1 Calculations and Discourses of Deficit in Indian Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

'Learning Loss'

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Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed down in India in March 2020. As school closures in India inched towards being one of the longest in the world (UNESCO, n.d.), anxieties about the resultant consequences took centre stage. Like several other nations, conversations about the pandemic's impact on education in India were often animated by a discourse of learning loss. This term has been widely circulated in media, policy circles, scholarship and public imagination, and continues to govern the actions and imaginations of stakeholders and school systems in India even now. The learning loss discourse, which has consistently elicited panic and urgency among diverse stakeholders in Indian education over the last two years, is based on a longstanding dependency on schools as the exclusive site for learning. As such, when schools shut down at the onset of the pandemic, many sensed that *something* was going to be negatively affected; the term learning loss gave the language to express what this something was. Despite a growing pushback against the learning loss discourse around the globe due its reductive assumptions about learning, deficit perspectives, as well as its close ties with market ambitions in education (Williamson et al. 2021), the term has been largely rendered commonsensical in India through intensive media coverage, private sector endorsement and public narratives.

In this paper, the concept of learning loss in India during the COVID-19 pandemic is critically examined. What is claimed to be 'lost'? What evidence is deployed to justify those claims? What is made possible by the circulation of this term? Demonstrating that it is a concept closely tied to quantitative processes of analyzing the effect of school closures, it is argued that the learning loss in India is conceptualised and measured very differently by different stakeholders – in ways that are often incompatible with each other. As such, learning loss is more of a loosely assembled rhetoric that is not only deployed to mobilise stakeholders to urgently act, but also limits possibilities of reimagination. Drawing on conceptual themes from literature on quantification and crises, media articles, policy briefs, research reports and other published literature on education in India during the COVID-19 pandemic are analysed to highlight the conceptual inconsistencies, discursive processes, vested interests and debatable assumptions related to the idea of learning loss.

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The idea of learning loss is certainly not specific to India; it has now become a popular universal term to capture the consequences of the pandemic on education. As such, an analysis such as the one in this paper could be conducted for potentially most countries around the globe, given the omnipresence of the term. This paper, thus, through its focus on learning loss in India, highlights a particular case of a much larger phenomenon. The uniqueness of the Indian case can be understood better by situating the so-called learning loss crisis in India within the recent history of the rapidly changing politics of Indian education. Despite historically being regulated by the state, Indian education was rapidly opened up to private actors in the early 2000s through increased public–private partnerships – a move that depleted the government's agency in favour of that of non-governmental bodies (Srivastava 2010). This development took place simultaneously along with the promotion of an emphasised 'learning crisis' narrative in India, fuelled by privately conducted large-scale assessments such as the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER). The increasing agency provided to private entities in the Indian education system coupled with the pressure of accountability put on the state through the continued exposition of 'learning crises' has resulted in non-governmental organizations and international institutions now finding a seat at the public education policy-making table (Ministry of Education 2021). It is against this backdrop of crisis and privatization in Indian education, that the formulation of the COVID-19 pandemic-induced learning loss is examined.

The intention in this paper is not to dismiss the devastating consequences of school closures during the pandemic on many young people, especially from marginalised populations in India. Instead, it is to understand how learning loss as a concept is assembled in relation to regimes that seek to monitor education quantitatively and neoliberal desires of capitalizing on public anxieties. In terms of organization, it begins by briefly laying out the conceptual themes that motivated this paper, followed by an examination of two distinct ways in which learning loss in India is conceptualised and calculated. Next, the rhetorical nature of the term and how it has been used to advance pre-existing interests for certain stakeholders are discussed. The paper concludes by amplifying the need to reimagine school education as schools reopen and providing a starting point for the same. Drawing on Arundhati Roy's (2020) call to view the pandemic in India as a "portal" for humans to "break with the past and imagine their world anew", the urgency to rise above the deficit view of 'losses' and focus instead on a radical reimagination of possible futures for education in India is advocated for.

