Schooling as an Essential Activity – Implications of Ignoring Schooling

What is the issue?

- Amidst the various ups and downs, lockdowns and unlocks during the pandemic, one (near) constant feature has been the closure of schools.
- It is crucial now to realize that ignoring schooling would have long-term implications.

What is the current scenario?

- In the recent past, there have been big rallies, protests, social and religious festivities (on a reduced scale though).
- Besides these are crowded markets, busy roads and almost every activity.
- There have been some attempts such as conduct of entrance tests and optional attendance by some pupils in.
- But barring these, schools have remained shut and out of reach for most.
- Various states have attempted to reopen schools, with limited successes due to the resurgence of the virus.
- The recent attempts will also face obstacles, possibly lead to a rise in local infections, and other disruptions.

How different have the approaches been?

- In the 9 months since March 2020, human interaction in the real world has become a scare resource.
- Different societies have chosen to act differently in this respect.
- The European model has been to keep schools running as much as possible, with great innovations.
- Denmark and Norway opened schools early in April/May in a staggered manner, and this did not lead to a second or third wave of infection.
- In the UK and Germany, schools reopened in August/September, and it was not smooth sailing for them.
- Some schools had to be closed temporarily while some (in Germany) adopted mass testing.
- The UK opted for a second nationwide lockdown in the first week of November but announced its resolve to keep schools open.

- In all, several countries in Europe, essentially, chose schools over non-essential business.

What does this signify?

- The incidence of infection, the school support systems and budgetary burdens are different.
- However, the above examples should not be dismissed on the ground that these were developed countries.
- It can be argued that they are developed because they consider schooling to be an essential activity.
- They are doing their utmost to see students do not lose out.
- In fact, the UK's education minister made it clear that "continuity of education is a national priority."
    - The government was threatening to take action against a local council which had ordered closure of schools.

What are the challenges in India's case?

- There are several factors, apart from intent, that makes keeping schools open so hard in India.
- For example, average distance travelled by a student and the density of student population in any school are high.
- This makes it difficult to safeguard against the spread of the infection.
- Schools can bring in changes in terms of class arrangements, staggered lunch hours, reduction in physical sports, limited social interactions and year-group bubbles.
- But they cannot control what happens outside their premises.
- On the other hand, more than these logistical factors, there are some key issues that need attention.

What are the long-term changes needed?

- **Decentralisation** - The school system needs more decentralisation both in terms of governance and planning.
- Not all decisions need to be taken at the national or state level.
- Local councils or districts could have chosen to stay open, depending on the spread of the disease, their local needs and capabilities.
- **Social needs** - Inequality in educational capability has been exacerbated due to the closure of institutions during the pandemic.
- So once schools across the country reopen, it cannot be simply teaching as usual.
- Schools need to reassess the needs of their pupils and do utmost to attend to

these.

- **Teaching methods** - Teaching practices at schools have a sizeable impact on a student's social capital.
- There are differences between the vertical method and the horizontal method.
- In the former, the teacher lectures and students take notes and ask questions.
- In the latter, students work in groups and ask questions to each other and the teacher.
- It is learnt that in societies where the horizontal method is predominant, generalised levels of trust in the society are likely to be higher.
- Students under the vertical system are also likely to have lower assessments (belief) of the value of cooperation.
- Essentially, trust and cooperation affect the long-term growth of an economy.
- In India, the method is more inclined towards the vertical method, where online classes are viewed as close substitutes of classroom experience.

What is the way forward?

- Reopening schools could have contributed to some increase in infection numbers as well.
- But then all activities have produced such an outcome.
- Several scholarly studies show that schooling and education determine long-run development and growth.
- It is high time that India treats schools as part of the essential sector and prioritises teachers and school workers too in the vaccination strategies.

Source: The Indian Express

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