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Learning Curve is a publication on education from the Azim Premji University for teachers, teacher educators, school heads, educational functionaries, parents and NGOs on contextual and thematic issues that have enduring relevance and value for them. It provides a platform for the expression of varied opinions, perspectives and stories of innovation; and, encourages new, informed positions and thought-provoking points of view. The approach is a balance between academic- and a practitioner-oriented magazine.

FROM THE EDITOR

The world as we knew it changed this year. The year threw the greatest public health challenge in a hundred years at the human race. We, at the Learning Curve, could not let this pass without recording what was happening on the ground and what may be the way forward. The pandemic made it clearer than it ever was that the school does not and cannot be looked at in isolation from society. That both are so closely knit that the foremost concern of our teachers in government schools where the poorest students study was not about the loss of their academic year, their worry was for the students and their family's safety, the financial difficulties that they may be facing, and in what may seem very visceral but is the reality of their contexts, if they had enough to eat.

We have heard stories of teachers reaching out to parents and the community to coerce them to send children to school. In this issue, you will read how parents overwhelmingly supported teachers to continue their work; how when all other ways of distance learning failed, the unanimous decision of the parents was that the education of their children should carry on and it was the community that provided all assistance to teachers to hold small-group classes in spaces like the temple or under a tree; how the educated youth among them took on some of the teaching tasks; how parents supervised homework and ensured adherence to safety protocols. In several ways, what was always the one thing bemoaned, the distance between the school and the community, was sealed to a great extent during this time.

We have compiled a wide range of opinions. While some articles inform of the long-range effects of this pandemic on the life and education of children – children dropping out to work and share their family's financial burden, children moving from private to government schools due to financial difficulties, girls continuing to carry the burden of housework and not returning to school, and early marriages – they also offer ways in which to respond to their physical, nutritional and emotional needs.

The issue informs that this churning of the old 'normal' may have placed us at the cusp of a hitherto unimagined reality; an opportunity to recalibrate how we must proceed with education – with one eye on the emergent challenges and strategies to deal with these and another to ensure that we fasten down the persistent challenges of equity and equality, now, possibly, for good.

An exclusive section, VOICES, features the experiences of teachers, students, volunteers and members of NGOs. Teachers and NGOs share how they used digital media, to begin with, only to realise how severely it lacked the most crucial construct of learning, human contact. But watch out also for the interesting experiments that many tried out to complement their lessons with online resources. Some children have shared their views on online learning and activities they engaged in during this time.

The statistics are alarming. But beyond these predictions; the ominous, albeit necessary forecasts, facts and data, are stories of the human spirit that rose above all else and shone. In diverse ways, teachers, activists and education workers redefined the relationship between the school and society.

Without dismissing the fears, let us keep these aside for a bit and rejoice in the fact that the school and society may have come closer than ever before. Even in urban, middle-class homes where parents and elders were, in some way or the other, involved with the online education of children, this is true. For us now, to not let the promise of this partnership slip away, is not just expedient but imperative.

Happy reading! We welcome your feedback, as always.

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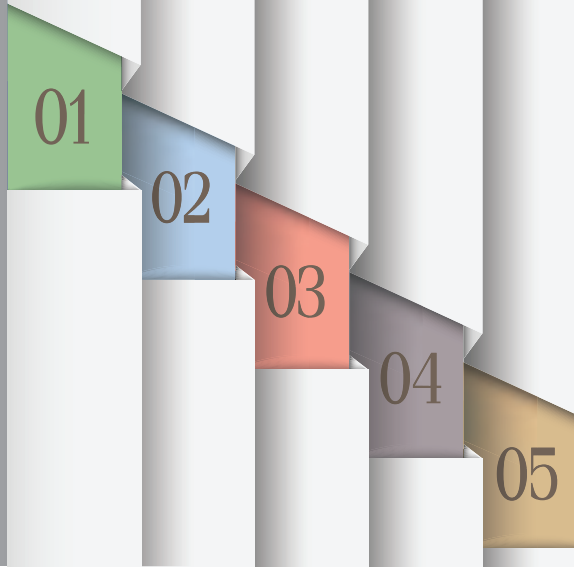

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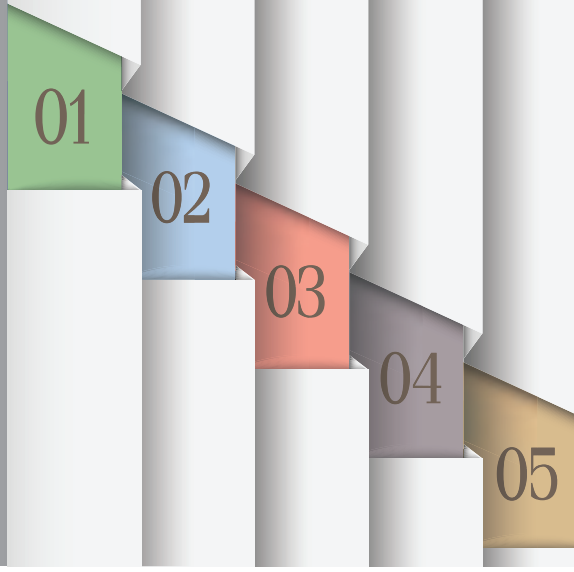

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Preparing to Reopen Schools | What Needs to be Done

Vimala Ramachandran

It has been more than eight months since the COVID-19 lockdown saga began in India. Reports on the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown on the lives of children have been coming out. In June and July 2020 several reports were published on the situation on the ground as well as its impact on children. Each of these reports – the NSSO 75th Round on key indicators of household social consumption on education (NSSO, GOI November 2019, published in July 2020)[i], the Central Square Foundation report on private schools (CSF, New Delhi July 2020)[ii] , the Save the Children (India) report on the post-pandemic situation (SC India June 2020), Young Voices – National Report of the task force examining Age of Marriage (CWC, Bangalore, July 2020)[iii] and a number of newspaper reports and articles on the impact of the lockdown on the poor, especially teachers and children – all point to a situation that is not only grim but also one that demands urgent attention.

Some facts

An analysis of secondary data reveals that 50 percent of all students are enrolled in privately managed schools (UDISE 2019, cited in CSF 2020). Given the growing evidence on economic distress, joblessness, reverse migration, parents of children in private schools may find it difficult to pay school fees, putting their children at the risk of dropping out or trying to transfer to government schools. One does not know if state governments are ready for a surge in enrolment. A recent rapid survey of 7,235 families by *Save the Children (India)* found that 62 percent of households pulled their children out of school – especially private schools. 'The assessment found that the discontinuation of children's education was reported by three-fifths (62%) of the surveyed households with the highest number recorded in north India at 64 percent and the least in south India at 48 percent.[iv]

The implications of this finding are serious – children who have been pulled out of private schools will either try to enrol in government schools or may just stop going to school. The task force report commissioned by DWCD, GOI on Age of Marriage reveals that many adolescent girls in secondary schools are fearful of being pulled out of school and either being married off or put into wage labour to sustain the family. This would also be the case for many boys, who would be expected to work in order to augment depleting family incomes. Unfortunately, given the situation of both the quality of education they receive in school and the lack of meaningful training opportunities, these young people end up doing unskilled work.

With so much emphasis on online education as a possible strategy, administrators and political leaders are turning their faces away from the fact that online education is not only a pipe dream but more importantly, *it is a passive mode of instruction*, especially when it is delivered in a one-way format with little scope for interaction. The cruellest joke has been about sending lessons via *WhatsApp*! The CSF report confirms that 'more than 66 percent of the surveyed private schools have adopted *WhatsApp* as the mode…' (p19, CSF 2020) 'The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported that only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access. In rural households (66% of the population), only 14.9 percent had access, and in urban households only 42 percent had access. And males are the primary users: 16 percent of women had access to mobile internet, compared to 36 percent of men. Young people's access is even less: a recent news report stated that only 12.5 percent of students had access to smartphones. Furthermore, most teachers are ill-equipped for online teaching…' (Urvashi Sahni. 2020).

Equally significant is the fact that a large majority of parents may find it difficult to support their children in both digital education as well as one-to-one interactive educational processes (including private tuitions). The CSF (2020) survey found that only 33 percent of parents said they could support their children's digital learning.

Points to ponder

- What are the implications of the pandemic and the resultant crisis on children from poor households?

- Are we, as a society, as the government and as educators asking the right questions?
- Are we looking at ground realities and then making decisions?
- Or are we just mouthing solutions without being sincere or serious about what our children need?

The COVID-19-related lockdown not only exacerbates all poverty and educational inequality-related issues, but it has also pushed a large number of the poor and not-so-poor into a precarious situation. Private (low-cost) schools that depend on fees are in danger of shutting down, contract teachers and those working in low-cost private schools have not been paid and online education is inaccessible to the majority of children in both rural and urban areas.

Equally disturbing is that there is so little discussion or serious national debate on what can be done to address the issue of education and learning. Online education privileges the already better off, leaving the poor to fend for themselves. Notwithstanding the warnings of so many educators and educationists about the ineffectiveness (and even harmful) effects of passive, one-way online communication that passes off as education, governments and several corporate supporters continue to talk about online classes as the only solution in the times of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Alternative viewpoint

There is another view or approach that merits serious consideration. In early 2019, I had the opportunity to interact with NGOs who are part of the *Transforming Rural India Initiative* in Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. I have also had the opportunity to interact with NGOs working with government schools in Karnataka and Odisha. The NGOs working with young women and girls and teachers in government schools, whether in rural or urban areas, have highlighted a number of serious issues. Among these are:

1. Teacher vacancies, especially in mathematics, science and English.
2. The status of school teachers, especially contract teachers. For instance, over 50 percent of the teacher workforce in Jharkhand is on contract.[v]
3. Poor learning outcomes and teachers expressed helplessness to improve it.
4. Ineffective educational administration which leaves schools to manage or cope with what they have (including teacher shortages).
5. The pressure on completing the syllabus, no matter what the ground situation may be.

Wherever NGOs and other groups working with government schools were able to energise the community, the overall atmosphere in the school improved a great deal.

This was the feedback before the pandemic and the lockdown. The situation on the ground may have changed since then and students, teachers and families may be facing severe challenges related to livelihood, migration and isolation.

What can we do during the times of COVID-19 lockdown? Are there strategies that we can adopt that may help us respond with empathy and determination? I spoke to a number of people working on the ground in NGOs and with government schools in district-based initiatives.[vi] These are some of the concrete suggestions that emerged in the course of the interactions.

Some suggestions

Assessing the situation

School heads, teachers, administrators, community leaders and local NGO facilitators need to come together and discuss the specific impact of the pandemic on their areas/communities. The following questions need to be asked in every panchayat and ward: Will there be a huge rush into government schools as the schools reopen? Would it consist of reverse migrants? Or would it be those who have not been able to continue in private schools? What is the rough estimate of the number of children who are at the risk of either dropping out completely or considering shifting to government schools?

There could be meetings of CRC, school heads, teachers, active SMC members and panchayat/urban bodies to assess the situation with respect to children and whether there could be a surge in enrolment. While a house-to-house survey may be difficult during these (COVID-19) times, this group would have the ability to evaluate the situation on the ground. The India Education Collective and *Prajayatna* -- two NGOs that work with government schools in several states -- have been using this strategy not only to get a better idea of ground realities but also as a means to sensitise and involve the key stakeholders.

Thousands of villages and wards have a low incidence of infection and, using the recommended physical distancing/masking/hand-washing norms, surveys could also be done in such areas. This, by itself, will give the government a realistic idea of the scale of the problem. This process is also important because teachers, school heads and administrators rarely come together to discuss strategies and bringing all of them together would be extremely valuable.

Prioritising

The most affected and at-immediate-risk are children in rural and tribal areas who will be appearing for their class X and class XII board examinations in 2021. These children are extremely worried about how they will cope (Vidya Das of *Agragamee*, email correspondence, 25 July 2020). Board examinations, where essential, could focus on the key learning outcomes necessary for certification. This could also be done through open-book examinations that do not privilege memorisation but focus instead on comprehension and understanding of basic concepts.

Simultaneously, there is a need for socio-psychological and academic support and counselling of parents and students as some parents may be pressurising their children without an adequate understanding of their mental and/or emotional states and academic preparedness.

Within school

Closer school and community linkages and partnerships could be made in creating learning spaces and bringing the school closer to the children and their families. The pandemic has provided many activists, education workers and teachers the opportunity to redefine ownership of the school. Parents have come forward to take responsibility, older children are supporting the education of younger students, some teachers and school heads are taking the support of parents to distribute worksheets and other study material.

The school is no longer seen as the preserve and the property of the government alone – parents, local communities and youth have come forward to sustain some teaching-learning processes. Community libraries and learning centres are working with teachers and school heads. This has been an important strategy of the M V Foundation of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Clearly, the post-pandemic environment can make the doors of the schools more open and welcoming.

Psycho-social preparedness

Children and adults are known to have been traumatised by the pandemic, the forced migration and loss of livelihoods. Teachers and school heads need to be prepared to address issues of trauma, anxiety and despondency in an empathetic manner. This means that state governments need to organise workshops (in clusters of 15-20 schools or, where feasible, online discussions) in order to mentally prepare the teachers and school heads and also physically prepare the schools to welcome more children. Online consultations and webinars could also help in areas that have good connectivity and where school heads and teachers are comfortable with technology. Where there is an existing network of either NGO or CSR programmes which work closely with government schools, members could initiate outreach with children and parents, new migrants in their area (village or ward), teachers and school heads and others working in education in the field.

This is also the time to reach out to the private schools as they too are facing huge distress. Many may be thinking of shutting down. Getting a list of the children in such schools and facilitating their enrolment is essential. Flexibility and openness to new ideas and area-specific innovations need to be encouraged and welcomed, especially among school heads, teachers and local administrators, NGOs and education groups.

Coming to grips with online teaching-learning

It is well-known and accepted that technology is a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction and needs to be used alongside it. Using technology as an alternative to regular teaching-learning processes compromises both the equity goals as well as the quality of delivery.

It would be important, against this backdrop, to take serious stock of what online learning has actually achieved so far. While high-end private schools have been able to use interactive tools, most of the not-so-well-off or well-endowed schools have resorted to one-way, passive communication with children. Even some so-called high-end schools have continued with the chalk-and-talk method – just delivering lectures to children. Even small children in kindergarten and grades I to III are subjected to this.

Preliminary feedback through small surveys and interactions reveals that online learning has not reached the majority of poor and lower-middle-class children, rural or urban. If this is indeed the

situation, schools and local education NGOs and CSR units could prepare and deliver 'workbooks' to children at home. The *India Education Collective* has tried this with some positive response. The idea is not to cover the syllabus but to keep the children engaged in the process of learning. A combination of workbooks and storybooks would perhaps be ideal.

Shorter academic sessions and truncated syllabi

In view of the reality that this academic session (2020-21) has been drastically cut short, we need a creative approach to utilising the time available. Instead of a mindless cutting of lessons in textbooks, it has become more important to focus on foundational skills that are required at each grade/level and working with children in small groups.

Practitioners working on the ground suggest that the focus could be on basic abilities in language and mathematics in the lower grades. In the higher grades, prominence could be given to core subject ideas, like developing reading comprehension in language, critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving abilities and conceptual clarity in mathematics. Similar focus areas could be worked out in other subjects. (Rudresh, email correspondence, 26 July 2020).

Equally, it would be important to maximise student learning during school hours through worksheets and continuous self-assessment/teacher-initiated assessment of learning. (Rakesh Tiwari, email correspondence, 27 July 2020).

India has a wealth of experience in accelerated learning (Ramachandran, 2004, Nirantar,1997; *Balika Shikshan Shivir/Mahila Shikshan Kendra* documentation) and creating innovative bridging programmes to help children get back to formal schooling, second-chance programmes and many more which have been used by both non-governmental and government schools and centres. Maybe it is time we revisited such initiatives and used them to create gentle bridge programmes to ease children back into formal schools and learning.

Increased hunger, poverty and joblessness

Given the evidence of increasing poverty and joblessness, hunger and malnutrition have emerged as serious issues, particularly in some areas. Again, a micro-context-specific assessment can help schools restart the midday meal and school health initiatives even before schools reopen formally. Augmenting nutritional supplements, introducing breakfast and thorough health check-ups need to be carried out, especially when children first come back to school. This could be done through interesting activities with the help of para-medical workers and, where possible, doctors and nutritionists.

Support for teachers

Finally, and most importantly, teachers need support. They need our confidence in their abilities and; they need respect to get back to school after the pandemic and the lockdown. They will have to reinvent themselves and play multiple roles – of counsellor, teacher, guide, guardian, etc.

We will need many more teachers in schools to cope with not only the increased enrolment in government schools, but also the varied roles that teachers will be expected to play. Accelerated learning cannot be done in large groups of fifty or sixty; evidence shows that it works best in small groups of children who are roughly at the same level, therefore, many more teachers will need to be recruited. Several state governments have not paid contract teachers during the lockdown and a large number of private schools have laid off their teachers (waiting to re-hire if and when they reopen). Many teachers have known to have resorted to MNREGA work or retail selling to make ends meet. This is a time when teachers need support, encouragement and training to enable them to come back to school with optimism and energy.

Lessons for the future

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant crisis have provided India with an opportunity to get back to the drawing board and think afresh. The new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is an open and progressive document, one that can provide space for trying out new approaches. Equally, it also provides administrators with opportunities to take a holistic view and stop working on different elements in silos. A well-coordinated strategy to overhaul and energise the school education system is called for.

While this may be too much to expect, it is important to recognise that there is a paralysis of governance. We seem to be going with the flow and not thinking or doing anything significant. There are highly committed and sensitive administrators in many states; if a national overhaul looks like an uphill task, we can surely work with state governments, district administrations and school clusters to bring about the much-needed transformation and make our school system vibrant.

Abbreviations used

CRC : Cluster Resource Centre
CSF : Central Square Foundation
CWC : Concerned for Working Children (a not-for-profit organization)
DWCD : Directorate of Women and Child Development
NSSO : National Sample Survey Office
SMC : School Management Committee
UDISE : Unified District Information System for Education

[i] *Government of India, MOSPI. November 2019. Key indicators of household consumption on education in India – Report no. 75/25.2 – based on NSSO 75th Round done between June 2017-June 2018. New Delhi*

[ii] *Central Square Foundation. July 2020. State of the sector report – Private Schools in India. New Delhi.*

[iii] *Concerned for Working Children. July 2020. Young Voices – National Report of the taskforce (DWCD, GOI) Examining Age of Marriage. Bangalore.*

[iv] *Hindustan Times, 11 July 2020 - https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/children-in-62-surveyed-homes-discontinued-education-amid-pandemic-save-the-children-report/story-rAVQCjfpr7ff7ClP6zpaRP.html*

[v] *The situation was summed up succinctly during interactions with facilitators from NGOs: "The low status of contract teachers, the uncertainty that envelopes their lives, irregular pay and almost no professional/academic support – all together have rendered the school system dysfunctional in many parts of the country…" (Ramachandran, Vimala, February 2020)*

[vi] *Vidya Das from Agragamee Odisha, Javed from Transforming Rural India, Sreeja from India Education Collective, Rudresh, Rakesh Sihori, Rajiv Sharma and Hardy Dewan from APF/APU, Kameshwari Jandhyala from ERU, Ankur Sarin from IIM-A. I am indeed grateful for their concrete suggestions.*

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Education | Which Way do we Want it to Turn?

Hridaykant Dewan

What is education?

'Education for all' and its purpose has been a contentious issue ever since it started being talked about not so long ago. The attempt was to make education a vehicle for preparing children for the economy and jobs, but now there is also an attempt to focus on education as a means of developing sensitive and concerned human beings; those who respect others and can show empathy. Woven into this has been a strand to promote the development of aesthetic abilities and a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, besides respect for working with the hands. This is not just for the sake of experience or creativity, but also for children to be able, in some way, to participate in something socially useful and productive.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) and the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) have stressed all these aspects and the development of rational ethics, scientific temper, a sense of fraternity and respect for plurality. There has also been an accepted commitment to providing quality education for everyone, which NEP 2020 strongly reiterates.

It is in this context that we should look at how education has been delivered and how the COVID-19 situation has disrupted it, analyse the different ways that seem to be suggested about how it will evolve in the future.

We also need to consider the lessons learned from people's responses to each other during the pandemic and what it means for educational processes and structure.

The current situation

If we examine the nature of education today, it is primarily directed at the learners' individual progress and their rise in the hierarchy. Advertisements are also directed at making the child the best, ahead of others and an unhesitating climber on the shoulders of others. The process has not been such that it makes the majority of the learners more sensitive to the pain of others or as a means of collective development and co-operation. It has not been aimed at making learners pro-active interveners in unfair and unjust situations. It is merely seen as a means of individual escape and therefore, the aspiration is to get a role in the economy.

> The individual desire to do well and better than before cannot by itself be faulted, but in the absence of ethical rationality, fraternal feeling and scientific temper it is disastrous for the social fabric and the movement towards equity and justice to all.

Education not only existed but comprised and was delivered to different children in circumstances that could be inequitable. Thus, it has been and is 'iniquitous and exclusionary'; essentially maintaining status quo except for a few components that moved from one level to the other. Low numbers of participation in education exist in spite of the reservation policy.

Education, some argue, has been promoting and accentuating inequity among many other things.

Nai Talim

The *Nai Talim* movement criticised the-then school education as being too academically oriented and leaving out the *heart*, implying empathy for others as well as the *hands*, implying leaving out work with the hands. According to *Nai Talim,* school education produced literate people who were not actually educated. Proponents argued that education alienated children from their community and made them competitive, self-oriented and liable to exploiting others and that this education promoted disrespect not only for those who work with their hands but also for the work they did.

All policy and most curriculum framework documents acknowledged the relevance of *Nai Talim* and the need for education to include the development of the head, heart and hands. What they did not quite accept was the contention that the medium of learning should be useful, productive work: it was felt that some form of

work with the hands in the school programme was necessary. These documents also stressed the need for integration of many other areas into the school programme so that it did not remain a process that was too cerebral and academic.

In spite of all this, we have a system that promotes competition and places maximum emphasis on academic examination performance, be it through extensive coaching or any other facility.

Biased system

This system favours the resourceful and the elite in multiple ways, although it is not as if there has been no talk of improving the quality of education for the underprivileged. In the last three to four decades, there has been a lot of conversation in policy documents around this question and many programmes and missions have been implemented. There have been some resources (however inadequate) allocated and spent on these efforts as well. Some of these efforts have drawn in passionate and committed individuals, who have tried to support these efforts. The efforts have been of many types and with many different perspectives and kinds of investments, but the one thing common to all of these is that they have been largely input-driven.

