings have been helpful to school children during the shutdown. Increasing levels of education among parents is an important feature of the Indian society along with rapidly increasing penetration of the internet and smartphones. Unfortunately, our attention is focused on higher levels of education rather than on foundational stages and the lure of fancy technology is more attractive than the human interaction so critical for education.

The school shutdown has thrown up many questions that need to be answered with concrete data. First: will a large number of children drop out of schools or change from private schools to government schools due to changed economic circumstances? Second: how will the shutting down or the loss of a full year of schooling affect children's future? Third: based on the experience during the shutdown period, what role do we think ed-tech will play in the future of education and schooling?

The first question is difficult to answer definitively at this time although ASER 2020 Wave 1 hoped to find some clues when it was being planned in mid-2020 as the 'unlock' process had started. As it turns out, schools had not opened when the survey was carried out and the increase in out-of-school children is largely among 6- and 7-year-olds who are most likely awaiting admission. It is noteworthy that the proportion of out-of-school children or those who admit to being not enrolled in schools is the same for boys and girls. Will we see large proportions of older children, especially girls, dropping out of schools? There is a need to regularly monitor attendance levels to estimate the real proportion of children who can be termed 'dropout'. ASER has been reporting enrollment annually by asking children and parents if their child's name has been entered in the school register. Separately, school visits provide the number of children attending school on a given day by comparing the number of children in the class register. For some time to come, the government will need to commission agencies to regularly monitor attendance levels in schools to estimate the percentage of truants or dropouts from school because they may not necessarily withdraw their names from the school but may not attend regularly on account of work.

There was a fear that school closure will impact nutritional status of children who will be deprived of their mid-day meals. But the school systems are reported to have delivered grains and deposited daily cooking cost in the student's or parents' accounts. This must have helped families of millions of children in a big way during this crisis not only from a hunger point of view but also by giving a sense of security. Unfortunately, ASER 2020 Wave 1 was not able to capture details of this information.

There are newspaper reports, especially in Western media, of anecdotes of children being forced into labor. Again, ASER 2020 Wave 1 does not cover such details, but Pratham has a strong wing that deals with vulnerable children, which could

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undertake a study to verify if numbers of child laborers and beggars in urban areas has risen. Many small businesses have closed down in cities and the families have been in extremely difficult circumstances. A separate urban study is needed urgently.

The second question about how school closure will affect children's future needs to be explored along two paths. There are problems related to examinations that need to be held for admission to higher levels of courses. School closure affects preparation for such examinations and delay-dislocation of examinations create further problems. This is really what people refer to when talking about affecting children's future. There is no doubt that the end-of-stage examination is an important part of a child's life and it can be very disturbing and frustrating to be unable to complete the course, not to speak of not being able to transition to the next stage. Of course, there is a need to reform examinations and the process of transition to higher level courses to abolish the dependence on once a year events. But, that will be a long term and complex undertaking that is also suggested by the new National Education Policy.

It appears that most education boards - central and state - have held the Std 10 and 12 examinations although the students are unable to attend the next level of classes in academic year 2020-21. ASER 2020 Wave 1 finds that about 18% of students at Std 9 or above attended online classes, which is almost the proportion of private school children who attended online classes in rural areas. The entire education system is focused on the board examinations and the entrance examination. That is where the stakes are high but for a relatively small proportion of students. The Gross Enrollment Ratio is said to be near 100% up to the age of 14. ASER data are consistent with these government figures. At the next stage of Std 9-10, the GER drops 20 percentage points to 80% and at the higher education stage it reduces dramatically by 55 percentage points to 25%. Not only are these numbers poor but even the product of this education, except in some elite institutions, is of poor quality by any standard. There is no way of knowing if this quality will deteriorate further, if this is even possible. It stands to reason that the students with means will have the opportunity to learn better than their poorer friends. But they always did. The divide is likely to deepen.

In contrast to the higher education sector, elementary education up to Std 8 is not considered high stakes. ASER 2020 Wave 1, which was telephonic, did not attempt to measure learning levels of children. But understanding learning loss of children over more than a year of school closure will be important. The phenomenon of learning loss is well known although it has not been studied in India. Any disruption of the regular, formal learning process is said to lead to learning loss that may result in loss of skills or knowledge. In India we have a bigger problem of extremely weak foundational skills such as reading. Whereas we may expect a good 80% children to be able to read a Std 2 level text in Std 3, only 20.9% Std 3 students in government schools and 40.6% in private schools can read such a text. Thereafter, annually about 10 to 15 percentage point more children acquire at least this level of reading skill and by Std 8 there are 69% government school children and 82.9% private school children who can at least read a Std 2 text. So, if formal schools are shut down for a whole year, how will the reading skills be impacted? Literature from the United States has begun to report research studies. The World Bank is predicting learning losses. There are reports of significant loss or lack of literacy and numeracy skills by some researchers in universities. There is an urgent need to conduct such studies in the developing world. In India, ASER has a very strong database to compare learning levels in 'normal' times. Low as they are, is there a further slide in the reading and numeracy levels?