Conceptual Approach

Crises and the Power of Statistics

Numbers, due to their perceived objectivity, have gained a privileged position in our societies where we have come to trust them deeply (Porter 1995). As a result, their usage in statistics bestows a specific power on statistical processes and calculations – they are believed to reveal objective truths that were previously invisible (Desrosieres 2001). Statistics, thus, often provide a certain impartiality, legitimacy and authority to individuals or organizations using them (Desrosières 1998). The

immense power of numbers and statistics makes them popular tools of representing realities, as processes of measurement and quantification transform social realities into tables, figures and equations. Statistics are vital in efforts to highlight social crises, such as learning loss, as social crises are instances "when statistics are intensely mobilized to express the gravity of the situation" (Desrosières 2010). In these situations, statistics and numbers gain *felt* properties that have the ability to influence public emotions and stimulate collective feelings of shock, panic and despair. Michelle Murphy (2017) refers to these as *phantasmagrams* – "quantitative practices that are enriched with affect, propagate imaginaries, lure feeling, and hence have supernatural effects in surplus of their rational precepts" (24). An example of a phantasmagram Murphy provides is a nation's GDP – a quantitatively constructed value that elicits anxieties when it decreases, or hopes when it increases. Similarly, I see the conceptions of learning loss as phantasmagrams, where their quantitative properties convey a sense of despair or anxiety.

Consider, for instance, the following headlines from some popular news outlets in India:

> Karnataka: 35–50% learning loss in kids of classes 1–3 due to pandemic
> (*The Times of India*, 15 February, 2022)

> 85% university students in India faced learning loss during Covid: Survey
> (*The Indian Express*, 14 July, 2021)

The media coverage of learning loss in India has extensively deployed statistics in its narratives – providing both a sense of authority and legitimacy to the calculators of these numbers, as well as a sense of materiality and countability to the 'loss' that has occurred, while also communicating a sense of panic and shock. It is crucial to examine these statistics not just for what they tell, but also for who produces them, how they are assembled, and what is left out of them. This motivates the analysis in this paper as, in alignment with questions in the field of critical data studies (Boyd and Crawford 2012; Dalton and Thatcher 2014), the different quantitative techniques of measuring learning loss are examined as not 'objectively neutral', but as intertwined with vested interests, political agendas and issues of power.

Co-production of Science and Society

Numbers and statistics are not neutral; neither is the science they support – as the concept of co-production (Jasanoff 2004) shows us. Building on prior scholarship in STS, Jasanoff argues that any scientific or technological activity does not occur *away* from ongoing social, political, or cultural activities, but is deeply intertwined with them. As such, "science and society… are *co-produced*, each underwriting the other's existence" (17, italics in original). Thus, the empirical, cultural and material resources that make phenomena or objects *visible* "often exist before the discovery of the objects themselves" (16). The objects brought into existence by quantifying practices and scientific endeavours are not simply *discovered*, but are made 'real' by those very practices as well as the social and cultural contexts within which those occur.

For the context of this essay, the learning loss that is claimed to have been caused by the pandemic does not objectively exist *out there*, but is co-produced through the various statistical processes, each specific to who develops it, that are deployed to measure its extent. This is a case then, where "the data and the objects they claim to represent are one and the same, in that the object exists only through the application of agreed upon methods of observation and measurement" (Jasanoff 2017, 3).

Ways of Seeing and Assembling Learning

In *Seeing like a State*, Scott (1998) describes an example of a forest and how it is seen through bureaucratic and administrative eyes. A forest, he says, is reduced to only the net amount of timber it can yield, when viewed through a gaze of what is deemed relevant by authorities. The lenses of productivity and utility, in this case, facilitate a vision that leaves out other vital components of a forest such as trees, fruits, wildlife and ecosystems. Seen this way, it becomes vital to ask how certain things are looked at – what is included and what is left out. With respect to learning loss, what is considered as 'learning' and what is not included? Who gets to determine this and for what purpose? Additionally, framing learning loss in specific forms marks certain actors as experts on education with specific kinds of solutions. These specific forms emerge from the kinds of statistical processes that are deployed to measure learning loss – which then subsequently make education available for intervention in certain ways. Li (2014) refers to the notion of statistical picturing (Demeritt 2001) as she speaks about the assemblage of underutilised land in Africa. She describes how scientists and experts on behalf of global institutions like the World Bank used statistical apparatus and mapping to homogenise and aggregate diverse land types in Africa under the singular label of underutilised land. This reclassification of land overlooked its local and cultural uses, while assembling it for specific actors to intervene upon to utilise the land better. While land itself could not be physically moved, the use of inscription devices (Latour and Woolgar 1979), statistics and data visualizations made it possible for lands to be "assembled in new forms, and differently disposed" (Li 2014, 593) for action-at-a-distance – where land was assembled into both a national and a global resource to be utilised and intervened upon from anywhere. The assembly of learning loss works similarly, where different statistical processes assemble it in distinct ways to make children's learning available in new forms for various actors – both national and international – to act upon. This assembly discounts contextual and social aspects of learning, and frames it in terms of the experts who are called upon for solutions. For instance, a measurement of learning loss in terms of a loss in a country's GDP makes it an economic problem rather than a learning one – which then invites economists and organizations like the World Bank or the OECD to take it on and provide strategies of mitigating it.

