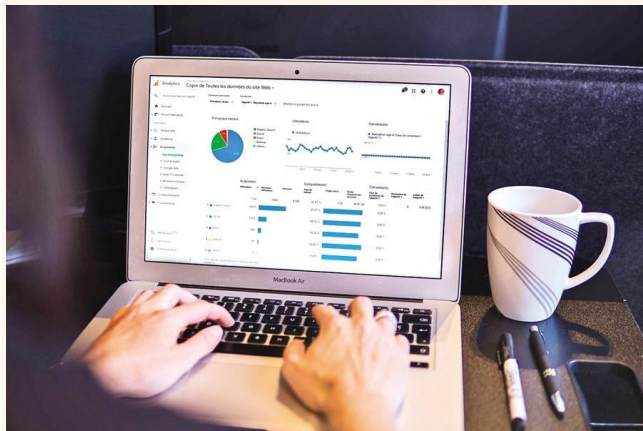


## Education in time of the pandemic

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A study carried out by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development over the early months of general holiday found that study hours for students declined by 80 per cent on account of school closure. In other words, study hours for learners at the school level dropped from 10 hours to just two hours and the percentage of those students who were required to help their parents in supplementing family income for two or more hours increased from 4.0 per cent to 16 per cent. Of children requiring for family chores also jumped from just 1.0 per cent to 13 per cent.

This representative picture of an adverse impact on the learning process mainly of the disadvantaged rural and slum students due to the coronavirus onslaught may have changed to a large extent by this time after 10 months of school closure. But to say that only learners of the disadvantaged segments are bearing the brunt of an abrupt end to the normal academic life is misleading. Students from middle class and affluent families certainly enjoy better guidance and facility support for pursuit of education. Yet the BIGD survey found that only 16 per cent students watched programmes on class lessons like 'Ghore Boshe Shikhi' and 'Amar Ghore Amar School' on television.

There is no report on the online studies a handful of schools usually in the capital and other cities arranged for their students. This percentage is likely to be as low as negligible. So the crisis of education started deepening right from the virus attack in the country and may have become worse by this time. In fact an entire academic year has gone waste and this has forced the authorities concerned to opt for an auto promotion for school students of the country.

No recipe could be devised so far to keep students actively engaged in a learning process. Isolated attempts fell far short of the requirement. Some private universities are reported to have regularly maintained academic schedules online. Even, it is claimed, they arranged online examinations. In a country where internet speed is not up to the mark and power supply is irregular even when the country produces more electricity than it needs, this will be considered a tremendous feat for those higher seats of learning.

The truth is that education in the country has mostly suffered a serious setback and this warrants addressing urgently. It must also be admitted that had the country's schooling system been in a format giving more emphasis on creativity and originality of individual aptitude rather than on learning techniques for only scoring high in examination, evaluation of merits would not have been as problematic as it proves now. The system here is faulty enough to shape students in a copycat pattern. Teachers' job is to find out the innate quality in each student waiting to be cultivated.

Unfortunately, people coming to the teaching profession at the primary secondary and to a large extent at the higher secondary level also do not do so out of love or commitment but because they have hardly any other better option. Friend mostly of them may become in an unholy mix but it is beyond their capacity to rise up to the stature of a philosopher and much less a guide. Is not it too much to expect of their becoming the architect of the nation?

There indeed lies the malaise. Gone are the days when teachers were a rare breed who could not meet up the family requirements but more than made up for the lacking by moulding their students' mindset and character worthy of the service to the motherland. It is futile to expect a comeback of teachers of their ilk but even in a business as usual environment students deserve better education from their teachers.

One thing may have escaped most people's notice that the pandemic has curtailed or brought to an end the mad rush of students from one coaching centre to another in cities and towns. High school students in urban centres, considered pandemic hotspots, were supposed to become the greatest losers on account of closure of coaching centres but for the online coaching. Villages have mostly remained immune to corona attack. Willing teachers could take classes there preferably in the open had they been given the option and conditions permitted.

Many school teachers, not excluding those in cities and towns, are not expert handlers of digital devices and this has also acted as a constraint to imparting online lessons. Members of school management committee, teachers and the ministry concerned could make arrangement for continuing teaching process after a thorough assessment of the needs of students of each school. Helping students with required devices for conducting regular online classes from the time economy and businesses have opened would have been a viable option.

Now that the first quarter or even first half of the New Year is set to go waste, the urgency of such a tripartite collaboration proves overriding. Before private schools fold their operation, teachers and staff become unemployed, the government must come to their rescue with a stimulus package. More investment in education in the shape of sanitisation and health protocol that village schools will need for conducting classes has to be made. In cities and towns this will be in the form of providing the needy schools and students with the required devices and internet connection at a nominal cost.

Once the facilities are put in place, teachers will have to prepare chapter-wise lectures, manuals and assessment sheets, assignments, project papers and term papers for students. Well designed such exercises can be the key to keeping students engaged in a continuous learning process and evaluating their performances in times of crisis like this pandemic.

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