In the late eighties and nineties of the previous century and in the first few years of this century, there has been a lot of work on materials, methods and training, inspired by attempts made by some non-government organisations (NGOs), some societies subsequently set up government education departments that involved many more NGOs. All these efforts excited and motivated people who were working with these NGOs and some teachers as well, but it all worked only till the people from outside the system remained in the projects. The larger government system did not accept it and since there were no major efforts to involve the community in clear roles, the energy of these programmes slowly dissipated. Teachers and the other workers in the system, who were deeply engaged with these efforts, attempted to find space in their work for the ideas and tried to continue, but the disabling and non-supportive environment did not allow them to.

The negative impact of technology

The inability to recognise the significance of the human element of the teachers' role in quality education has been disillusioning. Despite policy and system reform documents professing support, the entire community of teachers was belittled as being disinterested, academically weak and irresponsible. Teachers were made accountable for results but were not given the independence to create and administer lessons and learning, which became increasingly more technology-oriented. No attention was paid to the background of the school, the number of teachers available in the school and whether the children could come to the school regularly or not. Documentation took precedence over teaching and teachers could not think about or plan what they wanted to do in class.

Testing became an additional burden as teachers were not allowed to plan their own teaching but were given prepared material. Testing through MCQs (multiple-choice questions) and other such processes for easy compilation of data delimits the nature of tasks that can be assigned and promotes rote learning which, as the Yashpal Committee (1993), the NCF in 2005 and, more recently, the NEP 2020 reiterated most emphatically, needs to be dispensed with altogether. A system of testing in which the teacher only thinks of results, and in which the child is irrelevant, leads to a hunt for mechanisms that are akin to rote learning in order to help students 'crack' the tests.

The impact of COVID

All this may seem unrelated to the main theme of this article, but there is a very important connection: the relevance of past experiences to understand the situation we are in now. The drive towards finding solutions in spite of teachers has led to thinking about smart classes, voice or audio-visually compiled lectures, self-learning materials etc and now, the new situation finds us in a position where it is not clear by when the teachers will be able to start functioning in the conventional sense.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unhappiness and brought difficulty to all and for many, it has unleashed unimaginable misery. Forced out of their livelihoods and homes, often going without even one square meal a day, many were forced to travel long distances to places they had left in search of livelihood. Their plight and the response of the educated and those who hold resources pointed to the lack of empathy and laid bare their self-seeking mercenary character.

This outlook was not just reflected in their attitude towards the poor who were dependent on them for their employment and shelter, but also towards neighbours who were unfortunate enough to

contract the disease, even if it were because they were helping those who had become ill or reaching those who needed help in some way. The total and blatant lack of the feeling of being a part of society and the system that was protecting and sustaining them was very evident.

Distancing

In this short period of a few months, we saw how the oft-repeated term, *social distancing*, blended into the earlier disdain for the people who make the system function for the comfort of the elite, whether it is house-maids or anyone else from that background. The feeling of empathy and collective identity seemed to be totally missing. The sense of co-operation and collaboration was also absent, as people looked out for their own safety and attempted to form bubbles of insulation that provided them with all that they needed, but with no concern for those who worked to make it possible. It is not surprising that they were anxious about their children missing out on learning and making the effort to sharpen their edge over others. The idea of education has already got reduced to learning only to crack entrance examinations. So, there was no sense of need for the children to interact with or mix with other children. The perception was that children were wasting their time and widening the learning gap and hence, we need to start them on their regimen.

Mechanical responses

This pressure made all private schools start online classes. While there were parents who could provide their children with smartphones and unlimited internet access, there were others who were unable to do so. For those with no immediate means of livelihoods, providing even one smartphone to siblings competing for phone time, the access to the phone as well as the internet was a challenge.

There were immediate announcements for training sessions for teachers to take online classes. The discourse moved in the direction of this being a long-term solution and as a system of promoting and strengthening self-learning. The education industry started visualising recorded lessons that could be shared with students and not leave the burden of preparing and teaching the lessons to the teacher as they are not equipped to do so. The post-lockdown norm has been one of moving towards more technology, less human interaction, reduction of syllabi and, as already mentioned, more individualised learning. Cutting down on time and content implies that we still look at learners as being unable to read and understand texts on their own. The teacher is expected to explain the content and give the answers to the children: so much for the idea of self-learning!

Critical juncture

So, this is a juncture where we need to revisit the questions: What is education? What is education for? Why should we have schools? What can online classes do and what do they totally miss out on?

The small sample that I have interacted with and some that others have reported reveal that the children who are being engaged through online classes have all been unhappy with them. The thing they miss most is being with other children, whether in class or in the playground. They want the school to reopen soon and it is imperative to consider their point of view and think of the possible reasons why they are missing school. This has a critical bearing on the sudden push towards more technology-driven schools and learning. It emphasises the point about the inequity in access to avenues of education as it becomes more technology-driven and strongly bolsters the view that this form of education is in any case inferior to the education which ensures interaction with teachers and peers in schools and classrooms.

Revisiting the definition of education

Apart from this, it is necessary, firstly, to think of the way development is structured and secondly, how we want to organically address some of the major gaps that have remained in making education meaningful for children and the community. We have to consider ways to involve more people and children in the educational process and promote the role of education as a part of *collective development and sustenance* rather than a means of making individual progress and maximising profit.

The time has come for us to decide what we must do. Should we move towards more online, cerebral and iniquitous education processes? Or should we move in the opposite direction, towards an education system that has more closeness and contact? If we choose the latter path, we have to invest in ways to bring together children even in the smallest villages (with all the precautions of masks, hand-wash and physical distance) who can be with each other and a teacher, the adult who can facilitate conversations and learning and even

work with books, pencil and paper.

The question is: Can we work towards temporary *mohalla* centres that bring children of local communities together to learn to be human to each other and share our diversity within human and constitutional values along with rational ethics and scientific temper, values that NEP 2020 has also advocated so strongly? It is the answer to this tough question that will determine the direction of education in the future.

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> Our biggest concern was: are we bringing elements like economic inequality in the minds of our children? This was something which we had always tried to avoid in our school, with its environment of providing the same resources for all to learn, to use, to play etc… Were we ignoring ideas of social justice and humanistic values in the name of addressing a temporary gap of academic support through the online mode?
>
> *Anil Angadiki, Using COVID-19 as a tool for Learning, p 43.*

Perspectives on Child Health and Wellbeing

Adithya Pradyumna and Kayur Mehta

COVID-19 in children

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought unparalleled challenges to the care of children and adolescents globally. India is currently second on the list of countries with highest case counts and third in terms of deaths. According to data from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, as on September 1, 2020, eight percent of the cases and one percent of deaths in India have occurred in children aged under 17 years. COVID-19 appears to be *milder* in children than in adults, which is quite atypical for a respiratory viral infection, commonly presenting as a self-limiting febrile upper respiratory illness. However, children are still at risk of developing severe illness and complications from COVID-19. These include respiratory failure, damage to the heart, kidneys, and multi-organ system failure, just like in adults. A minority of children can also experience a serious, post-infectious inflammatory syndrome, which is specific to children, difficult to treat and can be associated with long-term consequences. The overall mortality rate due to the disease in much lower in children compared to adults.

Contextualising the indirect impact

Relative to the direct impact of the disease, children, especially in developing countries, have been disproportionately affected by the indirect effects of the pandemic through a variety of mechanisms. Over 90 percent of countries have reported disruptions in routine health services to the WHO and pandemic-related service closures, warnings and public health measures have led to substantially reduced use of routine child healthcare services.

Children who have chronic underlying health conditions, like diabetes, epilepsy and HIV have been particularly impacted due to the lack of access to medication and follow-up services. Decades of progress achieved in reducing preventable child deaths may be rolled back due to hindrances in access to vaccination services. There is a risk of re-emergence of several vaccine-preventable diseases due to the resultant decline in the level of herd immunity to diseases, for example, measles.

Consequences of schools closing

We first look at the importance of *anganwadis* and primary schooling for the health and development of children. These are places where crores of children routinely spend several hours of the day, improving their knowledge, gaining skills and socially engaging with other children. Importantly, children are also entitled to a healthy hot meal at school, ensuring supplementary nutrition to what they are already consuming at home. These very large programmes, which have been built and reformed over decades to contribute to better education and child development, have been severely impacted by the pandemic. Even during normal times, the *anganwadis* were utilised more in rural (59%) than in urban areas (40%), based on the National Family Health Survey conducted in 2016 (NFHS-4).

Despite significant progress in the nutritional status of India's children over recent decades, undernutrition continues to persist. The prevalence of stunting among children under the age of 5 years was estimated at 38 percent, and that of underweight at 36 percent in 2016 (NFHS-4). However, even before the pandemic struck, India was off course in meeting all the nutrition targets for 2025, including those for child undernutrition. Hence, COVID-19 comes as a huge setback to very important work on improving basic health determinants. Additionally, interruptions to deworming and iron-folic acid supplementation programmes may worsen the already alarming rate of anaemia, which was at 58 percent in 2016 (NFHS-4). The disruption of food supplementation may also have impacted pregnant and lactating women and, consequently, their babies and children yet to be born.

The routine of school provides a safe environment for vulnerable children. The meal and the security are incentives to send children to school, especially for the poorest families, allowing the parents to engage in wage-labour or other means of making ends meet without having to worry about the whereabouts of their children and their lunches. The hot meal is especially important for some children who may have no other means for a healthy meal, such as those of urban migrant workers, potentially also keeping them away from child labour. Several adolescent girls may have also been dependent on getting their sanitary napkins through the school health programmes and may have faced difficulties during the lockdown.

As of 2016, only 60 percent households had both soap and water for hand-washing. While efforts and campaigns to improve hand hygiene practices during the pandemic may have had some positive impact, there is a significant section of the population that lacks access to either water, soap or both, making them additionally vulnerable to contracting the virus.

Consequences of loss of livelihoods

Very importantly, the response measures in terms of the lockdowns have drastically impacted the livelihoods of millions of households dependent on daily wages. This has manifested as a triple-strike for vulnerable children – their parents are out of work, the school is closed, and the family is struggling for food. In heart-breaking testimonies, some of the children, now working as ragpickers, interviewed by a journalist have wondered if they would even get back to school, clearly indicating the potentially massive impacts also on mental health. Children have also been pushed into other hazardous jobs such as construction and *beedi rolling*.

In comparison to children from more affluent families, those from poorer families have inadequate access to computers, internet and electricity, and are, therefore, facing tougher challenges in continuing their education. The impacts may be even worse for female children with the scarce educational resources available being allocated to the male children. With more and more children being out of school, reports of child abuse, neglect, exploitation and domestic violence are on the rise, potentially compromising the mental health and wellbeing of children. There is also a possibility of children having lost both parents to COVID-19, leaving them extremely vulnerable. Overall, the costs of the pandemic are intangible and heavy on individual children, families and the nation. And so, despite not being the face of the pandemic, children are at risk of being among its greatest victims.

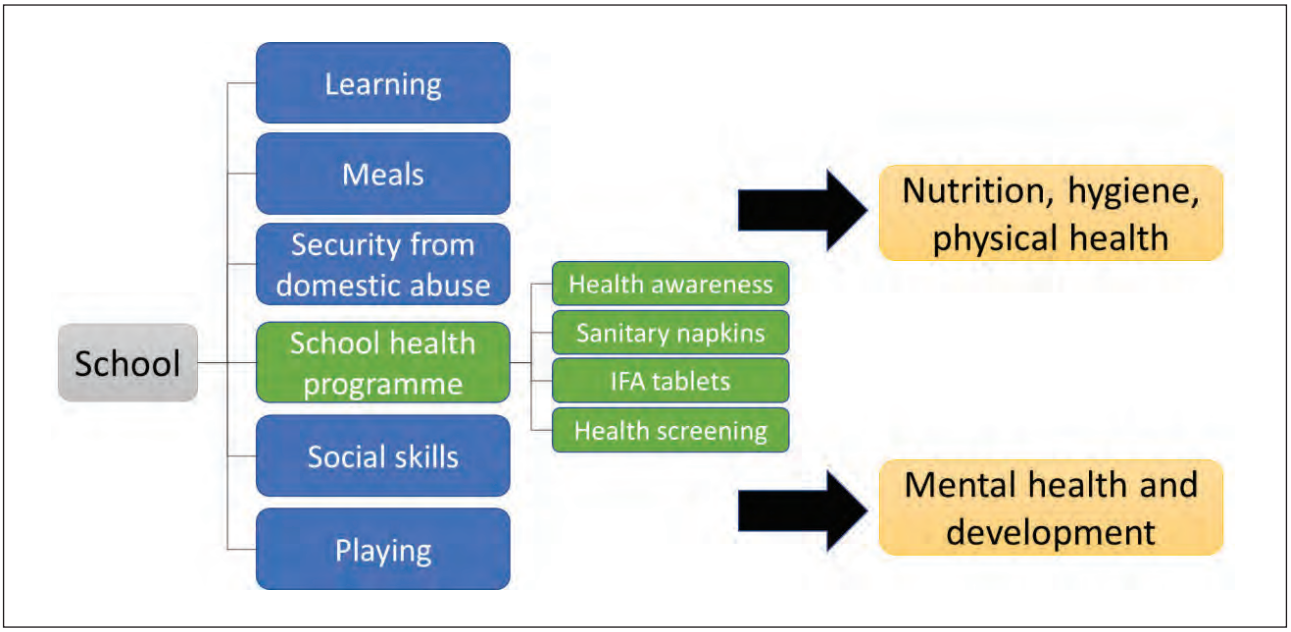

Figure 1. How schools contribute to the health of children (source: authors); IFA: iron and folic acid

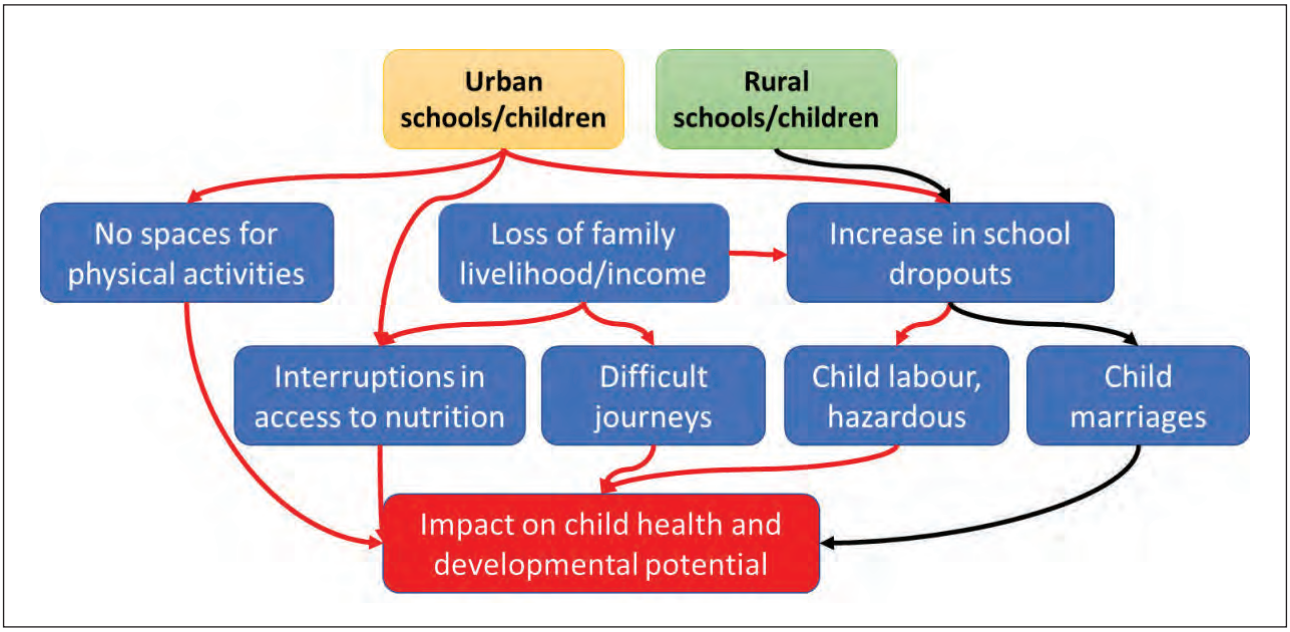

Figure 2. Potential impact pathways for disruption of child health due to the pandemic; pathways in black are important to both urban and rural children, red arrows are more relevant to urban children (source: authors)

Mitigating the impacts and protecting child health

While several children have already suffered severe impacts from the disruption of normal life, efforts are being made by governments, health and social workers, as also the voluntary sector to understand and mitigate further impacts. Policies have been put into place to support the increased supply of food to eligible families and continue the Mid-Day Meal scheme, which has faced mixed success until now due to tight lockdown measures earlier and infections among staff members, especially in urban areas. Such interventions to improve nutrition access are critical for lessening the effects and risks of COVID-19.

Good nutrition is a prerequisite for the overall physical, immunological and cognitive development of children. While there is no evidence so far that particular foods or food supplements can protect against COVID-19, it is well known that certain micronutrients, including vitamins A, D, C, E, B6, and B12, folate, zinc, iron, copper, and selenium contribute to a well-functioning immune system. Common signs of nutritional deficiencies include weakness, weight loss, irritability, poor concentration, diarrhoea, skin changes, poor night vision, shortness of breath, frequent infections amongst several others. At an individual level, it is important that parents ensure that their children eat well-balanced meals. A healthy diet entails consuming well-balanced, diversified, nutritious foods, including grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables and animal source foods.

As alluded to earlier, a vast majority of India's children depend on the midday meals provided by their schools; however, primary schools and *anganwadis* are yet to reopen, and it is unclear when that might happen. Under such circumstances, alternate strategies to ensure continuity of nutrition provision such as catering systems, take-home rations, voucher transfers or cash-based transfers, all with standard infection control safeguards, could be further explored. Strengthening primary care and sustaining community-based interventions to promote maternal and child health, such as home visits during and after pregnancy, micronutrient supplementation and immunisation programmes would also be crucial in alleviating the downstream effects of the pandemic on children's physical health. Further, disease transmission control efforts per se need to be strengthened as winter approaches, when virus transmission peaks. More stringent social distancing measures and the use of masks are highly recommended.

In certain vulnerable areas, make-shift arrangements were made for children to be able to access education and supplementary food. States, such as Kerala, that have managed this well are those that already had strong governmental educational services and better child health indicators. Areas with the worst indicators, including urban slums,

are of great concern. Volunteers in urban areas have set-up makeshift schools for children to help continue their education. Although such measures may not be sustainable, these may have prevented some children from dropping out. Civil society organisations have also mobilised their resources during this critical time to improve access to food and essential medical services. Some have suggested that young children going to primary schools are far less likely to spread the virus, and hence, there may be a case to open their schools before those of the older children. There is a need for a deeper discussion on school reopening in a timely and safe manner.

The pandemic may have also severely impacted the mental health of children. Subtle signs of poor emotional and mental wellbeing could include mood swings, behavioural changes, loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed, difficulty in sleeping, problems with memory and concentration. This is a time when both parents and children are under stress, especially those facing livelihood loss and forced migration. While parents face their own challenges, efforts need to be made towards the children's mental wellbeing by listening to them, acknowledging their difficulties, clarifying their doubts, reassuring them, generating hope and providing emotional support in resolving issues. Exposure to media should be limited so that children are not excessively exposed to pandemic-related information.

Setting a daily routine that incorporates academic work, chores, play, interaction with friends over the phone/other forms of technology and exercise/yoga, as well as family-time would go a long way in the overall wellbeing of children during these stressful times. It has further been suggested that returning to a structured learning programme can also help improve mental health outcomes. Multiple channels have been engaged by the government for the continuity of children's education – web portals, mobile apps, TV channels, radio, and podcasts – through platforms such as *Diksha, Swayam Prabha* TV channels, *e-Pathshala* and the National Repository of Open Educational Resources. However, many of these may be difficult to access for the most vulnerable families, who may require external support to cope. There are also ongoing efforts to provide textbooks to all school-going children at their homes, even in the remotest parts of India. Such efforts that consider the needs of the most marginalised need to be focussed on.

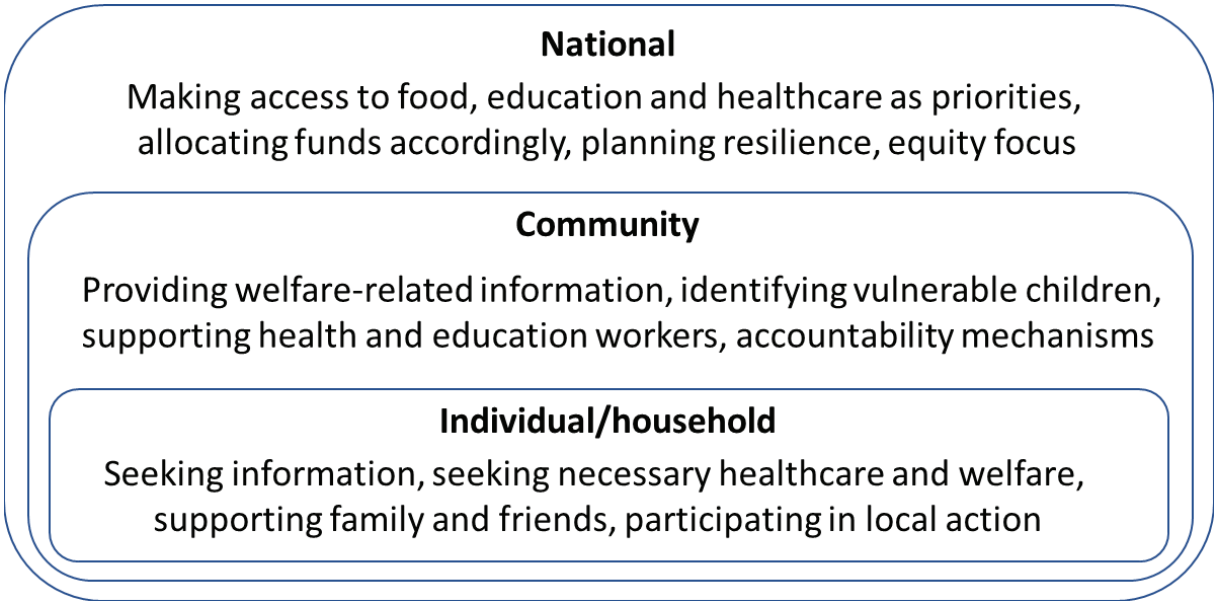

Figure 3. Actions at various levels to protect child health during the pandemic (source: authors)

Keeping in mind the slowing down of the pandemic, improved awareness among people, and adaptation of health systems to the situation, we may not have severe national-level lockdowns in future. However, continued awareness and practice regarding personal protection and better preparedness from health systems (aside from the benefits that a future vaccine may provide), are paramount so that these devastating disruptions do not occur again, at least at this scale. It is also very important that resilience of educational, food welfare and health systems are regularly

assessed and strengthened; these systems need to adapt quickly to disruptions as they are critical to health and wellbeing. Accountability mechanisms through partnerships between local people and the government should also be strengthened. This is essential both for rural and urban areas with special emphasis on healthcare in urban areas.