Calculating Learning Loss

The COVID-19 pandemic induced extended school closures across the world. Effects of these school closures were felt across the globe – as stories emerged about children struggling to cope with the academic, social and psychological

consequences of not being able to go to school. In India, these consequences were disproportionately more severe for students from marginalised populations, whose lack of digital and technological access cut them off from most schools that had pivoted to remote learning formats when they closed – to a relatively greater extent than its South Asian counterparts (UNICEF 2021b). Extended school closures in the country prompted stakeholders, parents and activists to rally for reopening schools. Even though the media coverage of this clamor for reopening schools often gave platforms to the voices of urban middle- and upper-class parents, rural parents expressed their concerns about their wards' lack of school time to a similar extent (Road Scholarz 2021). Amid these narratives, the term learning loss – inspired significantly by the historically used concept of 'summer learning loss' – began getting popularly used to broadly capture the impact of the pandemic on education, and was highlighted frequently as a justification for school reopening. However, upon closer examination, there does not exist a single agreed-upon definition of the term. Instead, what learning loss means is variable, unspecifiable and often dependent on who is talking about it – making the term a floating signifier (Chandler 2013).

An exploration of these varied meanings of learning loss reveals that the conception of the term is often quantitatively assembled, rather than qualitatively described. After the initial shock of the pandemic, once efforts began to understand and counter its consequences on education, calls for 'calculating' the extent of these effects were amplified. For instance, the Director of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics emphasised that "measuring learning loss is a critical first step towards mitigating its consequences. It is vital that countries invest in assessing the magnitude of such losses to implement the appropriate remedial measures" (UNICEF 2021a). This widespread desire to measure learning loss reflects a kind of *calculativeness* – which sociologist Michel Callon (1998) refers to as ways in which social abstractions or phenomena get conceptualised, coded and formalised as something to be calculated. Like in most countries around the world, larger discourses and narratives about the learning loss in India due to COVID were undergirded by quantitative processes that claimed to calculate how much loss had occurred. Below, I highlight two ways in which learning loss was conceptualised and calculated.

Learning Loss as a Loss of Academic Abilities

Given the very term itself, one way in which learning loss is conceptualised is in terms of how much 'learning' did not happen, and/or was forgotten. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, global institutions, such as UNICEF (2022), have maintained that in order to intensify recovery efforts and resource allocation in the most meaningful manner, data on the learning levels of students must be collected to best determine remedial instruction. In India, one such effort was undertaken by a research group under the Azim Premji Foundation in 2021. This study defined learning loss of students as comprising two kinds of losses – the loss of learning at the current grade level due to school closures, and the loss of learning from previous grade levels due to students 'forgetting' what they already learned (Azim Premji

Foundation 2021). Over 16000 students across five Indian states – Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand – were evaluated using assessment tools based on the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) Learning Outcomes, though only for two subject areas – language and mathematics. These endline assessment results were compared to baseline data for students from pre-pandemic assessments conducted by teachers.

Results from this study were published as percentages of students 'losing' a specific language or mathematical ability. For instance, "92% of children on an average have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes" and "82% of children on an average have lost at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous year across all classes" (10). Such data representation entails a specific assumption – that children have an absolute gain, retention, or loss of specific academic abilities. Children 'losing' academic abilities is not a new perspective – the longstanding and widely popular notion of a 'summer slide' or 'summer learning loss' is built around the perception that students 'lose' certain academic skills when not in school over an extended period such as summer vacations. In fact, 'summer slide' is a foundational premise for several attempts to model learning loss due to COVID-19. Take for example, a RISE report authored by the NGO Pratham's CEO Rukmini Banerji. Banerji (2020) uses Pratham's data on 'summer learning loss' in the state of Uttar Pradesh as the basis to claim that school closures due to COVID will have a proportionally larger learning loss.

