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Reopening schools in the new normal

By Ashani Abayasekara and Usha Perera | Published: 2:00 AM Nov 20 2021



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The decision to gradually reopen Sri Lankan schools – which have been shut for close upon 20 months since COVID-19 first struck – is a welcome move. As of September 2021, 93% of countries had reopened schools either partially or wholly, making Sri Lanka one of the last to do so.

Previous IPS blogs have pointed to multiple access and quality issues facing the country's distance education efforts, calling for the establishment of a comprehensive education recovery strategy for the future. The accompanying decision to devote the next six months from November 2021 to April 2022 for recover learning losses, giving precedence to essential syllabus areas and decision-making flexibility to schools, is encouraging news, in this context.

This blog provides some insights into the current education recovery practices being adopted globally and draws attention to some important areas that can be incorporated into the current strategies being devised in Sri Lanka.

Monitoring and preventing school dropouts

According to a joint UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Survey of 143 countries conducted between February and June 2021, only half, and less than a third, of developed and developing countries, respectively, reported that all primary and secondary level students returned to schools when it was reopened.

Common methods used to identify and prevent dropouts included school-based tracking mechanisms, financial incentives (cash, food, or transport), waived fees, community engagement programmes, and revised access policies. Brazil's School Active Search system, for example, brings together local Government agencies in education, health, social assistance and planning, to identify, register, and monitor out-of-school children and those at risk of dropping out.

Measuring learning losses

Measuring learning loss is an essential first step in mitigating its consequences. According to the joint survey, 58% of countries reported having conducted formative assessments to measure learning loss, while only one-third relied on standardised assessments. Existing research also points to the relative importance of formative assessments to estimate learning losses, as opposed to standardised testing which is more effective in the long-term.

Formative assessments are geared towards informing in-process teaching and learning modifications, and include tools such as quizzes, journal entries, essays, and works of art. The focus is largely on remediation interventions and/or re-teaching content from the previous year, foundational skills, and adapting instruction to the level of each student.

Adjusting and prioritising curricula

To help students catch up once they return to school, 42% of countries surveyed reported prioritisation of certain areas of the curriculum or certain skills. The most likely areas or skills to be targeted include foundational skills in numeracy, literacy, and socio-emotional resilience.

In terms of specific country examples, in Odisha State, India, the Central Board of Secondary Education has reduced the syllabi by 30%, to allow students to focus on a few subjects and learn these well. Bangladesh's education recovery programme includes a condensed syllabus for the next two years, focussing on important subjects such as Mathematics, Bengali, English, and Science.

High-stake examinations

According to the joint survey, countries introduced several changes to exams, such as adjusting content, changing the number of subjects examined or questions asked, and mode of administration. Cancellation of examinations were limited to high and upper middle -income countries, ranging from a share of 30% in primary grades to 18% in upper secondary education.

Immediate focus areas for Sri Lanka

Although somewhat late, it is encouraging to note that some of these worldwide practices are currently being considered in Sri Lanka too. Along with more concrete details and clearer strategies for implementation, Sri Lanka's education authorities should focus on the following to minimise further learning loss and safeguard student welfare.

Ensure all children return to school

While boasting commendable enrolment rates at the primary and lower secondary levels, student dropouts at higher education levels is a longstanding problem in Sri Lanka. Post-pandemic dropout rates are likely to be considerably higher, particularly in remote and marginalised areas. It is thus essential that immediate data collection and monitoring is undertaken to initiate action and bring back all students to schools.

The country's well-established decentralised education administration system can facilitate coordination among zonal and divisional education authorities and Grama Niladhari divisions to collect data and work closely with parents and communities, in this regard.

Provide general guidance on curricula adjustments and measuring learning losses, while maintaining flexibility

The intention to focus on revised curricula targets over the next few months and to provide Principals and Teachers with flexibility in deciding how to cover curricula are welcome moves, given the multiple social, economic, and emotional impacts undergone by children during the pandemic, to significantly varying degrees. Such adjustments, however, need to be based on the extent and nature of learning losses experienced by students, for which conducting formative assessments is key.

It is thus best that this flexibility is balanced with some general guidance on essential learning competencies for students around which curricula adjustments can be made, and benchmark diagnostic tests and guidance for teachers to assess student learning, especially in switching from formal to formative type of assessments.

Adopt a consistent examinations policy and communicate it clearly to students

The Ministry of Education should conduct careful evaluations on the timing and the content to be tested at highly competitive national examinations and establish a new examination policy which is clearly communicated to teachers and students, leaving no room for ad-hoc changes.

For instance, given the directive to focus on priority areas of the curricula in the next six-months the examinations should also be adapted accordingly. Some options include limiting the Grade Five Scholarship examination to an intelligence test, replacing examinations from grades six to nine with diagnostic tests, and limiting the G.C.E. O/L to core subjects.

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