The celebrated Japanese author Haruki Murakami once wrote, *'You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.'* The current pandemic is far from being over and has already exposed several vulnerabilities of critical systems and services. While fighting the fires, it is also important that lessons are carried forward to minimise the impact on the overall health and wellbeing of children.

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Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Aanchal Chomal

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted student learning to a large extent. Educational institutions have explored various online options to ensure uninterrupted learning. However, there is enough and more evidence to suggest that remote learning options do not work. Education is a deeply intimate process of enquiry, discovery and meaning-making that happens between the teacher, the student and her peers and personalisation and collaboration are necessary to make learning possible. Coupled with this, the inadequacy of internet access and smartphones make online solutions impractical alternatives.

In the last few months, various state governments, such as Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have initiated community-based learning programmes like *Vidyagama, Padhai Tuhar Dwar and Hamara Ghar-Hamara Vidyalaya* to ensure continuity of learning. In many other states across the country, several committed teachers are innovating with unique solutions like *mohalla* classes, roping in alumni networks and the older children of the community, etc. to provide face-to-face opportunities for student learning. However, for many others, online classes are the only workable option.

Whichever mode of learning is utilised by a school, the common questions that all schools are currently grappling with during this truncated year are:

- How should schools decide what to teach? What kind of activities should be used to engage students?
- How does one know if students are learning and if there are gaps in learning?

Answering the vital questions

There are no easy answers to these questions boggling the mind of every educator in the country, but one could explore a few pragmatic solutions. These solutions can be split broadly into four sections.

1. *Prioritisation of Learning Outcomes*

There are between 10 and 15 chapters in a language or mathematics textbook of grade I. The number of chapters increases in higher grades. It is practically impossible to teach all the chapters in this academic year. In order to decide which chapters should be selected, teachers could identify a few core or foundational, learning outcomes (LOs) prescribed for the grade in question. For instance, at the primary level, in language for grades I-V, one could prioritise the following LOs (Azim Premji University, 2020).

Language I-II	Language III-V
a. Develop the skill of listening comprehension and the connection between sounds and words b. Develop basic reading and writing skills c. Understand events occurring in the surroundings and express them orally	a. Develop the ability to read and write independently b. Develop the ability to comprehend textual materials presented in different forms like poems, stories, notice boards, posters, etc. c. Develop the ability to express one's thoughts with confidence in both oral and written forms d. Understand the basic structure of the language and apply it to writing

These LOs form the foundation of all advanced learning in language and therefore, prioritising these will help the teacher in addressing *foundational literacy*. A similar exercise needs to be done for all other subjects at the primary stage. For the upper primary stage, LOs that are core in building

a *conceptual understanding* of the subject must be prioritised.

Once the LOs are selected, the teachers could select one or two units from the textbook to address the LO. For instance, to develop basic reading skills among students of grades I and II, the teacher could choose a variety of short texts from different units of the textbook. The focus should be on familiarising students with the sound of the word, engaging with the characters of the story/poem, scaffolding reading aloud, explaining the text in their own words etc. A close association between the LOs and content will help in developing coherence in the classroom transaction.

The selected LOs should not be restricted only to the cognitive areas. Nurturing outcomes that develop dispositions of sensitivity, care, resilience and empathy are very critical in these times. Specific outcomes on maintaining health and hygiene, precautions in public places, personal hygiene etiquette should also be given adequate importance.

If a teacher is teaching multiple subjects, she could choose three or four broadly relatable themes like the family, the environment, etc, and then identify a few LOs from each of the subjects. She could then plan her lessons in a way that allows her to integrate content from different subjects. For example, a grade III teacher can integrate lessons from the Language and EVS textbooks. This will not only reduce the content load but will also help her to comprehensively address the LOs in an integrated way.

2. *Selection of appropriate pedagogical strategy*

Direct learner-teacher interactions have become limited, therefore, it is important to make these fewer encounters more meaningful. The focus should be on identifying students' learning gaps and addressing them through systematically developed lesson plans that clearly spell out the chapters to be transacted, the resources to be used, the activities to be conducted and the assignments to be given as follow-up. Care should be taken to emphasise on the areas that students are struggling with or the (pre-requisite) concepts from previous grades that students may not have mastered.

In most cases, the instructional strategy would be a combination of online, offline and self-learning opportunities. Each of these modes, whether online or face-to-face, should be used for specific purposes and could focus on explaining a new concept with adequate examples. For instance, in an EVS class the teacher can use student interaction to teach how plants make food through the process of photosynthesis, or listening to students' doubts about their assignments and clarifying them, or actively engaging with a particular concept that is foundational to a particular task the students are executing. In either mode, these classes should be further coupled with self-learning tasks given to students, for example, reading the chapter or selected pages of the chapter that describe the concept or attempting a worksheet on the concept. Instructions on how to solve the worksheet/perform the tasks should be spelt out clearly. Subsequent encounters should discuss home assignments to ensure continuity in the learning process.

For higher grades, introduction to new topics could also happen through exploratory projects and surveys. For example, prior to teaching a chapter on democracy, the teacher could ask students of her class to collect the names of all the elected MPs from their constituency, their respective roles, unaddressed issues in their area, etc. Once students have collected these and collated them in a survey report, the teacher could use these to introduce the concept of sharing of power in a democracy.

> During student interaction, the teacher must encourage students to share personal stories, narratives of challenges faced during the pandemic and also discuss these as a group. Listening to students, giving them a voice to share what they think and how they feel is more important today than ever before.

Teachers could also collaborate to create a common repository of resource materials like songs, stories, short videos, puzzles/games, worksheets that they can use to actively engage with the students. Group assignments should be encouraged and designed in such a way that students can work with each other and leverage their personal experiences to complete them.

3. *Integrating assessments in the teaching-learning process*

Planning, designing and using assessments meaningfully can be quite tricky during this period. The purpose of all classroom assessments should be to improve student learning. They should provide insights to teachers about the learning levels of students and also about the effectiveness of her teaching methods. Any assessment that tends to merely *evaluate or judge* the student can cause stress and anxiety and should be strongly discouraged. In these times of massive interruptions in learning, the

last thing students need is an intimidating test!

More formative assessments are, therefore, desirable. These should be integrated with the instructional process. Short quizzes, games, interactive discussions with open-ended questions are some strategies that could be adopted by the teacher to get a quick sense of the effectiveness of her method. It is likely that children may not be able to provide accurate answers to the questions posed by the teacher due to the inadequate duration of the engagement. In such cases, it is important for the teacher to listen to students' responses carefully. This would give her an understanding of what students have not understood and plan her subsequent instructions more effectively.

Greater importance should be given to authentic assessments that allow the students to demonstrate their learning in meaningful ways. Projects, assignments, surveys can be used to enable this. Instead of pre-deciding projects, the teacher could co-evolve ideas for project-work along with the students. Integrated projects that cut across subjects could also be used. For instance, while working on the theme of *Family*, grade III students can work on a project that integrates LOs from Language, Mathematics and EVS.

Theme	**Language**	**EVS**	**Mathematics**
Family- grades III, IV, V These ideas can be used for any grade – III, IV or V. A set of activities can be designed that spans across all subjects. Students can take 3-4 weeks to work on this. All concepts associated with the theme can be taught along with the students' work on the project.	A writeup or description of one's family – names of members / What they do. For older students - essay or guided paragraph writing on *My Family*.	A picture showing family members, with their names. A family tree can also be drawn. Students could be asked to draw their homes and surroundings. They can be encouraged to name the plants, animals, water bodies, structures like bus stops, cowsheds, post office, etc. around their homes.	Children can be asked to note the age, weight and height of all members of their family and tabulate it. He/she could make a calendar of some key activities and their timings by respective family members e.g. When do all members wake up? When do they sleep? For slightly older children, this information can also be represented in bar graphs.

A rubric can be developed for assessing this project, the criteria of which could be co-evolved along with the students.

Besides integrated projects, teachers can also use worksheets with different types of questions. These worksheets can be filled offline as self-learning material. The teacher should discuss the students' responses on questions given in the worksheet either during face-to-face or online classes.

Students should also be encouraged to do self-assessment. Simple assessment checklists with smileys and emoticons can be used with younger children. More elaborate ones specifying learning outcomes and students' mastery over them can be used with older children to help them monitor their progress. Using the approach of *Assessment as Learning* would also enable the teacher to empower students to be in charge of their learning process.

My Self-Assessment Checklist			
I like to recite rhymes			
I like to draw and colour			
I like to do counting with pebbles and leaves			
I know how a circle looks like			

In the case of online classes, maintaining e-portfolios should be encouraged. The teacher and student can systematically collate their work in the e-portfolios to demonstrate their learning during this period. Such a document will also work as evidence for the teacher to analyse the students' progress, their strengths and possible areas of improvements.

Portfolio to include

- ✓ Worksheets by students
- ✓ Projects
- ✓ Anecdotal records made by teacher
- ✓ Any self-assessment checklists/students' reflections

In doing all of the above, one must be exceedingly careful of not creating any undue stress of examinations on the children. Consequently, instead of allocating marks or grades, students should periodically be given qualitative comments on their performance. End-of-the-year promotions should be based on these qualitative records. A comprehensive assessment of the students' progress in content-specific areas, skills and dispositions should be reported and shared with the parents and caregivers.

4. *Involving parents and caregivers*

As children are spending a lot of time at home, involving the parents and caregivers in the child's learning through constructive ways would be useful. One possible way could be to share the grade-appropriate LO list with the parents and also with the students. Several states have designed attractive posters on LOs for parents and students (DSERT, Karnataka, 2018). This would be the right time to actively disseminate the contents. Projects and other assignments given to the students can consciously involve the parents. However, it should be brought to the parents' attention that the assignments are for the students to complete; parents should only help. Any effort by the parent to complete the assignment on behalf of the student should be discouraged.

A final word

This has been a trying year for all those involved in education although until schools reopen with the required safety protocols in place, teaching-learning processes will continue with whatever possibilities are available. Given the intimate nature of the teaching-learning process, particularly in the formative years, it is important that there are community classes at least once or twice a week. In all such interactions, the focus should be on addressing the LOs, rather than covering the syllabus or completing the lessons from the textbooks. Pedagogy and assessment approaches should be based on sound educational principles rather than poorly-conceived learning solutions. One has to evaluate the efficacy of the approaches and systematically weed out all such processes that make education a meaningless set of routines and procedures.

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Future-Ready Students

Ameeta Wattal

The pandemic has been a turning point in the way we lived our lives - impacting livelihoods, health, relationships and most of all, education. As a result, children have grown up very fast and have lost social interaction, creative play and basic experiences of nature in everyday-life activities. These have been replaced by screen time, leading to their development being compromised.

As the realisation that schools would not open in the near future became a reality, the window of learning in the first quarter of the year was used in the online mode. This practice depended on the capabilities of each teacher as no accreditation model was in place.

A holistic approach

Various collaborative approaches to the construction of knowledge and building clusters of practices were experimented with. Students constructed their own knowledge through affirmation, discussion, sharing of thoughts, multiple analysis of resources and teacher feedback.

A platform was created where students shared experiences, discussed theories, challenges and learned from each other. The teacher was no longer responsible for delivering knowledge or even providing the resources for learning but maintained a critical role as a guide, facilitator and assessor of learning. Online classrooms became more active in this collaborative environment. Students discussed, graded, researched and created projects. Teaching was objective, not subjective. Online classrooms not competitive because each child chose his/her own content and method of study.

Synchronous and asynchronous learning

Learning commenced at two levels: *synchronous* and *asynchronous*. In the *asynchronous* model, students created their own projects based on reading and sharing with the teachers This took the form of online quizzes and online stimulation of data.

In the *synchronous* mode, discussion and clarifying questions took place through video-conferencing and shared online whiteboards. A variety of experts were invited to share their experiences and speak through podcasts and web chats on various subjects, such as sustainability, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), cyber safety, immunity, health, mindfulness, art, and environment etc.

This methodology helped in creating an interdisciplinary approach. Learning became innovative, experiential and self-orientated through research, 100-page projects, process books, documenting the background of projects, portfolios, self-made films and videos etc. Through this, children found their own knowledge.

Modalities of online delivery

Commitment to community

At Springdales School, learning is transacted at different levels because we have a heterogeneous community in the classroom. For over 40 years, the school has had a culture of bringing in children from the economically weaker sections. There are approximately 800 students from the lower-income group who are integrated into the school across classes and have always been given the same facilities which are provided to students from privileged backgrounds.

Our social workers and counsellors conducted telephonic surveys of children to ensure that children were equipped with phones or tablets for their online classes. A collection drive was conducted in which staff and alumni contributed by donating phones and tablets which were distributed to the children along with payment for their broadband connections with an assurance that their parents were not using the devices.

Attendance

Attendance in classes was checked daily. Absenteeism was taken up immediately, reported and phone calls were made to homes by counsellors, social workers, supervisors and even the Principal.

New tools as learning aids

Breakout rooms were created to split the classes into smaller groups for collaboration and discussion in the afternoons to scaffold the learning of children from economically weaker sections in small groups. They were helped to make projects, films, videos and

research modules. The breakout rooms had peers as mentors, along with teachers to assist the children. Further to these sessions, telephonic helplines were created every evening for one-to-one interactions for guidance and doubt-clearing.

Assessment

Across subjects, no marks were allotted, only grades were given. Growth ladder rubrics to measure step-wise learning progression became the tool for assessment where students created meaningful new ideas with imagination and originality, understood digital literacy by using multiple technologies to communicate, create and access information. The students were able to solve problems and work collaboratively with the peer group, apply meaningful knowledge and reflect on their own learning strategy. This helped them to move to the next level at their own pace and co-construct their personal goals.

Assessments were conducted through open-book tests, observations by peers, teachers and parents, portfolios, art, film appreciation and storytelling sessions. Research projects were also used as tools of assessment. The possibilities of learning became immense, which, in a school of stone and mortar would not have taken place at such a deep level.

Reaching the last child

Children with disabilities have been greatly impacted by the pandemic. Springdales School has over 400 students with disabilities who have a variety of conditions and learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and Asperger's syndrome etc. School-family partnerships helped in giving assistance to them. Children with disabilities were supported with special classes, organised helplines and integration into mainstream online classes. Both teachers and parents worked hard in spite of being equally technologically challenged.

Because of the pandemic, specialist educators – occupational, speech and behavioural – were not able to meet the children personally and parents and teachers had to take on these demanding multiple roles. To bridge the gap, the teachers of the school helped parents to connect with the therapists through helplines in order to assist their children.

For children with screen intolerance, parents endeavoured to sit alongside to help them connect with online classes. This proved to be a great challenge because very few of these children were screen-ready.

Hurdles and solutions

The stresses of the pandemic resulted in many children undergoing severe mental health concerns, loneliness, depression, anxiety. This was particularly true of children with cerebral palsy. Those with language disability were negatively affected due to difficulties in understanding the situation. In certain circumstances, children with disabilities were being abused and neglected. Counselling sessions were conducted by specialised psychologists and school counsellors to support these children.

The realisation that students with disabilities had fixed routines and needed regular occupational therapeutic inputs as part of their sensory integration programme led us to introduce assistive technologies which increased access to study material. Children with hearing impairments were helped through sign teaching and speech software.

Counsellors conducted sensitisation workshops with parents so that they could involve their children with domestic chores as this would help in building life skills. Children with disabilities started washing up, laying the table, watering plants, folding clothes etc. all of which brought a sense of responsibility and participation. Individualised home programmes were created for parents. Worksheets and behaviour modification plans were sent home, helplines were put in place as a support system for parents who were going through emotional turmoil.

Creating counselling sessions for children and parents, tracking children in their regular teaching classes and following up with skill-building sessions after classes and helping in remedial work continued to be constants.

Humanising technology

As a school, we made sure that the time spent online was not passive but active and productive. We reviewed our strategies in humanising the online content. Personalised learning became integral to classroom transaction.

The greatest challenge that we faced was in crunching the content to process the syllabus into smaller components. This was attempted through a concept-based understanding of topics. Children were taught through competency-based learning rather than through the text, which gave them a deeper understanding of what they learned.

We noticed that young children in the foundational years were not able to devote screen time to their lessons, so we painted small aluminium boxes and placed multiple worksheets, indigenous toys,

drawing material, Play-Doh and other resources which would engage a child for a month. These boxes were sent to their homes. This helped nursery and kindergarten students to continue to learn offline. It also created a sense of a student's voice, agency and ownership with the material. Teachers went online with parents for twenty minutes daily and explained the use of the *magic box* for their wards. This whole involvement helped in breaking away from screen time and creating a link between the parent and the child through experiential practices.

We realised the difference between *doing digital* and *being digital*. *Doing digital* is enabling students to learn online from home while *being digital* is having a system that unlocks the benefits of technology. We moved from *thinking* technology-enabled teaching to *understanding* the extent of its actual potential. So, both culturally and digitally, we were able to change to a student-centric learning channel, based on a child's own pace, aptitudes, experiences, background knowledge, competencies and strengths. New ways of classroom delivery were imagined along with an analysis of student progress. Learners worked like one community, enjoying interaction along with benefiting from experiences that were customised for them. Inequity in teaching was addressed through digital learning technologies.

As a school, we have tried to embed purpose and humanity into our teaching and learning processes because learning must move beyond *batch-processed testing and ranking*. We believe that we cannot ignore this opportunity for change that will shape our education systems for the next 50 years. We learned that students master higher-order thinking skills because, today, *what matters is no longer what students know, but how they apply* that knowledge.

Innovations

We attempted to shift to Education 4.0 in which 21st-century skills became the focus of learning and introduced text chats that ran simultaneously with open discussions, thus maintaining the interest of the class. Attractive and precise PowerPoint presentations/slides, videos that guided students on activities were created. Teachers ensured that the content was qualitative rather than quantitative which helped to curate the signal from the noise. Screen time was used exclusively for one-to-one interactions in order to prevent aggressive gaming, browsing the internet and watching videos. Additionally, the notion of toning down assumptions of student integrity by re-examining assignments that allowed room for cheating and creating strong relationships between the teacher and the student was revised by rethinking contact hours. The questions that children were assessed on, essentially dealt with application and reflection rather than rote learning.

Throughout the pandemic, we have developed a strong organisational structure by ensuring students and teachers have voice and agency. We have strengthened relationships with parents and community, created opportunities for professional development, transformative learning and cultivating an ethos for inclusion and diversity. Our pedagogical practices were influenced by collaborative strategies in supporting sustainability and wellbeing. Our view was holistic with a commitment to enquiry-based strategies and student-centred differentiated learning.

The school and the community demonstrated practices which developed emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of students and teachers. We organised virtual health promotion programmes, assemblies, observations, memorials, celebration of all festivals through dance, music, art, theatre, sports and explored the link between human health and nature, happiness and wellbeing, creating effective communication in the classrooms. Slam poetry, stand-up comic shows, declamations, debates, environment days, personality and speech development sessions were also undertaken.

Every child matters

As the pandemic continued, we became a different school, unstoppably and irreversibly. Teaching and learning have been completely transformed. The online phenomenon has given students an experience of personalised learning.

In order to prevent any divides in our community between the privileged and those from less privileged backgrounds, we created a model of equity and opportunity by constantly revising our definition of quality.

Technology maximises the potential of each student if the school personalises it and brings in real-time feedback. This helps to identify students who are at risk and need extra attention. Our model of assessment is student-centric which integrates social and emotional wellbeing and helps educators to grasp student interest and willingness to learn. Through courage and commitment by rethinking the future, we have transformed our school into a larger ecosystem which is both humane and edifying.

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Of those impacted by the pandemic, children, especially girls, from the disadvantaged communities are affected the most. It is unfortunate that children are compelled to stay away from their learning spaces. For a child coming from a disadvantaged household, the school is a safe space which not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and essential life-skills but also ensures her psycho-emotional wellbeing by engaging her with her peer-groups through various scholastic and co-scholastic activities. The absence of these spaces at such a crucial developmental phase of their lives is a threat both to their learning and to their holistic growth.

Shubham Garg & VIshnu Gopal, Reimagining Education During the Pandemic, p 93.

Questioning the New Normal | Online Learning

B S Rishikesh

A phrase that has got added into our collective lexicon since the COVID-19 pandemic hit is, *the new normal* and it is being used to refer to a host of things. We have begun to hear it increasingly in the education domain, particularly in the context of schools. This article attempts to explore whether the educational endeavour in the current times can be considered as 'normal' and therefore, eligible for the tag of 'the new normal'.

The new normal

Let us, very briefly, explore this *new normal* in the school education space. Simply put, it is a process by which students consume regular syllabus-based content, which is either broadcast live by their teachers (the *synchronous* mode) or recorded and curated content is sent by the school (the a*synchronous* mode), through their digital device. What takes place through either of these methods is exposure to *content*, but not worthwhile discussions or other constructive engagements around the topic.

Yes, in the synchronous mode there is an attempt by some teachers to engage the students in a discussion, which unfortunately remains at a superficial level. Given my personal experience of the last few months, I strongly believe the reason that teachers are unable to go in-depth in their discussions is more to do with the severe limitation of this mode of engagement than anything else and anyone who has taught in the last few months of the *new normal* will agree that limitations of the technology-based approach to learning are severe. Simulating a normal, face-to-face class is not feasible, particularly with regular class sizes. Hence, to find out whether this is the *new normal*, the following questions need to be asked:

- What are the learning outcomes from such an exercise? How much do students gain from the experience?
- Is the access equitable? Can all those desirous of getting a learning experience, access it?
- Is the *new normal* a worthy learning experience? Does it meet educational objectives? Can it truly be classified as a normal educational endeavour?

Let us, briefly, explore the questioning of the *new normal* based on the experience over the last few months as well as from research on the use of technology in school education.

Technology and learning outcomes

The *new normal* is completely dependent on technology-based platforms to deliver education and schools have begun to tout this as futuristic. Anecdotal evidence has shown that school leaders have gone to the extent of saying, 'Thanks to the pandemic, we are adopting what otherwise would have happened a decade later!'

Nothing can be farther from the truth. No society, however rich and developed, had moved their school education into a completely technology-based one before the pandemic, which is a clear indication of what mature education systems think about the use of technology for education.

This is also backed by serious research. Studies have shown that computer usage by students does not impact their learning positively, indeed, there is evidence of their scores dropping. Without getting into the issue in depth, the learning from this analysis is that technology-based learning approaches are not solutions worth the money and effort they require in order to be supported.

Another insight is that technology is not by itself a panacea – technology can only be used as an aid and even for that to be effective, a number of other factors have to be in place. Currently, there is clear evidence that purely technology-based platforms do not yield desirable learning outcomes.

Access to technology

The *new normal* is based not only on gadgets and facilities such as stable electricity and internet, but also on many other conditions to be met by the students. It requires, for example, personal space for students if they are to get the most out of this mode and for younger students, for a variety of reasons, parental involvement is also necessary These may look simple, but are affordable only to a very few students in any society, particularly in societies such as ours. Therefore, is this education *equitable*, as any

educational endeavour at the school level should be? To decide this, it is crucial to look at the available data.