These conceptualizations of learning loss as an erosion of students' language and mathematical abilities take three ideas as self-evident. First, they assume that learning is a linear, level-based process – where teachers provide direct instruction to master a skill, children learn skills incrementally, and an absolute gain or loss of a skill occurs. This kind of a reductive perspective of how learning happens, embedded by 'managerial logics', has been consistently challenged in favour of more holistic and nuanced models of learning – where learning is messy, complex, non-linear and deeply cultural (McKinney de Royston et al. 2020). Second, these notions of learning loss prioritise language and mathematics over other subject areas and aspects of education. The discourse used is never 'linguistic learning loss' or 'mathematical learning loss' but a generic learning loss, despite language and mathematics being mere proxies in these conceptualizations for the purpose of simplified data collection – the latter being a practice that has often received criticism. In this process, other vital aspects of learning, not just subject areas, but social, emotional and cultural elements are left out or not considered 'foundational' enough. Third, the premise that children 'lose' learning when not in school – based on the widely studied 'summer slide' phenomenon – is debatable. Recent work by 'summer learning loss' researchers highlights the inconsistency of the idea – supplemented by concerns about the replicability of classic 'summer slide' studies, variances in results due to differences in psychometric tests used, and paradoxes that emerge when considering sociological studies of learning 'gaps' (von Hippel 2019; von Hippel and Hamrock 2019). The shaky ground of these premises makes it difficult to rely on such simplistic, narrow measures of learning to understand the consequences of the pandemic on children holistically.

Learning Loss as Economic Losses

A second way in which learning loss due to COVID-19 is measured and represented is in the form of economic outcomes. In a report, titled *Beaten or Broken? Informality and COVID-19*, the World Bank (2020) states that school closures and the ineffectiveness of remote learning in South Asia resulted in "enormous dropouts and substantial learning losses, which will have a lifetime impact on the productivity of a generation of students" (14). While there is no doubt that pandemic-induced school closures led to significant rates of school dropouts in India, of interest to this paper is how 'learning losses' here are connected to the concept of 'productivity'. This reflects what David Labaree (1997) refers to as a social efficiency approach to schooling, where the belief that "that our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence" (42) governs perspectives and decision-making in education. In such approaches, the returns of schooling are mostly seen as economic measures like earnings, national GDP, etc.

According to the World Bank (2020), school closures due to the pandemic might cause the average child in South Asia to lose around $4,400 in lifetime earnings. As with the previous form of learning loss, it is important to examine where this figure stems from. Much like formulations of learning loss as a loss of academic skills due to school closures, these conceptualizations of the term are also grounded in an assumption that learning is a linear function of the time a student spends in school. However, the calculations in this case involve not data collection and analysis, but projections. For calculating the extent of learning loss as a loss in lifetime earnings, studies combine two measures – the Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS) and the expected earnings information from sources like the World Bank's Global Jobs Indicators Database. LAYS, potentially the most popular metric that has been deployed to capture learning loss, are taken as "the product of the amount of schooling that children typically reach and the quality of that schooling" (Azevedo et al. 2020, 10) – the latter being relative to proficiency levels in international assessments. Azevedo et al. *estimate* the drop in LAYS due to school closures and combine it with *estimates* of labour market earnings for usual school attendance to simulate learning loss due to COVID as a reduction in future earnings. It is important to note that this projection, based more on estimates rather than empirical findings, hinges on a simplistic linear relationship between earnings, learning and school time and thus, overlooks the more complex social, cultural and political factors that influence these figures.

These calculations are then aggregated to estimate the loss of earnings at a national level. For instance, due to school closures, South Asian nations are estimated to lose $622 billion in lifetime earnings (World Bank, 2020) – with India's loss, specifically, estimated to be over $400 billion. Making projections here involves transforming complex realities into a neat mathematical model that churns out numbers *for the future*. These numbers are then projected back into the present with an affective function, as their magnitude is instrumental in eliciting public shock, panic, anxiety and urgency for action. The quantitative findings of such projection-based studies are uncritically taken up by media outlets, which through

headlines like "School closure may cost over $400 billion to India…" (*The Economic Times*, 12 October, 2020) strengthen the opacity of these calculations and instead amplify the economic anxieties. Much like previously described quantitative facts about learning loss as loss of academic abilities, calculating learning loss as lost lifetime earnings is akin to what Murphy (2017) refers to as phantasmagrams – or quantitative processes laced with affect.

