**Rising with the tide**

BY N E D A M U L J l 2021-07-05

IN the wake of the closure of schools, teachers received a lot of flak for leaving learning gaps as parents have not had a chance to see the assessment reports after examinations, as they would in a regular year. Schools have been accused of charging fees and not completing the work and assessments according to the parents` expectations. These are exceptional circumstances and teachers have arguably worked tremendously hard to bridge their students` learning gaps. Many schools have successfully navigated the roadblocks by working closely with parents and maintaining a communication loop with them. The recourse that seems to be working for many teachers is research, resilience, resolve and reflection.

What have some schools done to keep parents and students content, retain their student numbers and continue to engage and pay their teachers? A large part of it has to do with rising with the tide.

Researching available resources and material, demonstrating willingness to upgrade skills and a consistent analysis of teaching and learning has been necessary to ensure that our work and skills are relevant to the times. Rather than struggling to keep afloat with what we already know and resisting the force of change, we could perhaps dive deep into research to hnd resources that can help with refining the parameters of our knowledge and expertise. The third `R`in this strategy is equally significant as teachers have had to show great resolve against much scrutiny and criticism.

Whether we do this consciously with a pen and paper in a nicely lit study or make it a consistent train of thought as we go through the day, we need an action plan that unfolds systematically through our work hours. This would mean asking questions repeatedly and in different ways: what needs to be done and how? Have I found the most efficient ways of doing it? Have I upgraded my skills to match the requirements and are they relevant to the needs of my students? As we roll out our action plan, a massive load of problem-solving may descend in unpredictable times when it is particularly difficult to evaluate the outcome of our efforts, and we find ourselves firefighting as circumstances change faster than we can cope.

Many parents have been accusing schools of changing their decisions at the drop of a hat the truth is, decisions have been contingent upon unprecedented circumstances and not responding to them would have been disastrous on many fronts. Now that the academic year has almost ended, it may be a good time to `reflect` on what has worked and what can be done better interms of serving the interests of students. It is quite clear that simulating the face-toface teaching experience is not yielding results. Online education is a different ball game altogether.

No one has a crystal ball to see how the situation will pan out and how soon schools may be able to return to a face-to-face or hybrid reality. It might be time to reflect on what is not working perhaps we need to break up classes into smaller groups for greater individual support or minimise the range of subjects taught in a single day to make way for deeper learning. For example, a day dedicated to science and English and another day dedicated to mathematics and geography may enable teachers to iron out problems that the students may be facing before moving on to the next subject.

The interesting part about reflection is that it allows a departure from the action plan when it becomes evident that the strategies have not been effective. Rather than stick to the initial plan and keep incurringsunk costs, schools need to move quickly towards alternatives, such as teaching through videos, one-to-one tutoring, cross-curricular learning for example, integratingmathematics and art and research that engages children infact-finding, experimentation, or longerterm projects. Innovative teaching may empower children to become more engaged and independent learners, using their natural curiosity as a catalyst.

Often, we view experimental ways of teaching with scepticism as we do not regard the process of learning complete without the necessary assessments that not only help teachers know if they are on track, but also serve to show quantifiable results to parents. However, in the current climate, assessing effort may be as important as looking at attainment. After all, students have had to learn against many odds. The learning curve has never been more demanding and divisive lack of efficient equipment, space and connectivity all contribute towards putting millions of children andteachersatanunfairadvantage.Partof what will determine success is their stamina to keep rising above the tide. The writer is senior manager, professional development, Oxford University Press Pakistan.

neda.mulji@gmail.com Twitter: @nedamulji