The data from a National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) survey shows that in India technology penetration is so low that thinking of driving school education through online mode would be the most unequal manner by which it can be done. Only around 25 percent of Indian households have internet connections and of these, only about eight percent of students in the age group of 5 to 24 years have access to personal digital devices and internet connections. Secondly, although almost all villages are electrified, less than half of the households in the country have power supply for more than 12 hours in a day. Given this unequal situation, a technology-based *new normal* cannot be normal, unless the concept of equitable access to school education is conveniently glossed over.

Using technology to meet educational goals

What is happening in the *new normal* is an enactment of a regular classroom, but with much of the educational aspects missing. One may argue that many classrooms in our country are anyway in this mode during regular times as well and I agree with that contention, but is this *new normal* what education ideally ought to be? This is the most significant aspect and has to be truly explored for anyone to take a stand on the *new normal* being classified as a normal educational endeavour.

The Draft National Education Policy (DNEP), from which the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has emerged, states that education must result in the 'full development of the human personality' and envisions an education system that 'contributes directly to transforming our nation sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society'. It also refers to the report submitted to UNESCO in 1996 by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (chaired by Jacques Delors), in which it has been argued that education throughout life is based on the four pillars of:

- *Learning to know*, which involves acquiring a body of knowledge and learning how to learn.
- *Learning to do*, which involves acquiring an array of skills that enables one to deal with the various challenges of working life.
- *Learning to live together*, which requires developing a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and peace.
- *Learning to be*, which is about developing one's personality in order to act with autonomy, judgement and personal responsibility.

All this, while ensuring that education does not disregard any aspect of the potential of a person: memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical capacities and communication skills.

Even the best implementation of the *new normal* will be unable to provide the kind of education that can support the four pillars of learning as espoused by the Delors' Committee, widely accepted as the cornerstone of 21st century learning. Good education at the school level is expected to deliver on the aims stated above, which addresses the intellectual, moral and aesthetic development of a human being.

With an articulation of a broad view of education encompassing holistic development of students, with special emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual in all its richness and complexity, the DNEP goes on to add that students must develop not only cognitive skills, but also social and emotional skills, including cultural awareness and empathy, perseverance and grit, teamwork and leadership, among others. In order to meet these aims, the bottom line is that the education of human beings ought to be a social process, which involves other human beings as well, in an environment where all the senses are activated and optimised.

Simplistic solution

During the pandemic, most schools and the public-school system in our country have adopted the oversimplified solution of moving the regular school schedule into an online mode, using internet-based platforms to provide education. This is insufficient to meet the aims of any good school education as it is a mode which, at best, may present the content in an interesting manner, but the tools for engagement that exist on any platform are insufficient to engage students actively in order to accomplish the stated aims of education. When this does happen, it is not education. And when it is not education, it cannot be considered normal – rather, it is an abnormal situation and will remain so till normalcy returns. The question, therefore, is, what should be done about students' learning?

Long-term effects

Recent research from scholars at Brown, Virginia and Harvard[i] indicates that students in the United States have fallen behind their expected learning

levels due to pandemic-related disruptions. Importantly, these studies also show that learning levels are declining in spite of education shifting online. The paper by Brown and Virginia University scholars[ii] suggest that the drop in learning could be as high as a third of the expected scores in reading and almost half of the scores expected in maths. Further, and more crucially, a McKinsey study[iii] states that the deficit due to the learning loss could last a lifetime. It is evident, as well as proven, that in the USA the negative impact is most significant for the disadvantaged and marginalised communities, such as Black and Hispanic students. There is no reason for us to believe that the negative impact on the disadvantaged students in India is going to be any different.

These are serious losses by any means and in a country such as ours where poor learning levels have been a perennial problem, we can only imagine what it has meant for nearly 300 million of our school-going students, many of who have also lost out on the one decent meal they used to get at school as part of the midday meal (MDM) programme.

Hence, it is clear that structured learning has to take place and that allowing children to learn as they live, or merely from their lived experience, is not sufficient by any means. The huge gaps and learning deficiencies of children who are not being provided with a structured learning environment in the current times could cost them livelihood opportunities as adults. It is crucial that adequate learning opportunities are ensured and in this context, it is critical that non-technology-based solutions are evolved so that disadvantaged students without access to technological resources are also provided learning opportunities.

If on the one hand, providing education to disadvantaged students is crucial, on the other, it should also be ensured that those students who are on online platforms are provided with a balanced education. Decisions will have to be made keeping in mind the best interest of the child, including not only her learning needs, but also her health as well as socio-emotional wellbeing. Even if the technology-based approach is used, it is imperative to consider the maximum duration of daily screen time, the frequency at which students can use a technological device, suitability of various platforms for interactive sessions, the need for parental supervision, the different parameters for different age groups, what can be in synchronous and what in asynchronous mode, whether it should be active or passive learning modes and so on.

Practical solutions

Best practices from around the world suggest that the approach has to be a blended one, using different modes till such time that regular school can begin. Blended learning strategies include a mix of synchronous (or live) and asynchronous (or recorded) technology-based learning, coupled with face-to-face peer discussions in small groups within the communities students live in. These strategies are essential because beyond the technology question, is the question of educational processes. It is important to ensure that education happens as close as possible to the *desired level*. The regular syllabus, or a merely shortened version of it, is not the answer at these times. Students' needs are different, and schools need to respond to those in an educationally meaningful manner rather than simplistically as is the case in many schools at present.

Given that every child does not have access to digital resources, there will have to be multiple options provided so that, in the name of education, students are not deprived, and further wedges are not created within our already fragile and unequal society. There are many guidelines that have evolved. Our country's nodal academic body, NCERT, has evolved a set of guidelines called PRAGYATA, detailing eight specific steps, which requires enormous effort, to enable our students to continue learning.

These guidelines clearly state that in these times, the focus ought to be on building skills rather than overloading students with content. For instance, the skill of *learning to learn* gains tremendous importance in these times as self-learning is a crucial component for students to continue learning. It is in this context that assessments too will have to be re-imagined.

Vidyagama

The Karnataka Education Department came up with a scientifically developed blended learning programme to ensure that students who attend public schools have access to a formal learning environment even during the pandemic. This is an excellent practice that can be replicated across the country with further refinement based on learnings from the experiment.

The programme was developed by *Samagra Shikshana Karnataka* (SSK) and the Department

of State Education Research & Training (DSERT), Karnataka and involved multiple channels of access to learning, including *YouTube* channels that could be accessed using smartphones, and television and radio programmes for those without internet access, as well as, face-to-face community schools called, *Vatara Shaale* as an add-on.

- *Makkalavani YouTube* Channel was a curation of crowd-sourced content (lessons-to-activities) from teachers for students at the Elementary level. This went on for 50 days and the views for the videos ranged from 7000 to 1,36,000. Selected programmes from *Makkalavani* were also broadcast through *DD Chandana* and All India Radio for those who may not have access to the Internet.
- *Samveda YouTube* channel was exclusively for the teaching of subjects at the high school level as part of a bridge course exercise.
- *Vatara Shaale* in which teachers engaged students in public spaces in their respective villages, offering themselves as adult facilitators who students could interact with and learn from. There were guidelines and SOPs created as to how the engagement should happen and what safety precautions should be adopted. Twenty to twenty-five students from an area were grouped together and engaged by a teacher. A key part of the programme was bridging learning gaps and teachers were expected to conduct four formative assessments during this period to monitor the progress of students.

Unfortunately, this programme was discontinued as there were a few COVID-positive cases reported from some villages. This reiterates a learning that we have had over the last few months, which is that we cannot have a uniform solution to the situation we are facing. Extreme measures such as complete lockdowns work neither in favour of the economy nor education.

Looking ahead

The way forward is to have a balanced approach. Therefore, with regard to schools, it is best left to the community to take decisions on how to ensure students' learning. School Management Committees (SMCs) are best placed to take the decision for the community and decisions such as whether to open and operate a school and at what intervals for each grade can be made by SMCs that have both, parents and the teaching staff, as its members. It is also easy to take a decision to close the school in case of identification of any COVID-19 positive case. The other guidelines, such as the kind of content to be transacted and the pedagogic approach best suited could be evolved at the state level and shared.

This is an abnormal situation that we are all now facing, and we will have to make the best of it. However, making the best out of the tough situation is definitely not the *new normal*. The normalcy we await regarding school education is to have students and teachers engage with each other in lively classrooms and out-of-classroom activities and discussions, all of which are indeed best-suited to attain the aims of education.

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The time has come to decide what we must do. Should we move towards more online, cerebral, iniquitous education processes? Or move in the opposite direction, towards an education system that has more closeness and contact? If we choose the latter path, we have to invest in ways to bring together children even in the smallest villages (with all the precautions of masks, hand wash and physical distance) who can be with each other and a teacher, the adult who can facilitate conversations and learning and even work with books, pencil and paper.

Hridaykant Dewan, Education: Which Way do we Want it to Turn? p 08.

School Health Programme | A New Model

Bhargav Sri Prakash

A scientific school health programme

Education will always be a powerful force in shaping future generations. The current COVID-19 pandemic represents a teachable moment that can reformulate societies.

While India is grappling with colossal challenges as COVID-19 has re-calibrated our lifestyles, we must prepare to attempt to restore normalcy. Since children cannot be expected to adhere to social distancing guidelines, they are especially vulnerable to be infected transmitters and asymptomatic carriers. Studies have shown that children contracted and spread the virus when schools were reopened in the United States and South Korea. Additionally, researchers have confirmed that it is possible to get COVID-19 a second time after a few months when the immune system has lost the ability to resist the virus.

A critical juncture

It is therefore crucial that, under our current circumstances as well as in a post-COVID-19 India, children must be protected. One approach is to emphasise educating the child and her family through school health programmes about hygiene and lifestyle changes that can prevent infection and simultaneously, boost health. This unprecedented crisis can become an inflection point in history as the trigger of a quantum leap in health through our education system. School-based health education programmes can become a lever of force multiplication by engaging parents and caregivers. An evidence-based scalable model, which can even help bridge health inequity, could be our response.

> Schools can play a major role in inculcating healthful habits by teaching children and engaging parents through a scientific co-curriculum. Immediate attention on the cleanliness of the classroom and school environment can reinforce health habits that could be extendable to homes. Habit formation in terms of improved personal hygiene, such as cutting nails, washing hands and mindfulness around physical contact will prevent transmission of the virus.

Through holistic educational approaches, teachers could encourage children to embrace nutrient-rich diets, comprising of seasonal grain, fruits and vegetables. Simultaneously, children must be taught to refrain from consuming processed food and immune-suppressing sugar-loaded beverages. Breathing exercises and physical activities will add another dimension towards inducing individual and herd immunity.

An acronym for action

The following is a five-step model of strategies and tactics – I N D I A – to respond to COVID-19 across the country.

I-inspire

The first step would be aimed at inspiring teachers at every grade level, who must willingly accept the additional responsibility for the health of children in their class. Given that teachers themselves are often overburdened and this is a challenge compounded by the vast shortage of teachers across the country, it is imperative that, in response to this unprecedented pandemic, teachers are recruited towards a mission of health.

Historically, in India, the role of the teacher in the life of students is treated as supremely important, not to forget the teacher's extended role in shaping society. This message must be translated into a responsibility for teachers to be restored to an exalted place in our society's response to this pandemic. It is, therefore, important to get teachers themselves to willingly add to their repertoire of tasks, the responsibility of the health of the children, as their self-motivated participation will make all the difference in the outcomes.

It is important to recognise that teachers should be given the freedom to offer their suggestions in the spirit of co-creation of an actionable solution to help them develop a sense of ownership of outcomes, as they gain a place to emerge as frontline defenders in our response to this pandemic.

Suggested approach

School teachers can record short audio/video messages to help recruit their colleagues or even have in-person teacher seminars or workshops to appeal to teachers to join the fight against COVID-19. A short video or ad can be developed as digital collateral and material.

N-nurture

The second step is to equip teachers with protocols and material that are evidence-based and scientifically-backed while taking local practices and customs into account.

If there is one thing to acknowledge the global COVID-19 response, it is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for the entire human population. Social distancing, hand-sanitising and hand-washing may not be practical in parts of our country and for large segments of our populations. We may, however, explore incremental locally and culturally relevant ways to improve hygiene, which teachers can play a role in choosing for their students. A wide spectrum of solutions is, therefore, necessary through a digital repository of best practices. Children are in need of additional attention and nurturing during this pandemic.

Suggested approach

a) Teachers can facilitate a daily 10-15-minute circle time to encourage an open discussion among the students in their class, for the children to safely express their thoughts, concerns, fears and questions about COVID-19. This process may elevate children to become ambassadors of good hygiene and habits, and they can emerge as change agents in their homes.

b) Teachers can then, spend extra time with the child who appears to have any issues that may surface during these discussions and if required, involve the family of the child too to resolve it.

D-document

The need for keeping records and gathering evidence is a crucial component of scientific inquiry and practice. Simple tools, such as logs or health records of the class will help trace the occurrence and transmission of the coronavirus. Teachers can be required to record attendance and reason for any absenteeism. Children can be asked to create a daily diary, which can then, be used to assess their health risk factors, to record and to document the following activities in their homes:

- Food intake and servings
- Personal symptoms of illness
- Immediate family members and caregiver health-related symptoms
- Neighbourhood incidents of COVID-19

Suggested approach

a) Record keeping in digital and non-digital, low-technology ways easily available to teachers must be encouraged.

b) Validated physical or digital surveys: logs can be developed by teachers to provide simple age-appropriate record-keeping instruments which are in the local language and understood by the child. It is a considered opinion to recommend the avoidance of a paper-based documentation process because of the practical challenges of dealing with a large volume of physical records. Also, having a digital format can lend itself to easier data analysis.

c) Technology tools and analytics can ensure scalable and data-driven best practices, to ensure efficient ways to minimise the burden on teachers.

I-instruct

As a way of lowering the risk of the virus, teachers can talk about personal and communal hygiene practices, such as not spitting in public, cutting nails, limiting physical contact with surfaces, personal space where possible, washing hands when possible, natural cleansers, use of disinfectants and hazards of such chemicals, learning how to cover one's nose and mouth while sneezing and raising levels of sanitation. Children can be made aware of India's traditional hygiene practices, such as washing hands, face and feet before entering the house, which are slowly being lost. These culturally relevant traditions can connect to ancient heritage and practices and re-discover established working practices from already existing cultural norms.

It is imperative that teachers and teaching materials emphasise the need for communal support to counteract the bias and social stigma that may develop if children and their families get infected with COVID-19. It is important to stress that those who contract this illness may have an elevated risk of infection and require a sympathetic and empathetic response.

Children and their families must be taught that COVID-19 is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. This is particularly important in India, as several precautionary prevention measures of social distancing and hygiene are likely to conjure the ugly remnants of untouchability. Care must be taken to ensure that this social evil does not raise its head; that COVID-19 does not unwittingly undo the progress in societal integration achieved over decades.

Suggested approach

a) Wherever possible, teaching tools and language-agnostic digital content depicting cartoon-style characters can be developed for use during instruction by the teacher.

b) A central repository of materials can be used by the teacher to help them communicate habits effectively based on location, to ensure searchable content for a region (village, neighbourhood, municipality, district, state, region, etc).

c) Songs can be created by teachers and children to allow them to sing along, as they become familiar with the lyrics to even sing with actions to reinforce the practices.

d) Teachers can help children create art, such as drawings, paintings, postcards or video messages for their classmates to express their solidarity and unified support for them through 'get well' messages. This exercise will also raise a generation of children who are empathetic to the dangers of those around them.

e) Role-playing and theatre workshops can have children experience the complexities, as well as the nuances of the pandemic through the narrative.

A-action

The ultimate success of this response will be measurable only through the metrics of translating these thoughts into actions. The current pandemic and the sheer scope and scale of the threat that it presents requires us to deliberate in far greater depth about a focus on real-world outcomes. This focus on action, along with a commitment to measure outcomes and readjust based on evidence, creates a model of continuous innovation and refinement. It also establishes a pathway to a science-based observational framework, through which various aspects can be researched by data scientists.

It is easy to see how this important component of the model may be at great risk of being neglected during this pandemic. However, the significance of it cannot be overstated, as it establishes a robust system of invoking the greatest societal pillar of our education system through evidence-based practice.

Suggested approach

a) Teachers can be recognised as change agents in their society for their actions.

b) Measurable metrics can be:

i) Number of completed records from the children.

ii) Ratio of the number of children impacted by the teacher and the total number of children in the class.

c) Another important factor is whether the teacher operated and served a population which had a high incidence and risk of COVID-19.

d) Every district and region could have a role model teacher and a system of recognition every month.

A final word

In conclusion, I N D I A is a blueprint for a model of thinking about our response through our education system and is intended to serve as an iterative framework of invoking the participation of one of our nation's greatest assets, our teachers. The I N D I A model strives to offer a spectrum of low cost and actionable tools through a holistic model of response.

In the longer term, this innovation technology-enabled framework can offer a new scientific blueprint of adaptable localised solutions for the world and, where possible, this innovation can be codified into a platform of scalable technologies that will leverage our rapidly expanding digital transformation as a nation.

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The effort has been to keep the number of participants similar to that in a face-to-face programme, unless the approach is to have webinars, wherein speakers put forth their thoughts on a focus topic, with questions or comments invited periodically from the audience. While webinars are useful in the sense that they enable reach to a large group of people, their purpose is to inform or orient, as opposed to help them engage with something in a more focused manner.

Nimrat Khandpur, Online Professional Development Programmes - Reflections, p 72.

Voices of Adolescent Girls

Deepika Singh and Neha Parti

This article is based on interviews with adolescent girls in the age-group of 12-16 years from seven states across India who are in residential and day schools and informal learning spaces, such as community clubs. The objective was to understand how COVID-19 has impacted their lives, particularly the aspects of schooling, education and learning.

COVID 19 and its impact

The pandemic has unfolded differently for girls when compared to boys and life has definitely changed, but not in the same way for all. For a few of them, this time has given them an opportunity for more family time and to learn new things from *YouTube*. For others, it has made life harder than it already was. A girl in Assam lived with her brother and an alcoholic father who subjected her to physical abuse while she did all the household chores. Floods added to their inaccessibility and since she was also suffering from asthma, she was concerned about how she would get her medicines. In contrast, a girl in Karnataka living in a joint family had access to a phone 24 hours and was supported by the family to pursue her studies.

Anxiety about the future

There are some common strands running through all these experiences which need to be shared. Seventeen (85%) school-going girls echoed what one girl said, *'Agar school nahi shuru huey to humarey sapney adhoorey reh jayenge* (If schools do not reopen, our dreams will remain unfulfilled). We heard this again when we interacted with a few girls (15%) who had discontinued schooling after grades V and VII but were finding meaning in the activities conducted in a youth club.

Dreams of the future meant different things to different girls. For a few, it was being able to pursue their aspirations of becoming a computer engineer, a neurologist or a police officer and for the others, it was being able to go back to playing sports; to return to school so they could continue their studies; to be able to move around freely and be able to meet their relatives, like their grandmothers.

Grade X girls were anxious both about the upcoming Board exams and about coping with the curriculum once schools restart. All of them had been promoted and had mentally switched to their next grades. However, eight (40%) of them did not have the new textbooks and were using old and borrowed ones.

Nearly all the girls were concerned about the deteriorating financial condition of their families, the uncertainty of food supply. A parent who did not have money to buy food and was dependent on neighbours for rations, borrowed money to buy a phone so that the children could access their lessons. Here are some comments:

Abhi to khaney ko hai, kuch dino baad shayad nahi ho (We have something to eat now, but it may not be so after a few days).

Abhi to padosi khana de rahey hain - daal, chaawal, tel... par kitney din (Neighbours are giving basic ration of lentils, rice and oil… but for how long?).

Understanding our learners

Understanding our learners implies getting an insight into their family backgrounds, learning styles and preferences, readiness to learn and past academic performances. A young girl in Odisha, speaking about the diversity of learners, said: *Sab bacchey ek jaise toh nahi seekhtey, kuch ko zyada samay lagta hai, unka padhai kaise hoga is samay? (All children do not learn in similar ways, some take longer. How will they learn during these times?)*

Relationship with technology

This pandemic has added new dimensions which are critical in designing relevant learning experiences. Access to technology and comfort with it have become important, as have digital learning behaviours. Prior exposure to technology, connecting with a peer network, the attitudes of the learner and her family are also significant considerations in designing learning experiences using technology.

For girls, access to technology is always a highly negotiable affair, whether with parents or siblings. Parental support varies. In the first case here, the girl is grateful to her father for getting a phone, *'Papa ne loan lekar phone laa kar diya, taaki main padhai*

kar saku.' (My father took a loan to buy a phone so I could continue my studies). On the other hand, another girl speaks of limited access to the phone, *'Agar main zyada time phone pe hoti hu toh papa gussa karte hai.' (If I spend too much time on the phone, my father gets angry)*.

The availability of a phone is the first challenge. For most girls in our study, there was just one shared device in the household. Prioritising access becomes a critical decision. Of the fourteen girls who said they had access to smartphones, four of them could use it for an hour or less, some only for two or three hours a day, and in an extreme case, a girl shared, *'Phone bhai ke paas rehta hai poora din'. (The phone is with my brother the whole day.)*

There were other concerns. In one case in Bihar when our facilitators began forming *WhatsApp* groups to engage girls in the learning process, a parent told them that their daughter could participate only in girls' groups. Parents influencing gender norms for the *WhatsApp* groups reflect unspoken concerns about controlling interactions with boys. Prevalent gender norms take a new form in a technology-driven process. Not only did the girls have to negotiate with their elder siblings and father to get time to use a phone, but household chores also had to be arranged around its availability. Then again, access to the phone does not ensure the confidence in using the device. One girl admitted that she did not press the buttons she did not know about.

These devices were primarily seen as sources of entertainment. They were used to listen to music, to read stories, and to watch art and craft videos, or to play games. During the lockdown, 50 percent of the girls had learnt something new using *YouTube*. It was interesting to see that self-learning was shown in these pursuits, but not in academic subjects, for which they depended on an adult.

Trust

A girl in Gujarat raised this issue, critical to the impending push towards online learning:

'Kispe vishwaas karna hai aur kispe vishwaas nahi karna hai, ye kaise pata chalega online?' (How will I figure out who to trust and who not to in an online space?) This highlights the absence of preparing people, especially young girls, for the digital space with a focus on their safety. Together with curriculum transaction, thought needs to go into creating safe and enabling environments to bring on board the girls and their parents.

Technology and learning

The girls miss the feedback of their learning as now it is harder for them to know if they are on the right track or not. This finding reinforces the *need for validation* that is inbuilt into our education system. The confidence for self-learning is not inculcated. As we move towards technology-enabled learning, the nature of assessments and learning has to include shifts in mindsets.