Learning loss due to COVID-19 also finds itself attached to GDPs. In an OECD report, economists Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann (2020) claim that the impact of pandemic-induced school closures on nations "could optimistically be 1.5% lower GDP throughout the remainder of the century and proportionately even lower if education systems are slow to return to prior levels of performance" (6). India's projected decrease in GDP due to learning losses is calculated as over $6 trillion for a third of a year of schooling lost. This projection is made on the basis of a set of diverse data sets (Williamson 2021) that include relationships between learned skills and income, years of schooling and income, learned skills and economic growth. How these data sets are brought together into constructing a singular concept of learning loss as a drop in national GDP is often invisibilised in popular discourse. Instead, the focus is put on the bottom-line that 'learning losses' are related to drops in GDP. As such, highlighting decreases in GDP due to 'learning losses' are effectively utilised to mobilise anxious national governments into action – often in the form of specific predetermined economic and educational reforms. This is a matter that requires scrutiny, as I will discuss in the next section.

A Discourse of Convenience

In their study of how politicians use statistics for political communication or debate, Lawson and Lovatt (2021) argue that there are four primary tropes that characterise the use of numbers and statistics as rhetorical devices. While the authors draw out these tropes based on an analysis of a British political debate, I highlight how the larger learning loss discourse embodies the same tropes. The first is *dehistoricisation* – in which the history of how certain statistics were produced is erased by presenting them as objective facts. Concise summaries such as "India might lose over $400 billion in lifetime earnings" or "almost 90% of students lost a language ability from the previous year" convey a sense of the scientific objectivity of these claims, while completely masking who calculated these figures, what were calculated, and how were they calculated. The second trope is *synecdoche* – where individual aspects are used to make generalised claims about a broader phenomenon of which they are only a part of. For instance, in the case of the Azim Premji Foundation study, data from baseline and endline assessments of language and mathematics in five Indian states is used as evidence for a broader claim about learning loss in India. The third trope is *framing*, which refers to how the same data or data set is cited differently for distinct arguments – something that occurs as the same linear models of learning are deployed to make claims about loss of skills on one hand, and loss of GDP on the other. Lastly, *enthymeme* corresponds to the erasure of specific premises in stating arguments. For example, consider the claim

that "children lose quite a bit [of learning] over the summer months and hence the losses from extended COVID shutdowns are likely to be substantial" (Banerji 2020, 2). The premise that school closures due to COVID-19 are being considered as equivalent to school closures during summer vacations in making this claim is left out, as this equivalency is conveyed as obvious.

The above helps us conceptualise learning loss as a discourse or narrative that is rhetorically spoken about in multiple ways using statistics. All these ways entail distinct methods of counting learning loss – and yet essentialise it as a singular phenomenon that occurred due to the pandemic. What is important to note is that these different formulations of learning loss might often be incompatible with each other. For instance, there is no clear translation between children in India losing a specific language ability and a predicted loss of $400 billion in their lifetime earnings. Thus, as Williamson (2021) suggests, "there is no such thing as learning loss, but multiple conceptual 'learning losses' based on their own measurement systems". I argue that researchers, organizations and institutions do not measure or calculate the extent of a single phenomenon called learning loss. Instead, what they *can* measure based on what they consider important with respect to learning *becomes* their conceptualised version of learning loss. There are multiple learning losses thus – because an organization or individual that values foundational literacy and numeracy would frame learning loss as the loss of those foundational skills, while one that values economic growth of nations would frame it, let's say, as the estimated loss of national GDPs. However, all these distinct calculations are often united under the common umbrella of COVID-19-related learning loss – where they are often interchangeably used to communicate the anxiety and urgency required to push through specific interests or agendas.

Williamson et al. (2021) suggest that "the history of the concept of learning loss may, then, be intimately tied to industry aspirations to capitalise on governmental concerns and investments" (124). Drawing on this idea, this paper highlights that it is crucial to examine who amplifies a learning loss narrative and what function it serves for them. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to critically examine each of these individual arcs, I briefly point out what this looks like for three groups of stakeholders in Indian education – educational technology (edtech) companies, private educational organizations and global financial institutions. Following the (highly inconsistent and inequitable) uptake of online learning in response to school closures, edtech companies in India have profited the most, with a projected $1.7 billion market by 2022 (*The Economic Times* February 26, 2021). Around the world, such companies have leveraged the ongoing learning loss narrative to not only increase their market, but to also become key partners in policy and reform (Williamson et al. 2021). As such, it is unsurprising that in India, edtech firms have been one of the flagbearers of the learning loss discourse – where highlighting losses is followed by plug-ins for their own products with claims about edtech and online learning being 'inevitable' (see, e.g. – TeamLease Edtech 2021; Byju's 2020; *The Economic Times* 22 November, 2021).