ASER 2020 Wave 1 information shows that nearly 80% children going to private or government schools (Std 1-8) received textbooks and most children were helped by their parents to study at home. How frequently did they study? How seriously? Difficult to say, but about 60% of the children claim to have done some study activity with textbooks in the reference week (the week prior to the survey). This is an indication of the desire among Indian parents that their children should be educated. The near 100% enrollment of children up to age 14 has happened not because of any material incentive but because people do value education although they may not quite know what good education is. Therefore, it is more than likely that parents seriously pushed children to study at home in some manner. In addition, the data show that about 35% children (most probably a subset of those with textbooks) did some learning activity using other material such as worksheets, which could serve as a reminder and an encouragement to study. Is it possible that this informal learning activity at home countered the learning loss due to simple frequent engagement with learning materials? Simple assessments in villages may help us find answers.

The more important thing is that instead of waiting for June -July to open the schools, the teachers who are visiting their schools regularly can organize remedial learning activities with community participation right now. Pratham's experience and ASER findings point to the possibility of running such 'catchup' programs. As I have said earlier, if the decision to hold such classes in school classrooms of community spaces is left to village panchayat authorities via the district authorities, children

will be school-ready by June-July and no more time will be wasted. In any event, it should be possible to set aside time to catch up and overcome the COVID slide, if any. If there is no COVID slide, the time can be utilized to take forward what is envisaged for the foundational literacy and numeracy mission by the government.

The negative impact of not assessing learning loss and acting upon it can be disastrous. While schools can continue to promote children to higher classes, the learning standards will keep falling and will lead to shrinking livelihood opportunities. In any case, knowing that there is a loss and not acting on it will be nothing short of criminal.

The third question is regarding use of digital technology in education fondly referred to by its promoters as ed-tech. The Government of India has been encouraging use of digital technology for a variety of purposes. Teacher training, availability of teaching resources and access to learning materials for children have all been developed by many organizations. When the schools shut down, it was suddenly obvious to all that teaching-learning by remote methods was the only way to 'keep education going'. The first word that started going around was 'online classes' until it was realized that online learning needs much more than just smartphones. ASER 2020 Wave 1 shows that around 18% rural students, mostly above Std 8 and mostly from private schools, attended online classes. Pratham was one of the first organizations to start sending WhatsApp messages to rural children but many more organizations and governments followed quickly thereafter. ASER 2020 Wave 1 has found that during the reference week nearly one third of all enrolled children received learning materials. Of these 80% (that is 27% of all children) received learning materials on their family smartphone and 80% of them, or about 19% of all children received WhatsApp messages. These percentages vary from state to state. Obviously in states with greater percentage of households with smartphones, the percentage is higher. But, overall, the impact of digital means of reaching children is not impressive, whether in government schools or private, considering the ASER finding that 62% households have smartphones.

There are several issues with the use of these digital means to reach children. First is that while over 90% households have cell phones[2], 62% households have a smartphone which is mostly under the control of the father[3]. Therefore, its use for educational purpose is limited. Unless a family has multiple smart devices, the children cannot use one for education. In this survey, 10-11% households have reported purchasing a new phone - invariably a smartphone - during the pandemic.

Although many groups are promoting ed-tech applications for learning, there is no evidence that a smartphone with personalized learning software has a serious impact on learning. There are studies showing impact of digital programs on organized learning in schools or learning centers but the enthusiasm about ed-tech is mostly around smartphone mobile devices, without such evidence of impact. It is undeniable that digital technology can give a big boost to the teaching learning process including to build the capacities of teachers and the system as it exists today. But there are other issues to be considered at least in the Indian context.

First issue is with the process of learning. Given the low levels of foundational learning, do we expect that children, especially those from the socio-economically weakest families, with limited access to a smartphone, will learn by themselves with the device? Or, should we see this as a blended model that combines classroom learning and home learning and also individual learning with group learning? Again, there is no evidence of a model that has been tried in government schools or affordable schools for overall learning rather than just one subject learning.

The second issue is much bigger and something that the National Education Policy has focused on. All ed-tech software that is promoted is designed to teach the standard school subjects based on school textbooks. In doing this we curb the intrinsic power of the technology to allow non-linear exploration or building of knowledge. Learning cannot be limited to a rigid curriculum, although schooling is. It makes no sense to expect everyone to learn every subject in the same way. It makes no sense to place mathematics higher than creative writing or art or athletics. Technology can assist in making the process of learning truly child centric rather than teacher led. A recent article by Arvind Gupta talks about open learning processes. Pratham's own experiments in open learning are example of how digital means can be combined with group learning, volunteer/parental support and open curriculum lead to impact children's confidence and learning.

The pandemic is a disaster which showed us our weaknesses and tested our ability to innovate and overcome big challenges. It has given us opportunities to look within and think about what we need to change and how we can accomplish this change. ASER 2020 Wave 1 is one attempt to nudge the society and the government to think along those lines. It has also indicated to us what we need to do in Wave 2 and perhaps 3. ASER and Pratham work on the philosophy of analyzing to act and bring about change. That is what we intend to do.

[2] ASER 2018
[3] ASER 2020 Wave 1