**Adult education**

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MUCH like little worms that go unseen when hiding in apples but are revealed when the apple is eaten, disruption in education has shown us the mess we have created by overlooking the need for adult education.

At a time when children were learning at home for months and needed guidance in the absence of physical monitoring in a brick-and-mortar school, the parents` expertise has been in high demand. Children have struggled to get online, master the tools of virtual learning, study independently and prepare for assessments all this with little help from peers and teachers. The bulk of this responsibility has fallen on the parents, many of whom are ill-equipped for it.

The switch to online tools has shown us how desperately we need not just academic education but technological training for adults. We can only help our children if we know how, and it is mostly the lowerand middle-income groups that have been the hardesthit duringthis crisisin education.

It would be unfair to hold schools responsible for not being able to help parents navigate the virtual world they were busy setting up the online infrastructure, equipping teachers to continue teaching and engaging children in the learning process. Many parents became collateral damage in the circumstances, having little or no knowledge of how to lend support to their children.

One of the greatest benefits of any level of education is the ability it provides for individuals to adapt to crisis. Research shows that children of college-educated mothers achieve a higher level of proficiency in gateway subjects.

The Foundation for Child Development report, Mother`s Education and Children`s Outcome presents hard statistics on children`s levels of cognitive development being directly proportional to their mother`s education. This research is only one in a wide range of studies with similar findings.

It implies that, for a society like ours, it is imperative to invest in adult education especially for mothers.

The Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (2016) by Unesco called on countries to invest in adult education, after a study of 139 countries showed that states had made progress on most aspects of economic life, governance, finance, health and wellbeing as a direct consequence of their adult education policy. According to the same report, close to a billion adults in the world cannot read or write. For those living in such circumstances, it would be harder to grapple with a disruption to life as they know it.

The acute impact of lack of adult education is exacerbated in a world of digital interaction. For those waiting for life to return to `normal`, it is now clear that therewill be no such thing. We need to adapt to the paradigm shift and the longer we bemoan our lack of technological expertise, the more painful this transformative journey may become. If we can put systems in place to impart adult education now, particularly in computer literacy, it would accelerate the progress that we hope our next generation will make.

We have strong evidence from European countries where policies that expanded the outreach and impact of the informal adult education sector have seen exponential spillover benefits. The policies are on a need basis, directly related to the impact that needs to be created. Austria, for example, focuses on open education resources and the effects of digitalisation on adult education, while Belgium`s adult education policy centres largely on professional training and social inclusion. Needless to say, there are lessons to be learnt from these economies.

Many adult programmes, with great potential, have mushroomed in Pakistan andfizzled out due to a lack of impact and s us t a in abili t y.

Some time ago, the government initiated an Education Adult Programme funded by Unicef, USAID and the Japan International Corporation Agency and piloted in 300 centres infive cities. Besides basic skills in reading and writing, it offers vocational training and self-development.

Perhaps we need a more structured and collaborative approach bringing together multiple stakeholders and adult educators who can focus on targets, tap into online tools and benchmark learners against internationalstandards.

Teaching adults is an entirely different ball game to teaching children as their cognitive abilities, experiences and specific motivation for learning intervenes in the process. Identifying the learners` needs is the Erst step in developing a relevant and coherent programme. Often, we find ourselves repeating the same mistakes lil(e cats chasing their own tails, losing value through trial and error. Investing time, money and effort in adult education may be a long road but it`s one that promises to open up multiple paths in the future.  The writer is senior manager, professional development at OUP, Pakistan.

neda.mulji@gmail.com Twitter: @nmulji