It is not just edtech companies that have utilised the learning loss discourse in India to advance their own solutions or advocacy. Private organizations like Pratham and the Central Square Foundation, who have been advocates for the

prioritization of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in Indian education, have seamlessly tied their claims of the COVID-19 learning loss with their previous claims about a 'foundational learning crisis' in India. For example, Banerji (2020) states that "the fact that basic learning levels were worryingly low before the COVID crisis and that further 'learning loss' may be significant adds to the deepening concern about an already inequitable situation widening divides: disadvantaged children suffering further disadvantage" (1). The blending of two distinct 'crises' here is noteworthy, as it enables not just a continued advocacy for FLN in Indian education policy, but also opportunities to concretely institutionalise it (see, e.g., Ministry of Education 2021) and propose existing FLN-oriented programmes and tools (like Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level or TaRL) as solutions for even the COVID-19 learning loss (see for e.g. – Banerji 2020; Kaffenberger 2021; Angrist et al. 2021).

Global financial institutions like the World Bank have also utilised the learning loss discourse in specific ways. In his book *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Arturo Escobar (2011) describes the formulation of 'poverty' in 1948. He mentions that the World Bank's move to define 'poor' in terms of income automatically framed poverty as an economic problem to solve, thus, paving the way for the Bank to intervene across national borders 'from a distance'. In a similar way, the framing of learning loss by the World Bank in terms of loss in expected lifetime earnings or loss of national GDP transforms it into an economic problem, and thus, the Bank into the primary expert to solve it. Since then, the World Bank has been involved in influencing response strategies to learning loss in some Indian states (Bharathi et al. 2020) as well as trying to enter into partnerships with the national government leveraging the claimed economic dangers of learning loss. Each of these arcs reflect examples of how various stakeholders have statistically and rhetorically formulated learning loss in specific ways so as to frame themselves as the experts for providing solutions to mitigate it. However, while this rhetoric and reform advocacy around learning loss continues to operate at institutional, bureaucratic and policy levels, it is important to consider what this discourse means for the individuals at the core of school education – teachers and students.

The Time to Reimagine

The word 'loss' in the term 'learning loss' captures a sentiment that certain *things* – academic abilities, earnings, a generation of children – have been lost due to school closures. As such, the term entails a deficit perspective of looking at students and learning – fixated on calculating and highlighting everything that saw a reduction of some sense. Criticisms of the learning loss discourse around the world have often focused on this fixation on deficits, which particularly harms the most marginalised populations in any country (McKinney de Royston and Vossoughi 2021). In India, narratives of 'learning crisis' prior to the pandemic have consistently portrayed children from marginalised areas, castes and classes as behind their privileged counterparts. Subsequently, the learning loss narrative coupled with the fact that these populations have had minimal access to virtual learning have

strengthened the belief that they are now further behind. As a result, proposed reforms and mitigation strategies emphasise on the need for these children to catch up – restricting them to a continuous process of mastery-based learning of basics in an education system designed to marginalise them. A large population of children, thus, are likely to spend the next few years merely studying to master basic skills first, without any exposure to richer learning experiences or innovative pedagogies. Through framing learning loss as an issue of students not learning during COVID and the solutions to it as rooted in targeted skill-based teaching when schools reopen, the onus of 'recovery' is placed on teachers and students. This completely overlooks the myriad systemic inequities and flaws that have historically affected the learning of marginalised children, and thus, makes no case for a reimagination of education at a structural level.

