**Who you gonna call: teachers**

BY FA I S A L B A R I 2020-11-27

WHEN schools were shut down in March, Ahmad, a primary school teacher in a low-fee private school, as soon as the lockdown period ended and people could move around, started to go to the home of his students every week or so to have sessions with them, encourage them to do their homework, provide guidance and keep them connected with their schoolwork. His students did not have access to smartphones and/or tablets so they could not benefit from online teaching/learning activities. He had to provide in-person services.

Ahmad created a routine where he could stay in touch with each of his students, and he 1(ept this up through the entire summer period while schools were shut. This, despite the fact that at some point his employer said he could not pay his salary for a few months, and though Ahmad was not fired they were both unsure if the school would be able to become operational in the aftermath of the closure period. By sheer determination, Ahmad was able to keep his students afloat. By the time schools reopened Ahmad was in significant debt, but he had keptthelearninglosses ofhis studentsincheck.

When schools reopened, and Ahmad`s employer borrowed money from friends to keep his school open, Ahmad was able to convince most of his students` parents to send them back to school. Through his network, Ahmad also made an effort to raise money to purchase masks, sanitisers and soaps for the school.

As things began to settle, we entered the second wave of the pandemic. Schools have been shut down again, for the moment till Jan 10, 2021. It might be for longer, depending on the spread of the virus. But this time, as of now, we do not have a lockdown. And Ahmad was better prepared for round two. He has given his students homework and also devised a schedule for visits. He is quite hopeful that, this time round, he will be able to do even better than before and his students will not lose out a whole lot over this break.

The digital divide in Pakistan is very real. Overthe last year, we have seen how it has exacerbated existing and entrenched educational inequalities.

Where children from middleto high-income households were able to shift to internet-based instruction, most children from lowto lower middle-income households were not able to. And the latter constitute the majority of children who go to school in Pakistan. The approximately 55-60 per cent of school-going children enrolled in public schools and the 35pc or so who attend low-fee privateschoolscome fromlow-tolowermiddle-income households and face significant digital divide challenges. It fell to the Ahmads of our education system to step up.

And Ahmad was not alone. Pakistan has some two million-odd teachers in our education system.

Hundreds of thousands of them stepped up in the months that schools were shut and went way beyond the call of duty. And they will be, one can be sure, doing so over the next couple of months as well.

There are teachers who, despite their own constrained circumstances, raised funds for the households in their neighbourhoods as well as for their students and their families. Groups of teachers helped households whose family members had fallen 111. A lot of teachers, with their own money and funds raised through their networks, provided ration packs and sanitiser/soap/mask packs to students and their families. In many cases where, even in public schools, schools were unable to provide basic necessities, the teachers came forward.

And hundreds of thousands of teachers helped students keep in touch with their studies by providing coaching, phone or weekly visit-based instruction. In many cases, schools implemented systems where students could come in to submit and pick up assignments. All of this is still not enough to amellorate all losses, but learning losses as well as dropout rates would have been higher if teachers had not stepped up to the challenge.Now that schools have once again been shut down, one can be sure that teachers will again be on the front line, and with the experience of the last six months to guide them, at least on learning/ teaching issues, the effort this time round is likely to be more organised.

The government has not been of much help in this entire period. Yes, television and radio programming was initiated, but this is hardly a substitute. And it is not even clear if it had any impact.

Could the government support teachers, of private and public schools, in any way, in their micro-level endeavours? Could any resources be provided to the schools and/or teachers to be able to do that? Even though we have had six months of experience of education disruption, no such ideas, initiatives or programmes have come from the government.

Instead, a lot of focus and effort has been spent on the Single National Curriculum debate. Surely we need to think more about how we can support our teachers in these times than on the plan to tackle education inequality through the notion of an SNC.

But this was not to be, and it will likely not happen, despite warnings (some even from the education authorities themselves) that we might have to live with Covid-related restrictions for another six months or so.

We know Covid-19 is going to have a significant impact in terms of learning losses for children and even in terms of dropouts from schools. We need to reduce it as much as possible. Teachers, all 2m or so, are our greatest asset if we want to ensure effective contact with students. Hundreds of thousands of them stepped forward and stood tall over the last six months. We need to support them to ensure they are able to do an even better job over these next few months. But this requires quick and innovative policy thinking.  The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.