Educators have to understand what causes learner-anxiety and how technology contributes to it, especially in a situation where neither the learners nor the teachers were prepared for it. For example, a girl said that a document is sent by her teacher on *WhatsApp* and if she is unable to understand, the teacher sends a video explaining the concept. Thus, there is no immediate feedback to check the learning.

The crucial factors here are the abstract nature of concepts, lack of immediate application to see the concept in practice and the focus on more theory as a way to learn. Some girls spoke of the difficulties of learning science and math on their own or through *WhatsApp*-based interactions. This behaviour and expectations are in sharp contrast to those of learning something out of their own interest and demonstrating self-learning as was mentioned earlier.

Role of parents

Gadgets such as smartphones, feature phones and television sets are shared resources in the families of the girls in this study. Only one girl had her own phone. The phones were largely used by the father and the girls could get it for short periods only when he was at home. The TV, if one was there, was largely used for entertainment, not for educational programmes.

Although there is very little parental participation in the online classes, parents and other family members and even neighbours came across as the biggest allies in continuing learning as they encouraged and supported their children's learning. Despite this, all the girls felt the need to interact with teachers to clarify their doubts or to help understand mathematics problems, showing the iterative nature of learning.

For many parents, this was the first time that they had the opportunity to access a *WhatsApp* group and see what is being shared and discussed with their child. This is potentially controlling: parents

largely want the daughters to learn 'regular' school subjects. The patriarchal Indian male may not want his daughter to learn to question, be critical or learn about her rights, bodily integrity and other such themes. Resistance and backlash from parents are quite possible if organisations working with adolescents try to share such content and the State is aware of this.

Teachers' role

The role of a teacher in the lives of these young learners is pivotal. They are the adults who care about their future and are encouraging and supportive. All the twenty adolescent girls that we interacted with were enrolled in government schools or were members of informal learning spaces, such as village-based youth clubs. Teachers and peer educators are important influencers, whom they turned to with their doubts or if they need to talk to someone. In almost all the interviews, the girls mentioned how they missed the encouragement of their teachers, how easy it was to reach out to them in the classroom to understand a particular topic. However, only about 25 percent of girls said that teachers reached out to them during the lockdown period, phone calls and *WhatsApp* being the primary modes of communication.

Equipping teachers

At a time like this, when everyone is experimenting with remote learning, teachers need adequate training to understand their learners holistically before jumping into lesson plans. The training needs to cover multiple dimensions – the wellbeing of students, preparing the ground for students to learn online, preparing parents, digital safety and teachers themselves getting comfortable with the new mode of delivering learning experiences. Training must include having personalised conversations with students to understand their anxieties and the support they need to engage in virtual learning experiences. It means equipping teachers with differentiated strategies to reach out to students, for example, using the Integrated Voice Response System (IVRS), *WhatsApp* and even teleconferencing.

Teachers, too, could be anxious about redoing the syllabus and trying to reach out to the students. An adequate support system is needed for them as well, to be provided by the State.

Some important issues

Mental wellbeing has also become important now with the school-goers becoming anxious about the exams in the ensuing academic year. Many of them had re-joined tuition classes and the non-availability of textbooks was an issue. In Maharashtra for instance, content has been disseminated largely through the radio or TV. Most girls in our study were using mobile phones for music and entertainment with the radio having lost its relevance, hence the government should check if radio sessions are being listened to at all by the learners.

Television presents other problems. For one thing, not every home has a TV set, for another, girls, who are responsible for many household chores, may not be free to watch TV at fixed times when the lessons are being streamed. In the words of a girl from Odisha, *'Abhi toh 20 percent bachhey hi is se jud pa rahey hain, baki ka kya?' (As of now, only 20 percent children are able to join/connect. What about the others?)*

However, it is unrealistic to think that airing audio or video lessons and sharing of lessons on *WhatsApp* will ensure that learners have got an understanding of the concepts. They do not have an overall learning environment in which they are engaging with the virtual means, they may or may not have an adult in the immediate vicinity, or the time, to resolve their doubts or the private space to do so. For girls, it may be even more difficult as they are always on call for household chores, leaving their own needs unmet.

The State needs to come up with a comprehensive plan instead of responding only to immediate concerns. Some key aspects to be considered are:

- What would the duration and the learning priorities of the academic year be?
- With so much uncertainty about the pandemic, what are the plans for the next few years?
- Will exams be held as usual, or will that change or be cancelled?

As assessment does not necessarily mean exams, new ways can be thought of. It emerged from our interactions that many of our respondents did not know much about the pandemic. So, could the education programmes being streamed also cover topics outside of the syllabus? Such key decisions by the State and its communication to learners may put a lot of anxieties at ease. For the small percentage of young learners who are able to access the web and tech-tools, equipping them with navigating and safety skills are important.

Conclusion

Government schools in India are insufficiently served

in terms of human resources, infrastructure and learning resources. The teaching-learning process in government schools has been a neglected area. Currently, India does not have clear guidelines or policy for the State to respond to the educational needs during an emergency of this nature. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), while emphasising the need for digital learning (digital libraries), has not articulated a clear way forward to bridge the digital divide.

For the adolescent girls in our study, however, these issues are of great importance. They miss their schools, teachers and friends, the congenial chit-chat, playing, the pat on the shoulder; just the very possibility that they could reach out to the teacher if they wanted to - a very positive sign for those concerned about the education of girls. Almost all of them were learning something during the lockdown, even if they had no TV or smartphone at home. They were learning to cycle, make new hairstyles, improve handwriting, brush up on the previous grade's mathematics, grammar, drawing, to name a few. Their desire to learn is very evident and they want schools to reopen (with better toilet facilities), playgrounds and infrastructure. The experiences of previous epidemics, such as Ebola, show that girls may not return to school; more girls would be married off at a younger age. It is truly up to the state and civil society organisations to give wings to the aspirations of the adolescent girls and support them so that they can re-join the learning spaces, such as schools and youth clubs.

The role of parents, families and community members needs to be understood. Parental outlooks are also changing as livelihood and food insecurity hit hard in rural areas. How to make them allies so that they stay invested in the education of adolescent girls will be a critical consideration. The function of teachers as the other caring adults in the lives of young girls is also very important and calls for attention. The usual discussions among NGOs and government are about the part played by schools and how that is getting reshaped and changed. The role of families now needs to be discussed: how the family can provide a safe learning space, how they can be supported in doing so and the change in their outlook needs to be part of the narrative that is getting built as we all gear up to respond to the educational crisis amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is evident that learning is continuing, and learners are making choices and decisions about what they want to learn and how they learn, even with limited resources, all of which need to be recognised by the State and NGOs as learning. Also, all of us who are in the field of learning and education should be able to design multiple solutions to meet the needs of diverse sets of learners with diverse learning resources, including access to technology, all the time keeping the human element intact.

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Learning to Adapt

Akshatha S Belludi

This pandemic has shown that 'necessity is the basis of all adaptations' by creating a need for our teachers to build their skills in various areas of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), once alien to them, just so that they can reach their students. To be with their students as a supportive adult, listen to how they are feeling, provide emotional support and, if possible, try to teach something so that children do not get completely disconnected with education is the goal of most of our teachers.

WhatsApp groups, *MS teams*, *Google Meet*, and *Zoom* are some of the applications being used by our teachers to connect with their students. Creating *YouTube* videos and recordings are other strategies by which they are trying to reach their students along with writing blogs. Many of them are also developing animation videos to increase student participation. These platforms are also used effectively by our teachers to learn from each other.

This pandemic has helped our teachers explore various possibilities of technology and a knowledge base of using online platforms has been built. This would help them in offering blended learning experiences to their students, as envisioned in our National Educational policy 2020, once the situation is back to normal.

In this article, I will share the efforts of a few of our teachers in government schools and their learning curve in adapting to new technologies to stay connected with their students. Most of the success stories are of teachers who have built a good relationship with the parents of their students as well as with the communities because of their work. This is helping them in reaching their students and engaging with them even from a distance.

Teachers' stories

Case study 1

To support his students' learning during the lockdown, Somu Sir, one of the proactive teachers of our district, gained the support of the school alumni who lived in the same village. Of his eighteen students, only six had smartphones, the rest were supported by the alumni to complete their daily assignments sent by the teacher through a *WhatsApp* group. The old students, who are now in college, made sure that the children completed their assignments on time. Somu Sir also made the effort to connect with his students over video calls, again with the help of the alumni, to keep them motivated in their learning.

His students and their parents were very excited to see their favourite teacher speaking to them over video calls, as was Somu Sir who was able to see his students after a long gap of two months. Though initially a few of his students were a bit shy to open up, their parents interacted regularly with Sir and shared the daily happenings around the village. Somu Sir had also used this opportunity to build awareness in the communities on tackling the Coronavirus. One of his senior students, who has completed a diploma in Education started conducting English classes for these students, Somu Sir was delighted to share this with us.

Assignments over WhatsApp

After the school started for the teachers, as soon as Somu Sir entered the village, all his students came running to see him, hold his hands and speak to him, but sadly, Sir had to send them back home. They all returned with sorrowful faces, which Somu Sir found very touching. Many students demanded to be allowed to come to the school, but Sir was helpless as there were orders not to conduct classes in the school.

The children used to play near the temple in the village. One fine day in June, with the support of the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) members and a few parents, Somu Sir started his classes in the temple premises itself. He knew it was risky, but since it was a shared decision he decided to go ahead.

To teach his students, Sir is now using *Nali-Kali* cards and books supplied by the government as part of the *Odu Karnataka* programme which was launched to enable children to acquire basic reading fluency, ability to recognise numbers and do basic arithmetic operations with the help of appropriate teaching-learning materials.

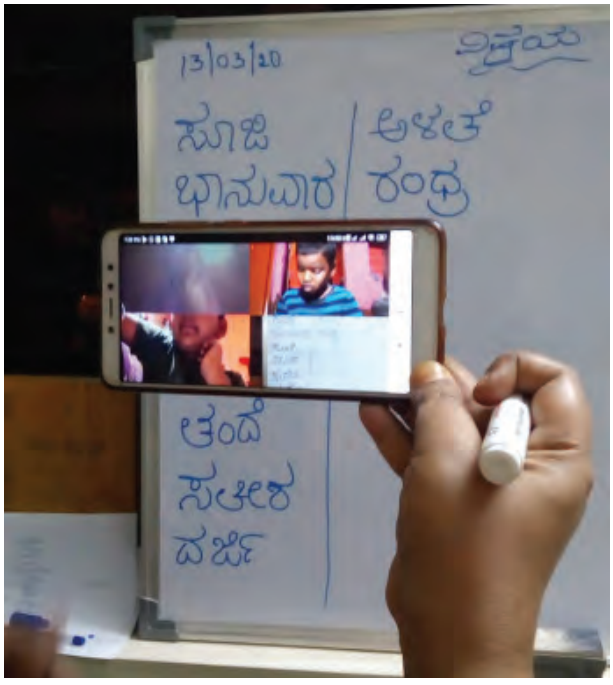
Case study 2

Srigowri Madam, one of the most inspiring teachers of our district, started connecting with the parents of her students over a *WhatsApp* group which she had started the previous year. Attending the online training programmes organised by the Education Department as well as those conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation and the online classes conducted by her daughter's school gave her the idea of starting her own online classes.

Srigowri Madam also spoke to the parents about her idea. It is interesting to note that she has always been able to involve parents in all her work and was able to persuade them about virtual classes. Quickly, she connected with the Foundation's resource persons in the field and sought their support, fixed a time and started classes after providing many practice sessions to the parents. Initially, many parents struggled but Srigowri Madam made video and audio recordings with detailed instruction on using Zoom which helped them understand the process of joining. A few educated parents also supported others to get familiar with using this application.

It was with a great sense of accomplishment that she saw all her students for the first time over the phone. Her students were also thrilled to see her. When they started calling her, 'Miss, Miss!' and telling her that they could see her, she felt like she was back in her classroom.

A week after the online classes started, the village Panchayat President called her up and expressed his gratitude for her initiative, which motivated her. She says that even if the parents are out of town on work, they make sure they return on time so as to give their phones to their children so that they can join the class. Now they have successfully shifted their online classes to the *Google Meet* application. The children themselves are operating it and attending the classes with ease.



Srigowri Madam's online class

Srigowri Madam records her session every day with a screen recorder application and shares it with the parents. She has made sure that parents sit with the students during the interactions. She teaches the grade II English medium students. She runs her classes in three batches between six and nine in the evening, with ten children in each batch. She has specially arranged a whiteboard for her online classes. She also prepares worksheets which are given to a photocopying shop from where parents collect them and ensure that their wards complete and share these on the *WhatsApp* group. Srigowri Madam also runs a *YouTube* channel where she posts all her work with the children so that parents get an idea of their children's progress.

Madam is very excited about her classes and is happy that she is able to reach her students and provide moral support. She shared an instance of a boy who never spoke in her class but is now able to speak confidently in the virtual classes. Madam says, 'Children look for new things every day. As teachers, it is our responsibility to keep exploring innovative ways to facilitate learning.'

Case study 3

Shamshiya Madam from Sirsi has yet another interesting strategy to engage with her students of grades V to VII. Her online engagements started with her Spoken English classes which she has been conducting over the phone for the parents of her students. A few of her students were motivated by this and wanted her to give them assignments on a daily basis so that they could also work on their English.

Participants from her *English Club* as well as alumni of her school are supporting the students who do not have access to android phones. Audio clippings, short videos etc were shared, even though there were network issues in the village. Various assignments were also given to these groups and feedback shared. To motivate her students, drawing, essay writing, debate, riddles and other competitions were conducted through *WhatsApp groups*.

Now that schools have reopened for teachers, Shamshiya Madam is printing worksheets (at her own cost) to help her students achieve various learning outcomes. The assignments are sent to her students through their parents. She tries her best to call up each of her students personally and explain the assignments and answer their queries. Shamshiya Madam acknowledges the role of her school community members and alumni in reaching the students and keeping them engaged.

Some hurdles

These are three accounts of our teachers going out of their way and coming up with many innovative ideas to engage their children during the pandemic. Though there were initial hiccups in reaching the students, our teachers were able to train themselves with the technological know-how and were able to engage their students successfully.

Despite these success stories, our teachers are struggling to reach out to many of their students, the majority of whom do not own smartphones. Even if they are able to procure one, many parents cannot afford internet packs. There are many who still do not have a basic phone. Education is the lowest priority in many of these households, where parents struggle to earn their next meal. Children are also working as labourers in farms and other places to supplement their family income. Looking at these problems, the apprehension of widening societal inequity grips the mind. School and education are the only solutions.

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Environmental Studies on Conference Calls

Anil Kumar Patel

The teachers of our school planned that each teacher would take up a subject of their choice and would teach it to 15 students of a class. Although I am a teacher of Physical Education, I chose to take up the responsibility to teach Environmental Studies for a month because of my interest in the subject. I was assigned 15 students from grade IV, though, after a week, I got the opportunity to interact with all 30 children of grade IV.

I spent the first two days wondering how it would be possible to study via a conference call. Questions such as these kept coming to mind:

- Would all the children have mobile phones in their homes?
- Will the network cause problems?
- Would the children be able to answer calls on time?
- What if the weather is bad?
- Would each side be able to hear the other clearly?
- Even if the network is fine, will children and their guardians be at home?
- Will parents and children be willing to study and learn over a conference call?
- Will they be able to understand the subject?
- Will children be interested? Will it be too unnatural to them?
- Will we be able to sustain this process?

I felt the answers to these questions could only be sought through action and so I started. The first day began with enquiries about everyone's health and wellbeing, how the children were spending their days at home, what they were doing for entertainment, what the situation in their homes was like. Although we continued to have these conversations on calls later as well, but to start with this built a cordial feeling between us – parents-children and teachers.

The first three days were spent reading, understanding and writing about *Relations*, a poem that is the first lesson of the grade IV textbook. When we were studying the poem, all the parents and the children were reciting it together on the call. I could even hear the voices of other children around them. This made the lesson more fun. The animated participation of the children and their parents during the discussions is a mark of the friendly relationship among teachers, parents and children. The children and I discussed the meaning of the poem and continued.

The PDF file of the Environmental Studies textbook had already been shared with the children. They used it to answer the questions in the exercises at the end. They noted down their answers in their notebooks and this was confirmed by their parents. Children took turns to narrate their grandparents' tales and stories over the conference call. They talked about *akti tihaar* which is a Chattisgarhi festival. Post the celebration of this festival, farmers begin to till their fields for the monsoon season. In this manner, parents and children recollected the memories of their relatives through the lesson.

For homework, children were asked to read the poem on *Teeth* from their textbook. They were told to try and arrive at the meaning of each line by placing the line in the context of their daily lives. Each child was asked to answer the questions related to the chapter by turns on the call and to write their answers and send them to me. Many children sent their responses. Most parents confirmed that their children had written the answers. Some children assured me that they would send their responses later and they did.

In the beginning, teaching all students of grade IV was not included in my lesson plans. Later, I discussed the first chapter with the ones who I had not contacted earlier and asked them to complete the exercises. I asked them to attempt to finish the exercises on their own, taking help from their parents and to contact me if they had any difficulty. So, now I was interacting with all the children in grade IV. Fifteen students had been attending my calls regularly since the beginning, which proves that they were taking an interest in their studies, though it was a challenge to explain the importance of the conference calls to the children and parents who could not be reached regularly.

Sometimes, connecting on calls would pose such a challenge that the entire day would be spent

trying to make contact with just five children. Sometimes, I could connect with only four children, and sometimes only with a single child. But I tried to maintain the continuity and moved forward. It was decided that one topic would be transacted daily with five children. When they could not be contacted on the appointed day and time, the work was moved to a different day and time. Hence, I was able to contact each one of the 30 children in the class within a week's time.

Although all the children live in the nine villages nearby, some of them had gone away to their maternal grandparents' homes in other villages during this time. With the weather worsening and the network being constantly busy, difficulty in making contact persisted. But, being teachers, we sustained our efforts to provide education to our students despite the pandemic and the complete lockdown. There was no reason to stop because we are all very fond of our students. For example, one day, when we were not able to contact five children from the village Dondhki, we had to seek the help of an acquaintance who lives in the same village. On average, we spent around five-six hours every day of the week working hard to make contact with every child. Besides this, we also had to prepare lesson plans.

It was an achievement for us just to be connected with the children during the lockdown. We were also receiving immense support from most of the parents. For instance, when we could not reach two children over the phone for a few days, two older children from grade X helped us out. But in another instance, for three weeks, we attempted to reach a particular child, but our efforts were in vain. We could not get any support from her parents. Still, we continued our efforts and towards the end, we could contact her on the conference call.

We read the poem on *Water* in lesson 3. Each line was understood in the context of values and attributes such as friendship, lies and truth, the importance of rules in sports, and the importance of places. The meaning of the entire chapter was understood by relating it to children's play activities.

The discussion on the chapter proceeded further with talks on an article in the newspaper and on rainwater harvesting. As I was reading the chapter aloud, children were also reading along with me. After reading, the chapter was narrated as a story. The story also incorporated the local problems and solutions related to water. The chapter had an image of a house with a rooftop where water would be collected during the rainy season and the water would flow down a pipe into a sump. Children were told to observe that image for a minute. Then, each child was asked to build a story around that image. Simultaneously, a few questions were asked, such as:

- Which methods are used to save water in your village?
- Which methods can be used in your house to save water?
- Which methods are employed in your school to save water?
- What can be done with the collected rainwater?
- How can we use water that has seeped into the ground?

I was able to contact most of the children regularly during the lockdown. However, many parents were very busy with their work, which caused many difficulties. To teach the students of grade IV, I was taking the help of Lokendra, a child in the same class studying in our school. As the lockdown lifted, Lokendra had to start going to work with his parents, who are agricultural labours, in order to help out with the economic situation at home. He would return from work late in the evenings and it was difficult for him to continue his studies. Also, there had been constant network problems at his end. But one evening, on a conference call between 7 and 8, he went to his neighbour's rooftop with his parents and studied for an hour in the light of a torch. I only got to know about this towards the end of our study session. It left me completely stunned.

Many such incidents have taken place. All the children have been participating in my class enthusiastically. It has been a joyful experience to tackle the challenges and keep the process of teaching-learning going.

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Using COVID-19 as a Tool for Learning

Anil S Angadiki

When we started hearing in the news channels about an infection that was traced back to a few persons in some developed metros in India and that too only those who had returned from other countries, it was not a serious matter for us living in a remote part of North-East Karnataka. But when the first lockdown was announced across the country due to which we had to close schools about a month earlier than our regular schedule, we started getting concerned. As the situation was unprecedented and our thoughts of the school's reopening started fading, our concerns about the children's home conditions and the challenges of the caregivers started increasing.

Making a beginning

The challenges

To understand the scenario, we started our discussions as usual: through one-to-one interactions with the parents. These interactions showed us the dark side of the pandemic affecting the lower middle class and the poor and marginalised communities. We started getting the updates of a few children's parents: some struggling to return to their home from cities, others who could not go to work on construction sites or run their autos, or open their roadside shops… even getting enough food was a challenge.

We were unable to reach some of them even by phone because they had lost their connections as they could not afford to recharge. Because of the complete ban on people's outdoor movement, our usual approach of visiting the homes of the children for interactions and addressing challenges became impossible.

New ways of engaging

Our hopes started rising as our organisation's efforts in supporting the district administration in humanitarian and health support began and we got permission from the nodal officers to go to the children's homes to interact with them.

The process helped us in different ways:

- It strengthened our bond with parents and children who appreciated our effort of reaching them amidst the pandemic.
- It made us understand our role in building awareness of the pandemic and the safety rules.
- It helped initiate our efforts in engaging the children in effective activities while developing their academic competencies.

Removing misconceptions

This was the initial phase of increase in COVID-19 cases and most people had misconceptions on the spread of the infection. To counter this, planned meetings in batches were held with the parents of four villages. How the virus spreads, the precautionary measures to be taken to avoid getting infected or becoming a carrier were effectively communicated with some displays and posters.

The next task of starting our interactions with the children to create awareness and begin academic engagements seemed difficult because the education department had by then initiated online learning and we had to comply.

Meeting with parents on COVID-19 awareness

Changing modalities

We began finding out about resources like the availability of mobile phones with children and parents that could support online engagements. Our school's digital status was not very different from the state average for villages: only about 50 percent of the parents owned smartphones. We began making *WhatsApp* groups of teachers and children of each class and clubbed neighbours together so that electronic resources could be shared.

Learning resources such as stories, poems, rhymes and a few worksheets were narrated on either *WhatsApp* or a phone call. Children were asked to send in their completed worksheets digitally. A few other modes, such as sharing online links for the upper-primary children, were tried out. In about two weeks, we had a list of concerns and challenges arising out of online classes though there were also advantages.

Misgivings

Our biggest concern was: are we bringing up elements like economic inequality in the minds of our children? This was something we had always tried to avoid in our school with its environment of providing the same resources for all to learn, to use, to play etc. How could we expect parents, whose top priority at this time of reduced earnings was to provide food and shelter to the children and who did not even own a TV, to be able to provide their children with a smartphone? Were we ignoring the ideals of social justice and humanistic values in the name of addressing a temporary gap of academic support through the online mode?