Besides disadvantaging marginalised children further, learning loss, as a discourse of deficit, discounts any gains or reimaginations that occurred during the pandemic. One can imagine that during school closures, several children received exposure to cultural or community-centred knowledge experiences while also learning new life skills such as craftwork, cooking, etc. – which are often considered *outside* the purview of conventional education. At the same time, many teachers, parents, as well as children, had to continuously improvise, innovate and reimagine on a daily basis to sustain learning experiences. Blanket statements that emphasise that all that happened during the pandemic were learning losses fail to recognise any of these efforts or learnings, and thus, call for a return to a version of education that would potentially never replicate these innovations. Instead, by highlighting that not attending schools equates to children's losing abilities, they merely reinforce a dependency on schools for learning – a situation that itself was responsible for a lack of imagination when schools shut down during COVID. Additionally, the emphasis on catching up, by prioritizing FLN skills after schools reopen, emboldens a linear, piecemeal perspective of learning which is all about discrete mastery of objectives. Learning is much more than that; it is a complex, non-linear process that is not reducible to simple mathematical models or statements about its gain or loss. At the same time, learning is not just about language or mathematics – it encompasses a myriad subject areas, skills and affective elements such as social-emotional learning. By selectively highlighting deficits in only language and mathematics or seeing learning as a mathematically predicted trajectory, the learning loss discourse discounts all these other aspects – making it impossible to understand the effects of the pandemic on them.

Fixating on a learning loss discourse won't dramatically change education in India. In their book on reimagining learning for Chicana/o students, Delgado Bernal and Alemán (2017) describe 'transformative ruptures' as related to "incidents, interactions, experiences, and moments that expose and interrupt pervasive coloniality and structural inequities" (5). The pandemic is one such moment – which has exposed longstanding structural flaws in the version of school education that has been provided in India – that presents an opportunity to reimagine what we perceive as learning or education. Describing how the pandemic in India "worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things", Arundhati Roy (2020) proposes a conceptualization of the pandemic as a "portal"

that can force individuals to "break with the past and imagine their world anew". She notes:

> Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Indeed, school closures due to the pandemic in India have presented an opportunity to go back to the drawing board and radically reimagine why, what and how learning happens (see also, Souto-Manning 2021). Yet, the learning loss discourse presents serious challenges to these possibilities. Due to the deficit-oriented outlook it has promoted, current educational reforms and strategies being suggested as schools reopen are grounded in terms like 'catch up', 'build back better', and 'return to normal'. The private organization Central Square Foundation (2021) mobilised a forum of sixteen leading educational organizations in India to "conceptualize effective strategies as we move forward and reopen schools safely" (3). The ensuing report, titled *(Re)build Back better*, listed ten recommendations for all stakeholders in education to work towards as a collective – ensuring equitable access to school, upgrading school infrastructure and instructional time, easing back children into social interactions, prioritizing foundational learning, reorganizing curricula to compensate learning loss, conducting assessments to identify children's levels, reorienting teachers to support parents, empowering parents to enable learning at home, building community capacities to continue learning despite disruptions, and enabling local bureaucrats to take decisions. Similarly, in a case study on India, UNESCO and UNICEF (2021) proposed four recommendations to 'build back better' – reducing barriers to digital and technological access, training teachers for e-learning, developing strategies to ensure distance learning for marginalised students, and collecting more data to guide strategic investments. While there are several recommendations across these two reports that are certainly necessary – such as resolving access issues, considering socio-emotional needs of children, and building capacities of community stakeholders – some of them fall back into the same trap of trying to implement stopgap solutions and archaic practices in a system of learning that is structurally flawed at its core. A history of focusing on mastering basic skills, building dependency on schools, and over-collecting student learning data have not resulted in radical systemic changes in the past; neither have imposed reforms and policies that are designed to exclude the most marginalised children. Like Roy mentioned above, a *return to the normal* or *building back* is not an option, since that 'normal' has historically been a flawed, exclusive system.

Thus, there is an urgent need to reimagine our schools and what happens inside and outside them. What might such possibilities look like? As I implore researchers and practitioners to explore them, I conclude this paper by briefly suggesting where one might start. An ideal starting point would be rising above the deficit perspectives in the learning loss discourse, and deploying more asset-centred

perspectives to motivate ideas and reforms. This might include identifying learning gains that students had despite school closures and examining the reasons behind them. It might mean identifying valuable skills outside conventional curricula that children had exposure to and bringing them into school lessons. It might involve a reckoning of the diverse experiences children had during school closures and building on them to plan instruction, rather than doing so based on where it was left when schools closed. It might entail a recognition of learning as complex, multidimensional, affective, embodied and multi-modal and a corresponding reimagination of curricula. Most importantly, this might look like centring student, teacher and parent voices in educational policy-making, where decisions are made *with* them and not *for* them.

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