Bridging the Gap: Addressing the Crisis in Child Education with the Covid Pandemic

Among the most damaging consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the closure of schools in the past year and the impact of this on the education of millions of children. In India, over 1.5 million schools were reportedly shut with the onset of the pandemic which affected an estimated 320 million students. The damage to the cognitive, social, psychological and physical development of the child due to the loss of a year of in-person schooling is yet too large to estimate. The path ahead remains uncertain leaving parents, teachers and students in a state of confusion and despair.

This unprecedented yearlong closure of schools has also had ripple effects beyond the field of education. The closure of *anganwaadis* and government schools has deprived millions of children of childcare and of a reliable and regular source of nutrition through programmes such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Within the household, girls and women have been the worst affected. With children staying home, their burden of domestic work has increased which has curtailed the time available to them to engage in other productive or educational activities. Similarly, there has been an increase in the incidence of child abuse, child labour and of early marriages.

While a large percentage of schools have simply remained closed throughout the year, others have attempted to carry on the education of children through online platforms. However, using online means for education has not been without its own share of challenges. There are stark inequalities in access to the internet, smartphones, and tablets especially across gender and class divides. A mere 24 percent of the country's households have access to the internet. Studies have shown that boys are often prioritized over girls within the family in terms of being given access to smart phones and tablets.

Even for those children privileged enough to have access to online education, the teaching-learning experience has been marred by limitations. Most schools did not have systems set up prior to the pandemic for online teaching. Thus, most teachers have had relatively little time or experience to prepare for instruction over this medium. For children, the inability to access or understand online learning sessions has resulted in higher stress levels and behavioural changes such as increased aggression, the lack of concentration and increased irritability. As indicated by several studies, the lack of in-person interaction has had an adverse impact on the child's social and emotional development. Further, increased exposure of children to the internet often at a vulnerable age has made them more susceptible to addictive online behaviours and has increased the risk of their exposure to unwholesome content.

There have been various formal and informal measures undertaken by the government, civil society organizations, educational institutions as well as parents and communities to address these issues. Creative and cost-effective ideas have been adopted to mitigate these challenges in anticipation of an early return to schools and a resumption of in-person classes. Yet given the unpredictable course of the pandemic, such a return to normalcy may take much longer than expected. In such a scenario, all those concerned with the education of the child will have much to learn and adapt to in the months ahead. For the state and civil society organizations, the challenge is to ensure that those who have lost a year of learning are brought back into the educational process. Millions of children who have taken up jobs to support their families or who have assumed caregiving responsibilities and other household duties at home so that their parents can work will have to now be enrolled back in school. Where online education is being provided, teachers and school administrators will have to ensure that the quality of the teaching-learning experience is continuously enhanced. Parents have the most difficult challenge of having to manage the time of their children, cater to their social, cognitive and emotional needs with empathy and patience, create a home environment that is conducive to focused and disciplined study during online class hours. While all of this can understandably be overwhelming for parents, the community has a role to play as a support structure for parents through creating safe and wholesome spaces for children to receive tuitions, to socialize and to play together.

Eventually to address a crisis of this magnitude will require proactive involvement and collaboration between all those involved in the process of educating the child – the teacher, the school administrator, parents, the community, civil society organizations and the State. It will also require a profound shift in society's attitude towards its responsibility for the well-being of children. Attending to the growth and development of children is not a function that can be exclusively assigned to a parent, a teacher or an educational institution. All of society bears the responsibility of moulding its next generation. Through both acts of commission and omission society leaves its stamp on the tender hearts, minds and bodies of its youngest members. Similarly, the well-being of a child is not a subject that can be siloed to the field of education or to institutions such as schools or to government departments concerned with child welfare. The interests and well-being of children will have to be a fundamental value guiding all policies and programs for social and economic development. It is a moral imperative that institutions such as the media, the market, the political system and the legal system will have to continually uphold and reinforce in public consciousness. It is after all one of the signs of a maturing society that it is able to set aside absorption with its own immediate cares and desires and nurture and foster the development and well-being of its youngest members, those who bear within them the seeds of our collective future.

The Baha'i Chair for Studies in Development is organizing a webinar titled 'Bridging the Gap: Addressing the Crisis in Child Education with the Covid-19 Pandemic' to discuss the serious crisis facing children's education in India in the wake of the year-long closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The webinar seeks to engage academicians, educationists and policymakers in a deliberation on the kind of interventions needed at the level of policy and practice to bridge the widening learning gap that children face in the aftermath of the pandemic.