The reason for these thoughts were the instances we saw during the process. Parents (especially fathers) owned the only smartphone in the family and would allow their children to use it for schoolwork only in the late evenings or sometimes not at all. Many times, the phone data would be insufficient. All this led to some children demanding smartphones of their own. It was even worse for the girls. Were we sacrificing the concepts of a just, humane and equitable society in the name of teaching-learning practice, when in fact, teaching-learning practices have to be strong tools to establish these values? These were the questions we asked ourselves.

As a result of our reflection, a second round of discussions started. All of us agreed that, under these circumstances, the most effective way of interacting with our children would be face-to-face meetings. Finally, we came up with the idea of reaching smaller groups of children in their villages. The challenge was that our children from grades I to IX were spread over six villages five to ten kilometres apart!

Planning the delivery

The best idea that emerged was using COVID-19 as a theme for both awareness as well as academic learning. Hence, an integrated approach of using language (Kannada, English and Hindi), science, social science was planned. What could be better contextual material than the pandemic when they were being exposed to it through newspapers, TV channels, community interactions and discussions at home? Small groups of teachers worked on the theme. Since the teachers were familiar with the learning levels of the children in the group, their task was made easier.

Some of the themes we chose were: introduction of microorganisms which we are living with, examples of some common viral fevers (like flu) which affect our health, introduction to a new strain of virus named *Corona* and why such precautionary steps were being taken throughout the world, introduction of terms, such as *vaccine*. We used videos to illustrate some of these. We went on to discuss how the virus spreads and how we can remain safe by observing social distancing and hygiene practices such as wearing masks and washing hands. We also introduced new terms like *quarantine, isolation, testing*.

This led to discussions on the impact of the lockdown on the children's lives through the children's own experiences and case studies from other parts of the country, which they gathered from the news. We were able to discuss data-handling and analysing.

In this manner, we brought in history and geography by having dialogues on past pandemics with the help of maps. Stories, rhymes, songs, charts, posters, case studies, newspaper cuttings, maps, videos prepared by us and selected from *YouTube*, etc. were some of the resources we used. All these efforts by the team made the children observe, listen to and discuss the topic and develop an awareness of the pandemic. Both the timetable and our visits to each group became more effective with time and parents, too, became more confident about our approach.

The engagement showed the team the many possibilities that COVID gave us for acquiring the

skills needed for different subjects. Designing projects became easier. For example, we could practise hand hygiene at the venue of the engagement and hold dialogues if the norms were broken. Designing posters and writing a booklet gave the older children a sense of responsibility and participation.

Teachers engaging with small groups of children

The challenges

Of course, the team faced some challenges. Some children's attendance to these engagements was irregular because their parents took them to the field to work and, as these were not school days, rules did not apply.

There were some difficulties regarding the venues too, for instance, some were too public, or there was water-logging etc. Travel to the villages with the risk of COVID-19 spread and the non-availability of transport was difficult.

Learnings from the experience

- Contextual materials using a specific theme developed for this duration are effective in developing children's basic competencies in language, mathematics, environmental studies etc.
- Usage of digital material along with face-to-face engagements seemed to be an effective combination, especially for children above upper-primary class.
- Some modes like *Door Sabha* teleconferences are useful as they can be used on ordinary phones. These make children less diffident about practising spoken English as they are not visible.
- Face-to-face engagements are better as direct interaction between the learner, her peers and the facilitator provide the possibility of individual attention and encourage direct participation which uses all the five senses and aids better learning.

The team's efforts have resulted in the creation and use of digital material in regular schooling. It has also made teachers more confident in coming out of the classroom and take their teaching outside. So, the pandemic has given us an opportunity to learn new things that can also be used in our normal schedule.

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Fewer Means, Bigger Hearts

Ankita Thakur is a class XII student in a private English-medium school in the Pussore Tehsil of Raigarh district in Chhattisgarh. She is a second-generation school-goer. Her mother, whose parents were daily wage labourers, went on to complete her B Ed in Special Education and is now a Block Resource Person for Special Education. Her father is a graduate and works as a daily wager in a private company.

Ankita's interest is in Biology and although earlier, the family had thought she would opt for teaching, on meeting a woman doctor acquaintance, Ankita decided to appear for the medical entrance exam National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for admission to MBBS and BDS courses. Ankita is a good student and scored 80 percent in the class X board exams. This is her crucial final year of school with the added pressure of clearing the medical entrance. We asked her about her preparation and changes in her routine before and since the onset of this pandemic.

Working very hard, this year Ankita had been following a strict schedule of study. She would attend school from 7:30 am to 1:30 pm; study for three hours on her own at home and take physics and chemistry tuitions for two hours.

In the first week of April, the school informed the students via a *WhatsApp* message that they would begin online classes for two hours every day from 10 am to 12 noon. The family had one smartphone that the mother used for her work in the field and she needed it to continue her work from home. So, they bought another smartphone. Ankita also has a younger brother in class VIII who too had to attend online classes. However, among the three of them, they were able to manage with two smartphones.

Ankita also needs the smartphone to prepare for the NEET exam, for which she has joined online coaching classes that are held for two-hours every day. The coaching institute teachers are more professional in their use of the online medium, she says. For the rest of the teachers in her school, it was a steep learning curve. The online classes were very erratic in the beginning, but the teachers tried working out the problems each child was having and now they are not only more comfortable with the medium, the classes go on more smoothly.

She says she misses her friends and teachers, especially the Physics teacher who taught very well and explained concepts by doing experiments in the lab. Now there are no experiments. It was easier to get doubts cleared in class, she says, although many teachers now have a 'doubts session' on Sundays, in which students can specifically ask for clarifications on topics discussed during the week.

In school, Ankita tells us she was more aware of her progress because of the frequent tests. Now it is impossible for her to know how she is doing, even as teachers try their best to give them tests by sending papers and reviewing their answers online. It just does not give her the full picture of how she is doing, says Ankita.

Are all the students in her class able to join the online classes? No, one girl who did not have a smartphone and could not buy one, dropped out; she could not attend a single class. But the teachers were very forthcoming and after the lockdown was lifted, asked the girl to come to school every day and learn from them directly. But Ankita feels for this child and has decided to ask her mother to give her friend one of the two phones they have. What will you do? we ask. There is an old Tab (Tablet) lying disused in the house, that she says, she will get repaired and use for herself.

As told to Learning Curve

Going Digital | Teacher Capacity-Building

Bibi Raza Khanam

Albert Einstein once said, 'In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity'. Although the teaching-learning process is one of the challenges COVID-19 brought with it, everyone is trying their best in this situation to find alternatives to overcome the difficulties caused by the pandemic. Schools closed soon after the effects and the impact of COVID-19 became clear and for a while, teaching and learning stopped completely. Capacity-building of teachers took a new turn – it shifted from the physical interaction mode to digital mode. Government schools responded by decentralising teaching and creating imaginary learning situations and using the online mode.

I am sharing the experience of the teacher capacity-building exercise we did during this time.

Initially, we were not sure if we would be able to engage our teachers who were not physically present. The distance mode was a different and new way of working for all of us. In the beginning, it seemed difficult for both us and the teachers, but we gradually found that it works and that using technology is not difficult – it is actually very easy and effective!

Many of us are trying different ways to be in touch with teachers, head teachers and functionaries and engaging them in meaningful activities. So, some amount of experience has already been built. We realised that we could reach out to a greater number of teachers and cover wider areas more frequently than before. Teachers are also finding the online mode great, both to develop themselves as well as to beat the undue stress the pandemic has created.

We brainstormed on the various ways we could work with teachers by understanding their responses and their willingness and began with a group of teachers with whom we had engaged earlier in the direct mode. Knowing them and their needs, we mapped them according to their interests, attitudes and involvement and the subjects they taught.

Preparing for the change

'Before anything else, preparation is the key to success,' said Alexander Graham Bell. Once we had identified the cohorts and their needs, we had to design their learning, keeping in mind the current level of the teachers and the levels we wanted them to reach in terms of content knowledge, understanding of the teaching-learning process, teaching practices etc. It was important to include them in this process so that they would take ownership of their learning. We did this by discussing their needs and our plans for addressing them. We also talked about our objectives, the modes and frequency of interactions. We prepared concept notes and shared them with the team for their opinion. This enriched the process, helping us to identify the areas we might have missed.

Since we needed to have concrete examples and experiences in our tool kit, preparation was important. To do this, we collected resources, read, sought guidance and reached out to people in the organisation who could act as resource persons so that we could gain from their experience. This helped us to prepare well in terms of the content as well as the design of the sessions.

Readying ourselves for facilitating in distance mode was also very important. We were working with teachers without their being physically present and also interacting with teachers with whom we had never met physically. We could not read their minds or see their expressions. It requires a great amount of people skills to connect with virtually. We needed to work on our communication skills, how much to speak during sessions, when to intervene, how to moderate, how to engage all the teachers so that none of them feels left out, and; how to effectively modulate our voice, etc.

Equipping teachers for online sessions

Using digital media

First, we had to prepare our teachers to use digital media like *MS Teams* for teleconferencing and to join the sessions. We spoke to them individually and explained the steps, including things like using audio buttons for *mute, unmute* and *not to go on hold* if they had to take phone calls while

on a teleconference session. We practised how to disconnect from the session, take the phone call and then re-join the session. We took screenshots of the steps for joining an *MS Teams* meeting and its other utilities and shared these with the teachers.

Sharing reading materials

We shared reading materials through *WhatsApp* and emails two to three days before a discussion so that teachers could come prepared. We found that it was better to share these materials in a PDF format as it is easier to open on the phone. We had to make sure that the reading material was not too large since most of the teachers would be using only their mobile phones to read.

Content

While choosing topics, we had two questions in mind: How can I help better classroom teaching and learning? What are the right topics for me to achieve this?

We started with very simple articles so that teachers could connect with them easily and we progressed based on the group's response, needs and interests.

Some of the resources we used in our work with the teachers were Kannada, English and Maths handbooks on various topics. We referred to articles from the *Learning Curve*, Arvind Gupta, *Balaga*, APU pull-outs, *Bayalu*. Other sources were books like *Child's Language and Teacher, Toto Chan, Diwaswapna*, Kamala Mukunda's *What Did You Ask in Class Today*, *Children doing Mathematics* by Bryant and Nunes. IGNOU materials for maths, articles from Guru Chetana, NCF Position Papers, NCERT Learning Outcomes, DSERT Learning Outcomes were some of the other publications which provided valuable inputs to engage our teachers and facilitate their self-learning. The ASER and NAS reports were also used in our discussions to enable teachers to get a broader picture of the current educational scenario.

Designing a session

Know teachers' strengths

This was essential. For example, if in a cohort group, one teacher is good at classroom practices and making teaching aids, she could be a very good resource to make others understand the importance of these aids and practices based on her own experiences. She could also influence others in the team to adopt this practice.

Visualise the session

The online sessions had to be planned – from the lesson plans to the learning outcomes to be achieved. To do this, the larger objectives were broken down into smaller parts that could be achieved by our teachers. We reinforced learning through various worksheets, assignments and made sure that the teachers were assessed at every step and changed our teaching methodology accordingly. We identified the levels to be achieved by every teacher in the group and mentored them in doing so.

Some tips from our experience

Our sessions started with a summary of the previous session and concluded with a brief sum-up of the topics discussed. This helped teachers to connect in case they had missed the flow. We found it helpful to invite a colleague to participate in or facilitate the session for a change. It helped teachers to interact and learn from a new person. If we were not able to conduct the session at the agreed time, we informed the teachers beforehand so that they were not kept waiting. These things really helped to sustain the continuity of the group discussions and develop a strong bond among the participants.

We shared the minutes/updates of the meeting with participants after the session. A teacher who missed the session was contacted after the discussion and briefed about it. The teacher was asked if there had been any difficulty in joining and invited to join the next session. We also spoke to the teacher about how his/her presence would have enriched the discussion. For the teachers who joined the discussion, we messaged them to say how their participation enhanced the value of the discussion. We kept reviewing ourselves in various ways for making our sessions more effective.

Our learning so far

- Teachers are open to adapting to new technologies if the approach is user-friendly.
- Clear, systematic planning, continuity of concepts, connecting concepts to the classroom, bringing new dimensions to already known concepts are key to keeping teachers engaged in the process.
- Creating a sense of belonging among teachers is vital to sustaining interest.
- It is possible to create a non-threatening, inviting space in online forums, provided there is a shared understanding of the strengths and limitations of the medium.

Based on our observations and discussions with teachers and among team members, we are able to estimate our impact. Teachers, too, are able to adopt meaningful teaching practices for early grades and prepare supporting materials, like designing activities, games and teaching aids for the classroom. They are able to write articles to share all the learning and understand the connection between concepts and developing and designing different levels of activities to work with children of different levels.

Way forward

Once schools reopen, we will be visiting the classrooms of these teachers to observe the changes in their practices, understand their needs, form groups and design further engagements accordingly. We will take the support of these teachers in reaching out to larger groups in an offline mode. The changes these teachers will bring in once they are back in schools are definitely going to influence others. We would like to design processes to share the best practices which come out of this experience.

We will be continuing online engagements like voluntary teachers' forums as we are able to reach out to a larger number of teachers from various blocks, something which would be difficult to do offline. We are happy that, as a team, we could explore opportunities to continue our work with teachers creating some lasting experiences for both parties during this critical period, a process that increased self-confidence.

We realise that we have worked seamlessly with teachers in distant places by exploring technology and discovered that it is easy, and these platforms are designed for self-learning. Even people with no prior knowledge can easily learn to use these. Many of our teachers have become very comfortable with *MS Teams*, teleconferencing, *Zoom*, *Google Hangouts* etc. Sharing of articles and other reading material is taking place through *WhatsApp* and emails. In our experience after two or three sessions teachers work perfectly well and smoothly on any virtual learning platform.

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Children's Learning and the Community
My Experiences

Janak Ram

'Hello ji', I said, picking up the mobile phone. A child's voice on the other end responded, 'Hello teacher.' I quickly disconnected the call so I could call him back instead. The child answered the phone and told me his name. He led the conversation and asked me, 'What did you eat today?', 'What has been prepared at your house today?' (These are common small talk phrases people use in Chhattisgarh to move a conversation forward).

The lockdown was in its twentieth day, so I responded, 'We're under complete lockdown. Right now, we're only eating potatoes and soybean *baris*. What did you eat today?' The child took some time to respond. After a pause, he said, 'Teacher, the thing is, papa was out of town and he has been stuck there during the lockdown. Today, we had only rice.'

I composed myself and told him to get his mother on the phone. I talked to her and got a complete picture of the situation. There were three people living in their house at the time. All the grocery items, save for rice, had run out. His mother had not approached anybody for help, out of self-respect.

I quickly shared the details of the situation with my team and organisation members. Through talks and discussions with the team members, it was revealed that many other children were in the same situation. The Foundation* was quick to respond to the needs of this family. Besides them, they also provided rations and essential items to other families who were in need but were not asking to maintain their dignity. Teachers also surveyed their areas and prepared a list of people in need of help and provided this to the Foundation. The Foundation immediately procured the rations and keeping the dignity of the beneficiaries topmost in our minds, our team delivered rations to the families. The relationship between teachers and children is one of such melodious harmony that children share their experiences and troubles without any hesitation.

This lockdown has been a source of many revelations. I was told by some Foundation members that there is a region where no ration cards have been made for the past three generations of people. How were they to receive any help? Our Foundation stepped forward to help them during these difficult times but what hope do they have of any help going forward? This also strengthened the belief that children should be educated not just about moral values but constitutional values as well, so they may become citizens who are aware of their rights and entitlements and are able to raise important questions.

Another experience during the distribution of rations was that many people in a village came forward forcefully demanding rations, clamouring that they were in need too. When we asked them if they had nothing to eat whatsoever, they said they did but were ensuring they had stocks for the future too because of the uncertainty of the lockdown and when it would be lifted. I calmly explained to them that we were currently helping people whose needs were immediate. The Councillor of the ward was accompanying us, and he also ensured them that if the situation were to worsen, the government would provide assistance. They were not willing to listen or compromise, but we stood our ground. We registered their names for future purposes and after this assurance, they went away. These were tense moments. Education also teaches us to mould ourselves according to our circumstances and situations. For us being able to reach people in need felt like a respite from the heat on a hot day.

Children's learning

In the beginning, small talk with the children about their wellbeing over the phone was a pleasant diversion from these tense times, for both teachers and the children. We talked and sang songs and rhymes and narrated stories. However, at times, we spent hours trying to get all the children on a conference call but problems with the signal forbade this. Still, we kept trying. Sometimes, the call would be connected only for it to be disconnected soon. This was the experience of all the teachers. However, we were able to sustain a dialogue on children's studies through personal

calls and individual discussions. We were also relying on parental support in this. However, once the period of unlocking began, parents started leaving the house for work with their phones and we lost contact with the children. Thus, we were faced with a substantial challenge: How would children's studies progress now?

Teachers began preparing workbooks that would allow children to read and answer questions on the readings by themselves. Since they did not yet have their books for the next grade, we believed that these workbooks would prove to be useful. Teachers worked hard and prepared workbooks for different topics and subjects and delivered them to the children's doorsteps. Keeping in mind all safety precautions, like wearing masks, face shields and gloves; using sanitisers and; maintaining physical distance, teachers would deliver these workbooks to the children's homes every week and collect the completed workbooks. Children's responses would be discussed over phone calls. However, this exercise too proved to be difficult for children who still face a challenge in reading and writing. Though I, like the other teachers, was designing workbooks according to the children's learning level, limited understanding still posed a challenge for us all.

Teachers, children and the community

During community visits to sustain a regular dialogue on children's learning, we had built a kinship with children's parents and other village members through amicable discussions. Whenever and wherever we met, we would greet one other, and they are very forthright about their opinion on children's learning which helped us in the teaching-learning process. Owing to the closing of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, our primary concern has been to keep children from feeling alienated from their studies. When there was a relaxation in the lockdown, we put forward the idea of continuing children's studies with the community members ensuring that all safety protocol is followed to the tee.

The community members agreed and even freed up the community hall for the same. Furthermore, a few educated young people from the village came forward to help with the task of children's education and they have been continuing this till now. This group of volunteers also included some of our old students who have passed their matriculation exams in the academic year 2019-20. They have taken charge of small groups of primary graders and are helping them with their learning.

The cooperation on the part of the parents and other community members, many of who have opened their courtyards for the purpose of children's education, is also commendable. A few other social service organisations have also been helping us. As a result, we have been able to divide ourselves into small groups and have been able to reach seven villages where our children hail from and work with them continuously.

During the pandemic, there is a constant worry about children, teachers and volunteers getting infected because everybody is constantly moving around. Parents, teachers and children are all stepping out of their homes for daily tasks and coming in contact with others. Though everybody is ensuring that they take proper safety measures, a worry still lingers. It is a challenge for teachers and children and their parents to be stress-free in such stressful times.

A silver lining

With time, the situation is changing. People are facing the pandemic in the best way they know. They are not letting it dampen their spirits. They are beginning to learn to live with masks and sanitisers and maintaining good hygiene practices and physical distancing. We are glad that the children are now stress-free. My fellow teachers recorded rhymes and songs and sent them to the children. The videos and stories we had recorded in the beginning are now proving useful for the children in their studies. We have been looking at this experience in a positive light by thinking of how many children, parents and teachers have only now realised the true potential of their mobile phones.

Parents who were not keen on having a dialogue or having us come to their houses are now talking openly to both their children and to us, teachers. A few parents and community members have furthered their horizons. They have graciously lent their empty spaces for the purpose of children's education and some have even helped in the teaching-learning process. Some parents have begun to help not just their children but other children in their neighbourhood with their studies too. They have displayed utmost sensitivity in the times of COVID-19 that has helped keep children away from worry. Hopefully, this spirit will continue.

In any society, education is a central institution that can bring about sweeping changes. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has stressed the

importance of educated members of the society coming forward to help children in their learning process and it anticipates this participation. During these times, a student composed a rhyme and sang it for me, and I often find myself humming it. I leave you with this song written by the girl:

ये सुन न, ये तू सुन न

कोरोना से है बचना तो

तू घर से बिना वजह बहार निकल न॥ ये .....

निकलना है बहुत ही जरूरी तो

मास्क, दूरी और सेनी टाइजर या साबुन उपयोग करना ॥ ये....

अपने बडे –बुजुर्गों का ध्यान है रखना

उनकी तहे दिल से चिंता है करना

जो है संक्रमित उनसे शारीरिक दूरी बनाना

पर प्यार व सेहत बना रहे ये ध्यान रखना ॥ ये...

हैं वो भी अपने जो हैं (डॉक्टर, पुलिस,नर्स, स्वछताकर्मी....) लड़ रहे कोरोना से

उनका सम्मान पहले है करना

ये कोरोना तो एक दिन तो चला जाएगा

फिर आपस में इसके लिए दिल में हैं भेद क्यों है करना॥ ये....

ये सुन न, ये सुन सुन न .....

(Listen, O Listen / If you wish to avoid corona / Don't leave your house without a cause / Listen… If leaving is absolutely necessary / Sanitiser, hand wash, distance and mask are your accessories / Care for your elders /Keep them in your thoughts / Keep distance from those infected / But don't make them feel dejected / The ones fighting are also family / Treat them with respect accordingly / Corona will leave one day / So, why let any differences stay / Listen, O Listen…)

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Teaching and Learning | The Dyslexia Experience

Mala R Natarajan

The teaching-learning process is a continuum of experiences with the teacher in class and homework and learning at home. Pauses in an academic year are usually structured and, more often than not, they are partial. These periods offer unique opportunities – many a time in a fun way – to reinforce what was taught in class, making sure that children can seamlessly continue with the academic sessions when our school resumes. However, the pandemic brought upon us a pause which was both unplanned and with no end in sight! The impact on academics has been significant, more so, for children with dyslexia.

At the outset, the teaching-learning process for a child with dyslexia is based on the philosophy *teach me the way I learn*. This is best done by making the process gainful as well as fun, using the multi-modal approach. Through this, the child receives inputs through auditory, visual, kinaesthetic and tactile channels – either through all or an appropriate combination which is aligned to the child's learning style. Implicit in this approach is that the teaching methods are never one-size-fits-all.

When the pandemic struck, special educators at the Madras Dyslexia Association (MDA) got into action quite early to devise remedial sessions which leveraged technology yet stayed as close as possible to the ways best suited for reaching out to children with dyslexia. To quote Mrs Savitri Krishnan, Head of our After-School Remedial Centre, 'Ingenuity, creativity and adaptation is the need of the hour'. Exuding confidence in the special educators, she said, 'They do their best as always and make a difference and reach out to every child in need'.

Mrs Gouri Ramanathan, Principal of Ananya Learning and Research Centre, our full-time remedial learning centre for children with dyslexia, shared similar thoughts. She described the various innovative methods that the special educators employed to cope with some typical issues, for example, deficits in attention and sitting tolerance, faced while teaching a child with dyslexia.

In one instance, a child was encouraged to do some fun, physical exercises within the frame of the camera, which enabled the special educator to encourage the child and make sure that he got back to the classwork at the stipulated time. Sometimes, the two of them would play interesting online games so that the child could relax, and the teacher could then get her attention back to the lesson!

However, all the special educators felt that verbal encouragement could not compensate for a gentle pat on the back or an encouraging touch to reduce the frustration that builds up.

At the start of the pandemic, students, teachers and parents had divergent opinions and expectations of the online sessions, varying from the excitement of trying out something new to scepticism. Hurdles were posed by technology, connectivity issues and sudden change-over to a no-paper, no-text scenario. Both teachers and children adapted themselves to the new norms very quickly and teachers and parents were relieved that remedial sessions could continue without a break, continuity being an important peg to ensure reinforcement in the teaching-learning process for children with dyslexia.

The experiences, involvement and reactions of the parents have been varied. If not for the trust vested in the special educator, the quick realignment may not have been possible, though there were incidents of over-zealous parents doing the homework and sometimes even classwork within plain sight (of the camera)! There were some parents who looked forward to significant improvements in the child's skill levels in this short duration. Both special educators and the senior teachers counselled the parents on these aspects. There were a few occasions when the special educators had to bring to the notice of the parents the distraction caused by activities going on in their homes during the class. (Of course, some of them provided comic relief and helped diffuse some frustrating moments too!). In some cases, the COVID-instilled anxiety in the parents rubbed off on their children too.

For many parents, these online sessions were an eye-opener: they saw the effort their children put in and the struggle they faced to achieve small goals

set during the class. This brought in the realisation that the child was not being lazy nor is he stupid - the two common perceptions about children with dyslexia.

Educational technology (Edtech) was an esoteric term till the pandemic struck, but with the passage of these few months, special educators have become willing users of various software, computers, web camera and other devices for effective teaching. The integration of these into the lesson plan is now very smooth. Mrs Surekha says, 'I am looking forward to trying out features of the e-classroom software to enrich the teaching process.' Gouri Ramanathan expressed eagerness to continue the integration of Edtech in remedial teaching when in-class teaching finally resumes. Both of them concurred that the special educators were a closely-knit group, sharing their experiences and learning from each other. However, there are some aspects that could not be addressed, for example, mechanical aspects of writing, extra-curricular activities like yoga, dance and music sessions for the holistic development and counselling sessions for the children.

Online sessions for Occupational Therapy (OT) were planned based on individual needs and were able to help the child cope with the difficulties in fine motor, gross motor, attention and executive function. However, children themselves unanimously missed the ambience of a school and the classrooms. The opportunities to participate in fun-filled activities planned around Multiple Intelligences (MI) were sorely missed. The online version of the activities was good, but in-class activities were better! Parents and special educators, however, worry about how children would adjust to returning to school later.

The management perspective was centred around the operational issues. Face-to-face assessments have not been possible since the start of the pandemic. This has led to fewer admissions implying, fewer children have received the benefit of full-time remediation. There has been an impact on the revenue too. Online awareness programmes and training sessions are being conducted to ensure that we continue to strive to work towards our mission of enabling a dyslexia-sensitive society. The Madras Dyslexia Association hopes to take forward the positive outcomes of the teaching-learning process from this pandemic and bridge the gaps once the in-class sessions resume.

Acknowledgement

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What Did You Learn of the World Today?

Prarthana Mudgal is a class VII student of a private English-medium school in Bhopal. She was just managing to cope with the passing away of her paternal grandmother, who she was very attached to, when schools closed in March. In the heat of north India's summer, it was initially a great reprieve to remain indoors and unexpected school holidays are always welcome. But as children are wont to, Prarthana soon started to look for things to do. And what she ended up doing is truly remarkable, knowing how easy it is for children who have unrestricted access to TVs, laptops and phones to lose track of not just hours and days but weeks and months.

She does not think it as something out of the ordinary and is awkward talking about her work, but we were able to coax her into telling us about the things she did during the lockdown.

Prarthana, like her other schoolmates, began attending online classes started by her school in March. But she could not engage with the online mode and attended less and less, till she dropped out completely. Her parents and teachers discussed the matter and decided to let her be, knowing that her cochlear implant was a barrier to her engagement with the online model. They were aware that the frustration of having to cope with a new medium of learning may manifest in some other emotional issue.

Looking for things to do, Prarthana decided to make masks that were until then still not so easy to come by. In one day, she learnt to operate the sewing machine at home and learned how to stitch masks on *YouTube*. In the coming weeks, she used up all the spare cloth, thread and elastic available in the house to make dozens of masks. These masks were needed by the employees of a petrol pump who were operating as part of essential services even during the national lockdown. When they offered to pay her, they were asked to bring her more material for the masks instead.

One day, Prarthana visited the neighbourhood medical store with her father. Later, to her questions of why those people were working while everyone else was staying indoors; where they ate and when they rested, she was gently made conscious of the fact that the employees of the medical store keep were keeping it open for the rest of us; that they go without rest from 7 AM to 11 PM, without even a tea stall open from where they can get a cup of tea. We should serve them for serving us, her father mentioned to her. From that day onwards, Prarthana began to make tea for them. Every day, she would make tea and carry it in a one-litre flask to the medical shop. Sometimes, she also carried with it some packets of biscuits or *namkeen*.

At night, the family would have 40-50 extra rotis made and would go around the neighbourhood feeding stay dogs. They were able to cover at least five-seven colonies in the neighbourhood each day. Participating in all this, Prarthana was learning to be an empath and when she saw a dog by the side of the road that was unable to move and refusing eat or drink water, she had her father call an ambulance and waited with the dog till it came and took it to hospital.

As soon as the lockdown was lifted and the NGO run by her father began operations, there was need for hand-sanitiser. This became her next big project. She again turned to *YouTube* and learned to make liquid hand sanitiser with aloe vera that grew aplenty at their home and some other store-bought ingredients, like spirit. Of the people who came to the NGO, there were always some who could not afford to spend on soaps and sanitisers and were offered this liquid that Prarthana prepared in the family's kitchen.

Would it be correct to assume that Prarthana fell back on her learning? Sooner or later, she will be back in school, back on her class desk, learning multiplication or past participle. But which class would teach her to always look out for others? To use her time productively? To have empathy for those who have less? To serve those who serve us? The lockdown was a golden opportunity for parents at home with children to set the right examples, talk and discuss issues that matter the most in our lives.

As told to Learning Curve

Community Participation in Children's Learning

Rajashree Nayak

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences, beyond the spread of the disease itself, on the social, economic and political life of the people. The severity of the pandemic, which has resulted in the closing of educational institutions, has been an unprecedented test for education. Academic activities in India were rapidly halted by the end of March by institutions and states even before the countrywide lockdown was announced. After the lockdown lifted, most higher education institutions have shifted their teaching to the online mode and many students have managed to get the required facilities.

However, this is not true of primary education. Primary schools, with students from different economic and social status, are located in every corner of rural and urban India. Even if students can access online classes, pre-primary and primary students are too young to be able to operate online platforms. Both government and small private institutes have found it challenging to sustain primary school students' learning and maintain the systems related to the online mode of education.

The idea of engaging the children in schools and running a distance school, or community classroom, was a new strategy which we thought of in May after the lockdown was imposed. Apart from academics, there was a huge need for the school to provide emotional support to the children and parents and some families needed assistance even for bare necessities. When the team visited and interacted with children, the students did not speak much and were unresponsive to the teachers' enquiries. It was clear that both the parents and children were disturbed.

As a result, when a discussion was initiated in our team on conducting community-level classrooms, though there was a lot of fear and confusion about the pandemic, there was excitement too. Every individual had some responsibility in the process of engaging children in the learning process. The team divided itself into three different groups and went to the villages to carry out a situational analysis. Our relationship with the community, which had always participated in our activities, made us confident of the success of this venture.

Profile of our school

- Our school has a strength of 87 children (grades I-III) from six villages which are at a distance of three to six kilometres from each other.
- Half of the students belong to families of daily wage earners, one-third of the parents have marginal land holdings and very few are from well-to-do families. A little over two-thirds of the families have smartphones but these are not accessible to the students. There are various reasons for this: parents are not available at home during class timings, poor network connections and the children's inability to handle smartphones. Engaging primary grade children through smartphones even for a minimum of one hour is difficult and can have a negative impact on them, both psychologically and physiologically. For all these reasons, online classes for primary school children are impractical.
- The parents have always been part of our school practices in the past and have participated in conducting classes on *Janapada* songs and other local activities.
- The School Community Network (SCN) team is a body of community members representing the six villages. Members from the school team hold frequent meetings to discuss matters and take decisions about arranging events, classroom orientation and parent-teacher meetings.

Situation analysis

- Awareness about social distancing, maintaining personal hygiene and wearing masks was found to be very low in the villages. The children were unaware of the dangers of infection. Life was the same as in the pre-lockdown period. As children could not go out to play, they were watching a lot of TV. We found that there was a need for meaningful engagement.
- Lot of myths were circulated among the public

about COVID-19 that made the children afraid to interact with others. Surprisingly, the parents were not seen taking the precautions they wanted their children to take.

- Our interactions with the parents and community showed that the parents were concerned about their child's future and education. However, because of the differences in the parents' literacy levels and professions, they were more worried about the effect the closing of schools would have on their children's immediate learning. Ninety percent of the parents would have sent their children to school if the necessary precautions were taken.

Collaboration with the community

We organised small meetings in public spaces in the village where we had short brainstorming sessions with parents to find ways to conduct classes with the children. Parents wanted homework, alternate-day classes in the school premises for small groups of children and so on. When the idea of conducting classes in their village was proposed, all the parents agreed without a moment's hesitation. Parents told us to re-open the school as early as possible and said, 'The children are not listening to us, but they will listen to you'. Their immediate response and willingness to support us surprised our team. Some of the steps they took are described here.

School premises

Eighty-five students live in five villages (only two come from the sixth village), so the students were divided into two teams in every village. Each group consisted of a maximum of ten members. Classrooms were arranged according to the group size. In the first phase, the parents could arrange eight rooms for the classes in *Samuday Bhavan, Samaj Khone, anganwadi* centre, Ambedkar Hall and two centres in the temple premises. However, after two classes, the teachers and parents realised the open spaces, where the rest of the classes were being held, were very noisy, so rented rooms were arranged. Teachers visit the two students in Bhimalli, (the sixth village) once a week with homework and assignments.

Volunteer teachers

In Hunsihadgil village, the community was so concerned that the children had lost touch with reading and writing that they enlisted a teacher from the community itself to follow-up the work given by the teachers. They even offered to pay the teacher for her work in sustaining the children's learning. However, knowing the parents' financial condition, the school team assured them that it would not be necessary.

Communication

Parents undertook to inform/remind the children of class timings and ensured full attendance. They looked after the facilities and made sure that the recommended precautions for safety were being followed. Parents and support staff also voluntarily sanitised the 'classrooms' and cleaned the premises twice a week.

Follow-up

Parents followed up on student and teacher absentees. This was important in the COVID situation as positive cases in the villages meant that classes would have to be stopped for the two-week quarantine period. In the villages where there were positive cases of COVID, we gave worksheets (with the children's names on them) to one of the parents who helped us by distributing them to the children.

Some results

So far, the team has engaged children from six classes in each centre in June and July. From August, four consecutive days of classes were organised at each centre. This schedule will continue up to the re-opening of schools.

Our efforts have led to 96 percent attendance in everyday engagements. Efforts are being made to systematise the process with weekly reviews. During the lockdown, the children had forgotten letters, sounds, reading and writing, skills the teachers are attempting to teach again.

Learning outcomes

As a result of the teachers' efforts, some positive outcomes have been:

- Creating awareness of COVID-19 and supporting students' safety and security.
- Expanding the skills of listening comprehension and the connection between sounds and words.
- Enhancing basic reading and writing skills both in Kannada and in English.
- Developing spatial skills.
- Identifying and making 2D-shapes by folding, paper cutting on the dotted grids, using straight lines etc.
- Learning basic operations in maths.

Insights on community support

Being a social institution, a school has a major responsibility in achieving the full participation of the community members in the school system. The system of establishing SCN or SDMC (School Development and Monitoring Committee) should be as high a priority as learning.

Shared understanding

A partnership between school and community members results in school development. A small observation on our surrounding schools might help to explain how important the school-community network is and the change that may take place in school when both the agencies work together in a collaborative mode. But this is possible only when the school *invites* the parents to be part of it. Teachers calling parents occasionally to school, familiarising them about school practices and updating them about their children's learning, showing them how they can support the teachers, increases their participation. Respecting parents is a crucial aspect of this approach.

Conclusion

Although the team is moving forward enthusiastically to engage children in learning and the children are taking time to adjust to the changes, they are trying. Teachers are also facing difficulties as this method has its limitations and is not like the actual classroom experience. For instance, it is difficult to have displays of the children's work or use TLMs in limited spaces. Conducting activities with social distancing rules is impossible and the increase in the number of COVID-positive cases as well as asymptomatic people is creating fear. Students, too, are taking more time to open up to the teachers. If these conditions extend much longer, there will be a huge impact on students' learning and their relationship with the teachers, though of course, if conditions remain the same then, this may be the only option for students and teachers.

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Online Teacher Development
Exploring New Possibilities

Shridhar Rajanal

Our teacher development process had been more face-to-face, but COVID-19 forced us to explore other possibilities; to explore alternative methods to reach our teachers. In the early stages, we had educative conversations through teleconferencing, but this method had its limitations. There was an urgent need to find a platform to have effective communication with teachers. Finally, after much thought, Mallikarjuna Sajjan, our Cluster Resource Person (CRP) came up with an idea. 'Let us develop a simple studio from where we can communicate effectively with all our teachers', he said. Though none of us knew anything about it, we all felt that this was an innovative idea and wanted to try it out.

Background

As social distancing became necessary for the control of COVID-19, it was equally necessary and important to keep engaging with teachers in their academic activities. At first, teachers created *WhatsApp* groups in their respective clusters, but later, to discuss and build communication channels with teachers, we started using the teleconferencing method with toll-free numbers. However, teachers said that the discussions were not effective since it was only verbal sharing. People wanted *interaction*, something visual, something more dynamic. They thought audio-video online lessons should be initiated for continuous and effective interaction. The idea was that there should be a platform where the facilitators could communicate with the teachers.

We wanted to use the blackboard (or whiteboard), teaching aids and learning materials so that the facilitators could articulate the concepts well and explain them properly. It was then that Mallikarjuna Sajjan came up with his plan of establishing a studio in the teaching-learning centre.

Creating the studio

Generally, a studio is a place from where we can communicate with a large number of people. To make the communication effective and interesting, it is equipped with audio and visual aids, technical support to monitor the audio and visuals, different materials to explain concepts and enhance our communication. A studio usually has an organised system of a podium, lights, camera etc to enable people to focus on different aspects and highlight the most important ones.

We did not have any of these things. We just had some space in one of the rooms in the Government Higher Primary School, Aminagad. Although all of us wanted to build a studio, with no knowledge and resources, we were struggling.

Building the studio

Although we did not have a full-fledged studio, our work with the teachers had to start. As we began communicating with them, we got to know what was needed and what the shortcomings were. Immediately after every session, we would want to equip our studio with things that were needed but were not available! Every time we had online conversations, we were able to identify the flaws and set them right. After four or five online sessions, we had made some basic arrangements, such as a place for the speaker to sit and speak comfortably.

As we were filming from our mobiles the resolution was very low, so the quality of the images and sound was poor. One of our colleagues had a good mobile which he gave us. To increase the brightness, Mallikarjuna Sajjan brought a very bright lamp from home. With these changes, the visuals came out very good. Another colleague, Shivananda Sajjan, brought some tools like a tripod stand to support the camera phone.

Initial problems

Teachers began feeling that having to listen to speakers continuously was monotonous and boring. We, as the core group, began a discussion about how to make the sessions interesting. Many ideas were shared. The most interesting suggestion was to use the projector to project images on a screen *behind* the speaker. We had a projector in the Teacher Learning Centre. All this was very exciting for us as we could experiment with many things.

Equipping the studio

We needed the following things to create a studio:

1. Two mobile phones with good cameras
2. A tripod stand
3. Table lamps with high powered bulbs
4. Laptop and screen
5. Bluetooth headset
6. A large room where silence could be maintained for a few hours
7. Adequate TLMs

Collaborative work

We got a lot of positive response from teachers as we improved our technology and projected relevant parts. We made interesting PowerPoint presentations and short videos. We were also able to source effective video clippings and use it in the session.

Initially, there were a lot of hurdles. For example, recordings were disrupted due to lack of coordination. We learned to work together, divide work amongst ourselves and plan systematically for coordination. We developed a very good understanding and ways of sharing amongst ourselves. We started working as a team – the studio team!

Learnings

Besides discovering that preparation is the key to success, our other learnings were:

1. A few days prior to a session, we met and worked out the session in detail. We discussed the textbook, syllabus, content and supplementary material to be given to the facilitator. The whole team would sit together and discuss and come up with ideas to help improve the session.
2. The facilitator took the help of other resource persons and decided on the teaching aids and materials required with the core team while the others made them.
3. The team helped the facilitator to conduct a trial session before the final one; evaluated, reviewed and made suggestions for improvement. This also helped the facilitator to manage time.
4. A lot of practice was provided to the facilitator to get used to the technology: audio, video, PPT and TLMs. Team members supported this effort and provided necessary materials as and when needed.
5. We sent the link to the group so that all members and teachers could join the discussion on time. Our members were there to assist with any problems.
6. We were able to train teachers on using technology effectively by giving them both oral and written instructions and guidance. After each meeting, elaborate oral and written reviews were given to help improve the sessions.

Working together

Geeta Madam and Rangapura Guru, who are trained in the *Nali-Kali* methodology, took valuable sessions on collective group activities. Shashidhar, Shreyas, Geeta and Manjula Madam, the CRP and all of us formulated a timetable to discuss *Nali-Kali* and maths concepts along with the kits.

Other resource persons demonstrated alternative methods of teaching and the use of teaching aids. The teaching methods of *Nali-Kali* and the *Nali-Kali* Group Movement made teachers come up with challenging questions which led to debate and discussion. Similarly, for grades IV and V, maths kits helped in progressing from the concrete to the abstract.

Impact of the studio

The Education Department officials were happy with the way the online sessions were conducted and the online processes on several topics have been developed for different groups. Other groups have been asked to take our help to create a studio. Along with this, the Department conducted special five-day training programmes for the teachers of *Nali-Kali* and for grades IV and V and higher primary school teachers of the *taluk* through *Google Meet* and our type of studio. The head teachers from the *taluk* have already started the process of conducting model online lessons with their school teachers.

Way forward

The road map for the future has been thought out. These are the main features:

1. Designing different concepts to be taught through the online sessions using the studio effectively, especially primary teachers of *Nali-Kali* and teachers of grades IV and V.
2. Creating opportunities for teachers to draw up lesson plans which use the methods and aids which can be disseminated from the studio.
3. Equipping the studio with necessary materials to help in better sessions.
4. A few clusters and head teachers have shown

interest in establishing simple studios and we plan to help them do this for effective online sessions.

5. As a team, our major learning was that the entire process was mainly building our capacity in content and pedagogy. The studio just helps us to reach more teachers.

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Walking an Unknown Path | Online Learning

Smriti Rathore, Ruchi Kotnala and Monu Kumar

We are undergoing a crisis in the present times. The pandemic has totally upended the lives of people – the lockdown and its restrictions, social distancing and the closing of schools! The question that arose for us, teachers was: how we can connect with our students from afar, that too in a situation of uncertainty, mistrust and fear generated due to this mysterious virus? Learning had to continue and at first thought, the engagement over a distance mode came out to us as an instant possibility. At the same time, we had to anticipate the possible structure of the classroom in distance mode, something that was unknown terrain for all of us in the school.

In this article, we share the preparation of our work, occurrences over online platforms and the methods we used for our distance engagements, the challenges we faced, our learning in the process and finally, the way forward.

Our preparation

As the online platform was new to us, we first had to learn several things. One was getting acquainted with and exploring different platforms like *WhatsApp, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams* as well as other complementary platforms like *Google Forms, Facebook*, and *YouTube*. After doing some pilot programmes among our colleagues, we took it to the students. We started collecting and creating resources that could be shared online, read books related to the subject, followed up more rigorously by brainstorming over online meetings in subject/grade groups and general groups on *Microsoft Teams, Google Meet* and through conference calls over the phone. We discussed our reading and shared the work in suitable formats to develop thematic worksheets and assignments.

After preparing ourselves, we collected the phone and *WhatsApp* numbers of the students by calling their families or visiting their homes. Then, we created two *WhatsApp* groups: one grade-wise and one general.

Going online

In response to the parents' demands, we provided the students with PDF copies and screen-shots of chapters in the textbook in the first few days. Parents thought that their children would study if this was done, though we knew that this approach would be ineffective. The small size of a mobile handset screen demanding long periods of students' engagement with the device, made sustained attention difficult. Parents also realised that sharing textbook chapters in PDF does not work.

By this time, we had started giving questions on *Google Forms* for which students had only to click the correct options. On the same platform, we also included short questions requiring investigation and survey and for this, *YouTube* videos and images were used. Initially, we got many enthusiastic responses from students. We also provided NCERT textbooks and notebooks to them and referred to the textbooks along with the online work. In our context, textbooks are the only academic resource students have at home. But only those who were at grade-appropriate learning levels could use the textbooks as self-learning material.

Other resources

There were several online activities based on the observation of natural phenomena, conducting simple investigations and experiments, recording daily activities, reflecting on the experiences students were going through which did not require textbooks. Along with this, we shared the links of *YouTube* videos of rhymes, songs, stories and explanation of the basic concepts of many topics. Many of the resources were also shared on the school *Facebook* page. Additionally, we prepared several *YouTube* videos addressing both the local context chapters from NCERT textbooks and *Eklavya* books.

As an example of our online work, here is a *WhatsApp* message sent to grade I students for a task based on a chapter in their textbook:

प्यारें बच्चों! अपनी हिंदी की किताब 'रिमझिम-१' के पेज 76 को खोलिए और उसमें आई कविता 'पतंग' को पढ़कर अपने घर के किसी सदस्य को सुनाईये फिर इसको रिकॉर्ड करे हमें भी भेजिए|इसके बाद

पेज 77 पर आई गतिविधि 'पतंग का चित्र बनाईये' और 'अब कविता बनाएं' को अपनी नोटबुक में कीजिये | फिर इसका भी फोटो खींचकर हमें भेजिए|

Another example is a video based on a *Santhal* folk story *First House* put up on *YouTube* by *Book-Box*, about two friends building their first house with suggestions from different animals. Each animal suggested a part of the house analogous to their body parts. The friends collected materials to build the parts as well as the whole house. This was followed up with these questions: After watching the video, do you think this story is an example of teamwork? In what way? How many animals were there in the video? What was the house made of? (Wood/brick) Which part of house was made with bamboo?

Features of platforms

Over time, we have come to realise that running academic engagements in the asynchronous distance mode, without seeing each other, is ineffective. So, we started synchronous distance engagement over *Google Meet* with the students who had access to the internet and smartphones and were willing to join in. We used the telephone for those with no internet access.

Every online platform has certain advantages. For instance, the telephone is the most accessible mode for all students and has the least network issues. Then again, *WhatsApp* provides affordable space to share links of videos, audios, *Google Forms*, website links, images and even documents. It also helps the sharing of views/updates with a large group of members in real-time. *Facebook* provides a digital resource repository as well as allows sharing and a discussion platform. *YouTube* is a video repository and allows access to these resources without having a Google account, unlike *Facebook*. *Facebook* and *YouTube* both afford running live sessions. The advantage of *Google Meet* is that it provides, both individual as well as, group support. However, this requires considerable internet bandwidth and is, therefore, limited to a few students.

We have tried to use all these platforms to optimise different types of assignment along with home visits.

What we learned

We knew that providing PDF copies or screenshots of textbook chapters would be ineffective. However, due to parental demand, we had to agree (though parents too soon realised the limitations of sharing these files).

When the lockdown restrictions eased, getting students' responses online reduced a lot. Accessing mobile devices reduced and for various reasons, the students' overall academic engagement declined. One of the major reasons for the low and slow response was weak and interrupted internet connectivity. In several cases, students were doing their work but were unable to share it over *WhatsApp*.

After the lockdown was lifted, we gave hard copies of worksheets and handouts to students at their home on a weekly or fortnightly basis. To reduce the challenges of limited access to the internet and smartphones we also extended academic support to students in their homes.

One interesting aspect is that we were able to cover only 80-85 percent of the students through home visits in a 15-day cycle and 5-10 percent in a 30-day cycle. Five percent of the students were living very far away and were unreachable, so, for them, we had to rely only on *WhatsApp* and *Google Meet* mode. The remaining five percent of the students could be met only intermittently.

We have learned a lot as teachers in our attempts to engage students online. For example, thematic assignments required us to break the boundaries between subjects. We had also to study subject content and concepts in a deeper way to present it to students. According to Ruchi, 'My area of interest is Arts, and I feel most comfortable while teaching it. However, after I started teaching Hindi, English and maths to grades I and II, I became interested in those subjects. I have also learnt to design worksheets, use *Google Forms*, produce *YouTube* material, and give voice to stories.'

Challenges of going online

Some of our major challenges included the small screen size of mobile phones, weak internet connections, inadequate academic environment at home, students not taking the online classes seriously and unfamiliarity with digital technology for academic purposes. In addition, many students' families could not afford data recharge costs. Another issue was two or more children wanting access to the mobile at the same time.

Way forward

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented and complex situation. As teachers, we had to bridge

the gaps in learning but in contrast to a regular classroom, we could not engage personally with the students or use all the pedagogic and learning resources in real-time. Although we provided worksheets and textbook-based assignments, lent books, gave short home tuitions, there were limitations in the distance and online modes. Better work in this area depends completely on how we engage after understanding this situation.

Having observed all the challenges, both during the lockdown and following it, we are placing greater emphasis on our visits to students' homes. We are continuously exploring dynamic modes of engagement for learning and preparing online materials and sustaining online engagement so that we will be able to face lockdowns or other emergencies that we may have in the future.

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We deeply appreciate the contribution of our school team in the overall journey during this time. This write-up is an outcome of everyone's work.

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My New Schooling Experience

Vanya Gupta

Because of the pandemic, we have now shifted to online classes. Online classes are not exactly better or worse than normal school: they are different. They are beneficial in some ways and harmful in others.

The first advantage is that we get notes and extra exercises of chapters shared by the teachers online. This helps since we do not have to write long notes in our notebooks/registers, rather, we can just refer to the important points and simplified explanations which our teachers give us. They are helpful for students who give importance to self-study as they get plenty of time to study. Moreover, we are still in complete touch with our syllabus which is very beneficial and convenient because, if online classes were not conducted during the lockdown period, then, we would not be able to study or finish our syllabus or be able to learn anything.

The travel time (to and from home and school) has also reduced and we have more time to engage in other things. More importantly, if we do not finish our work on time, teachers won't be able to punish us!

As for the disadvantages, many teachers had trouble adjusting to this type of teaching system as they had problems in using gadgets or setting up their laptops or phones. As an example, one teacher held her phone in her hand while writing something on a piece of paper which was not clear at all. Some students also had problems due to network issues, for instance, time lags, frozen screens, getting disconnected from the meeting etc.

Another reason online classes are harmful is that there is too much exposure to electronic gadgets as we have to sit in front of the laptop all day, attending school, writing and submitting many projects and homework as word documents and then attend our other tuitions, which are also online. This has an adverse effect on our mental and physical health, such as harming our eyesight and posture.

Many teachers believe that since we are sitting at home all day, we have a lot of free time, due to which they give us a lot of homework. Sometimes, it is almost double the homework we used to get in school, which was already a lot. In addition to this, we have extra homework from tuitions and some students attend private institutions like Akash and Vidhya Mandir Classes (VMC) which take four-hour classes. All this takes up a lot of time and adds to the stress of preparing for tests in our schools and tuitions. We hope that teachers will adjust our homework according to tests and reduce the volume of work.

Of course, the syllabus has reduced so much and only very short questions or Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQ) are asked for tests, but because of this, many of the more important chapters, which are very necessary as the basis for further understanding, are not tested. This means that we are unable to gain much knowledge and are only studying very simple chapters from which it is easy to ask short questions in tests. Also, as we are all getting used to responding only to short-answer type questions and tests in the form of MCQs, in our higher studies, we may not be able to write long answers in the allotted time as we will not be used to doing so.

Another disadvantage is that many students do not want to pay attention in classes and do not like it when teachers ask us to switch on the cameras as they consider it free time and want to laze around. Because of this, teachers are unable to make sure if the students are paying

attention. This is a disadvantage because when we are in the classroom teachers at least know who is listening and who is not. The classes also become non-interactive, and teachers complain about how they feel they are teaching muted screens with barely anyone responding.

In conclusion, according to my observation, there are more disadvantages than advantages of online classes. I love school and want to have fun in learning and wish these problems can be addressed. I am longing to go back to my normal school!

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No society, however rich and developed, had moved their school education into a completely technology-based one before the pandemic, which is a clear indication of what mature education systems think about the use of technology for education.

B S Rishikesh, Questioning the New Normal - Online Learning, p 25.

Innovating Learning | Reinforcing Connections

Vardhna Puri, Jyotsna Lall and Hyder Mehdi Rizvi

Background

Lockdown in India, which began in the third week of March, was perhaps the strictest in the world. In the sphere of education, it has been over eight months and schools and *anganwadis* are still closed. The children of Nizamuddin Basti were seriously impacted by the lockdown as almost all their formal education and part of their nutrition depended on the services of the school and *anganwadi* centres. This corroborates the findings from other parts of the country as well, though the long-term impact will only unfold gradually.

The second blow came when the *Tablighi Jamaat* headquarters, located in Nizamuddin Basti was identified as a source of COVID-19 and Nizamuddin Basti was sealed off leaving the children with no options for schooling. There was, practically, no learning support and the only stimulation seemed to be doing whatever they could manage on their own or watching TV.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) is not new to Nizamuddin Basti. We have been implementing the *Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative*, a public-private partnership project that since 2007 aims to use heritage conservation as a stepping stone to improve the quality of lives of the community. From 2008, our education programme has been ensuring access to quality education to children in Nizamuddin Basti.

The lockdown and the subsequent sealing off of the area led to immense suffering in the community, particularly to the 78 percent people who worked in the informal sector and were dependent on daily wages. The Aga Khan agencies* responded to this situation through the distribution of dry rations, creating awareness, mask distribution and supporting the government in sero-surveys. Through community contact, we also identified vulnerable families that needed extra support.

Seeing no end in sight to the pandemic and the impact of the continued closing of the *anganwadis* and schools on children's learning, coupled with limited or no access to data and devices, AKF decided to work with the parents through community teachers so that they, in turn, could help their children learn.

Response to the pandemic

The continuation of educational services was all the more challenging as the transition to online learning was not possible for most of the students studying in the school, much less for the children in the *anganwadi* centres. We started with *WhatsApp* in April 2020 as Nizamuddin Basti was a containment zone but soon realised that this strategy was inadequate as an initial survey identified only around 250 children who had access to smartphones, which is less than 20 percent of all children covered under AKF's School Improvement Programme. However, currently, both online and offline modes are being used to bring down costs.

Initially, the AKF team sent assignments through *WhatsApp* and made videos to explain concepts so that the learning process could continue. However, it soon came to light that it was a struggle for both teachers and children. Engaging with children through technology requires a nuanced understanding of the way technology can be used, how to make it a *reciprocal* system, rather than teachers simply sending instructions/photos/videos. Another consideration was that, in most cases, children were able to access mobile phones only at night, when their parents (mostly the father) returned from work. High data charges, especially with shrinking incomes, would not allow many children to upload the assignments to send back to the teachers, which left the teachers in the dark about children's learning. This understanding of ground realities is something that government programmes seem to miss.

When it was clear that all the children could not be supported through an online programme, AKF decided to carry out community-based activities to promote learning. Community teachers carried out extensive surveys, with necessary precautions, to identify the children who were in need of support. As these are predominantly migrant localities, many children had gone back to their villages with their parents, Of those who stayed behind from the original survey (done before the children went to their villages), 700 children enrolled in three

primary schools and 120 children enrolled in seven *anganwadi* centres were identified for home and community learning.

The new methods adopted

Pre-COVID education modes, which were geared towards making learning engaging for children, included using activities and hands-on learning in the classroom and placing the children's experiences at the centre of learning. Children's learning processes do not change drastically even in unusual times, including the present one: they will learn when they are actively engaged in the learning process. So, the challenge now was to make parents and community members partners in the new form of online learning. This is what the teachers were trying to replicate in the children's homes.

The intervention began at the primary level with the providing of worksheets which could be completed by the children with support from parents. The children, or their parents, collected worksheets every week from the school where the community teacher discussed the work to be done. They also collected the previous week's worksheets to assess what each child had learnt. The worksheets were designed to strike a balance between *structured* and *unstructured* activities. For instance, if sums were given, children were also encouraged to put down their imagination on paper by making up a story and illustrating it or imagining themselves as a character in the story or creating puzzles with the given shapes.

Rafia (6) and Mariam (3) are enrolled in the school and *anganwadi* respectively. A story about a red balloon from NCERT's Barkha series was given to be read out. The children are encouraged to draw what they wish after hearing a story. Rafia read the story out to Mariam and encouraged her to draw. She wrote *'gubbara'* on Mariam's drawing as the teacher is always reminding parents to write whatever children say, a key activity for emergent literacy. Rafia practices her reading and writing while telling stories to Mariam.

Izan of class V and Noor Mohammed of class III are among two of the many children who sit in the park to complete their work as most homes lack enough space. Being older, Izan is able to help Noor with concepts such as 'carry-over' in two-digit addition. Work seamlessly transitions into play, both equally engaging.

A different strategy has been adopted for children enrolled in the *anganwadi* centres. The teachers visit every family on a fixed day each week to discuss the activities that they can carry out at home with their children and demonstrate to them by reading out a story or conducting activities with children. Parents are encouraged to spend some time each day 'working' with their children. The teachers also answer questions, provide clarifications and take feedback.

A range of materials, including colours, chalk, drawing paper and clay, is provided to the children to use for various activities. Each week, about ten activities are discussed with the parents who do two activities with the children each day. A booklet with a story, a rhyme and two worksheets related to the ongoing theme is also provided. The teacher explains this 'package' to a parent or an older sibling.

Parents are encouraged to turn to their immediate environment and pay attention to how it can help with learning. Utensils, vegetables and occasionally even footwear is used by the parents for seriation, matching, sorting and pattern-making activities. Counting is done while chapatis are being made or vegetables being sorted. The floor is utilised to make lines of all kinds to practise balancing skills. Parents are encouraged to tell stories from their experiences, as well as through simple illustrations provided to them along with the worksheets for emergent literacy.

Reflections

This is an ongoing programme – at least until the time educational institutions open. While this period has been hard for parents and children, we have also seen it as an opportunity to facilitate parents' engagement with their children – something that we had not been able to do successfully in the past – as well as their trust in the teachers. What has been heartening is the parents' enthusiasm to engage with their children, which dismisses the assumption that families from disadvantaged backgrounds do not give adequate attention to their children's learning.

Many learning practices are woven into the everyday lives and the teachers can play a part in expanding the scope of these. One example is parents working together with children of multiple age-groups with an older sibling helping the younger child, with or without parental supervision. There has been an instance where a parent visited the house of a teacher (who had been absent on the account of illness) to enquire about her absence on a given

day and to collect the activities for the week. Most parents sit with children to conduct the activities, signalling active engagement in their learning. The purpose of designing activities in this manner was also to reinforce the idea that formal literacy is not the only way by which parents can engage with the learning of their children; that informal interaction and fun with children is also a way of learning.

While we look forward to the pandemic ending soon and schools and *anganwadis* reopening, we hope a legacy of these times will be that of parents actively supporting their children's learning.

Teaching parents to work with their children

*The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and Aga Khan Foundation (AKF)

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A Will to Teach and a Will to Learn

Yash Kumar Singhal

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. It hit everyone regardless of their status or background. And with schools closing, exams getting cancelled and over one billion learners impacted worldwide, education is among those fields that have been hit the hardest.

Institutions tried to provide temporary relief through online classes and asynchronous learning, but these too have their problems. Students were missing out on things like practical exposure and peer-to-peer discussions that would take place in a physical classroom. On top of that, increased screen time, unresolved doubts, load on teachers and unequal access to technology were also barriers to effective learning. The education system began to suffer because it is not resilient or adaptive enough to work under such drastic turbulence. It has been due for a complete redesign from some time now and this pause that COVID-19 has forced upon us is the perfect time for us to do just that. As no one can understand student problems better than students themselves, we needed to take matters into our own hands.

Finding solutions that work

During the lockdown period, my school organised a *Changemaker Challenge* which I entered with some friends. The task was to come up with a solution for making learning more efficient and inclusive during the pandemic and then pitching that solution to a panel of judges who would fund the project. After brainstorming for days, listing down all our crazy ideas and doing all we could to get inspiration, my team and I still had nothing.

Micro-schooling

Finally, on the solution submission deadline, with some help from my parents, I thought of *micro-schooling*. The rationale is fairly simple: we cannot go to school because if so many people from all parts of the city collect at one place, the virus becomes impossible to track and can very easily create hundreds of carriers every day. So, the main idea behind micro-schooling is - *if we can't go to school, why can't school come to us?*

Think about it like this. At home, we are living with our families, interacting with them, talking to them, hugging them… all without fear of catching the virus. This is because we know that within our respective homes, no one is infected. Similarly, if the city were divided into *micro-geographies* with few or no cases, everyone within those bubbles of safety can interact freely! This way, with the necessary precautions, students and teachers from within the same locality can meet up in small groups to continue education without the problems of online school.

And why just students and teachers? 'Learners' and 'volunteers' from all ages and backgrounds could share their skills and knowledge to create a web of learning, eventually enhancing the education of the entire community. The classes could be conducted out in the open air, we can have a *gurukul-esque* exchange of knowledge enriched with discussions, demonstrations and conversations. All this, while not having to worry about the virus.

Starting off

As our project did not need any funding, we did not win the *Changemaker Challenge*. My friends lost interest after this, but I remained passionate about the idea and decided to test it out within my own residential complex. So, armed with a hastily-made Google form, a simple poster and my sister's small whiteboard, I set out to make a difference.

In my first pilot session, I had just two students. I remember standing there in the middle of the park in my apartment complex, trying to teach these two middle-schoolers about punnet squares and blood types when a primary school girl came up and sat down for my class, eager to learn.

Seeing how even such a young girl was able to learn concepts of genetics, made me realise that all it takes is a will to teach and a will to learn. Her enthusiasm gave me the push to come back the next day for another class. This time we had nine learners and, just like that, one day at a time, the class size grew and the sessions evolved – from volunteers teaching science, maths and English to

professionals teaching about the Design Process, architecture, public speaking and even the German language!

My experience

We were a few weeks into micro-schooling when I read the news about the state government's ban on online classes. Realising that the need of the hour was to help students continue their education without schools functioning, I organised a few syllabus-oriented classes for younger students from grades III to V. In our first such class, which was about fractions, there was just one student. Nevertheless, we started the class and sometime during the session, my little classroom caught the attention of two children who were playing nearby. Although they were wary at first, curiosity got the better of them and soon they had joined the class, proving that learning is also contagious.

I truly believe that this concept is an awesome solution to education during an emergency situation and could even be continued post-pandemic. I hope that others will follow my example and step forward to solve other problems in the community too. To complain is to have identified a problem, but one must then go one step further and actually try to solve it.

Currently, I am working on creating a write-up that can help guide students in other areas on how they can set up their own micro-schools. Through this, I want to further expand this network of learners and volunteers and spread the motto of *schools can close but learning cannot stop!*

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Online Professional Development Programmes | Reflections

Nimrat Khandpur

The context

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a mixed bag of experiences with respect to teacher professional development programmes. While it has enabled many more persons to access training programmes at very low costs, it has also extensively changed the dynamics of the programmes, not necessarily for the better.

For one, the *number* of participants has dramatically increased – if I was told six months back to anchor a series of lectures for 400 teachers at one go, I probably would have been at a loss! However, where online programmes are concerned, the only limitation of numbers appears to be the number of participants *allowed* by the technology platform as well as the capacity of mobile phones to access the platform. It also follows that it becomes difficult to keep track of the chat-box even if only a proportion of participants are asking questions or responding to a thought.

Second, online platforms can create an *illusion* of extensive participation. Since you cannot really see the person responding each time, if the video is off or response is from a person not on the grid in front of you, or chat messages are coming in quickly and even if the same persons are responding to the facilitator, again and again, it appears that a rich discussion involving the participants is underway. However, it is entirely possible that the remaining participants are struggling with technology issues or are somehow not able to connect with the topic under discussion. Thus, compared to the online experience, face-to-face programmes offer much greater ease for facilitators to assess participants' interest and understanding and enable them to alter the discussions as required.

Third, the *duration* of the programmes is limited by the need to keep screen time at a minimum. In our experience, the duration for which participants and facilitators can stay meaningfully engaged is about one-and-a-half to a maximum of two hours.

Last, but certainly not the least, the *planning* process itself has changed. This shift has taken time – from thinking of sessions as is usual in a face-to-face mode, to thinking of them in an extremely structured manner with very strict time boundaries – each moment has to be planned, leading to a kind of detailed *storyboarding* while preparing the sessions. Resources have had to be tailored to the online mode, or an entirely new set of resources sourced and/or created. It follows that the kind of flexibility offered by face-to-face programmes – to take short diversions into related areas, to modify an activity on the spot, etc – have to be dispensed with.

Modalities

The foregoing methodology has informed several programmes in the past six months since the first lockdown – the approach has been to clearly identify the *objectives* of the programme, the nature of the *platform* and the *capacity* of facilitators and participants. A key component of planning has been to try and give every participant a voice, even if it is not necessarily 'heard' by all the other participants, not only through keeping track of participation but also through submissions related to assigned tasks on *WhatsApp* or other platforms.

The effort has been to keep the number of participants similar to that in a face-to-face programme unless the approach is to have webinars, wherein speakers put forth their thoughts on a focus topic, with questions or comments invited periodically from the audience. While webinars are useful in the sense that they enable the reach to a large group of people, their purpose is to *inform* or *orient*, as opposed to helping participants engage with something in a more focused manner.

While the number of participants has ranged at times from 30-40, there have been instances of about 200-300 participants who needed to be part of the same programme. In the latter case, two approaches have been taken. One is to create parallel sessions, provided a sufficient number of facilitators are available and the other is to have a webinar followed by planned interaction among smaller groups of participants.

When using parallel sessions, groups of 30-50 participants have been created. Criteria for grouping have included: subject area of expertise, a mix of gender as well as the districts/schools the participants belong to and in some instances, we have mixed educational qualifications to distribute persons across groups.

In the case of parallel sessions, planning becomes even more critical – even if the subject areas for each group are different, there has to be coherence. For example, one group cannot concentrate primarily on content and pedagogy while another concentrates on classroom management. Therefore, numerous discussions among facilitators and several iterations of plans are required to ensure commonality across groups while retaining the specificity required on account of each group's focus area. This is applicable even if the groups are addressing the same areas since each facilitator must have the autonomy to plan sessions and to alter their plan as they go along based on the responses of participants.

Tasks

As mentioned earlier, when getting a large number of facilitators together is not possible, interactions among smaller groups of participants can be facilitated. One of the modes could be to have a common webinar in the morning with the facilitator creating a task or set of questions for participants to discuss, and if relevant, a video or a reading to be shared. This is followed, after a suitable interval, by small-group discussions among participants based on the task set by the facilitator. The discussion is facilitated by a peer mentor who has been oriented to the task. Again, the scope for scaffolding by facilitators is not available. At the end of the day, each participant submits her responses to specific questions, which the facilitator can read and incorporate in the next session.

Breakout rooms

Another option exercised was to use *breakout sessions*, offered by some platforms, wherein the facilitator orients participants for a task and then sends them into 'breakout rooms' (unfortunately, this facility is available only with Zoom). Sharing by the participants can be used to take the session forward.

While breakout rooms are useful to enable small group discussions, it takes time for discussions to build up and it is also difficult for the facilitator to move from one room to the other since time is limited. The need to keep screen time to a minimum is an ever-present criterion and all too often, breakout rooms end up having suboptimal usage. Also, since each group may not be able to present their views, sessions remain truncated.

All these options were tried out for different groups of participants and the one that was most satisfactory in terms of participant engagement and facilitator ease involved small groups of 20-30, with two sessions a day. The first session was led by the facilitator, followed by discussions based on specific tasks during the second session of the day.

Using tasks optimally

To optimise time for learning, two sessions can be arranged in a single day, with participants engaging with a relevant task in the time between sessions. These tasks are usually submitted on *WhatsApp* groups created, especially for the programme. This task is extremely useful in the sense that it enables participants to review their learning and, if there are related submissions, for the facilitator to assess the transaction so far. However, the scaffolding that face-to-face programmes enable through small-group-facilitation or the support provided by facilitators is entirely missing.

The task becomes even more important when a concrete outcome is expected. For example, an online programme was conducted for developing a plan document for teacher education institutes – a complex task even when conducted in-person requiring three-fold changes: first, participants need to make a shift from their current functioning to one informed by policy and best practices; second, identifying specific actions they need to take over a period of a few years and; third, identifying the resources that will enable this shift. The approach was a mix of interactions with experts in various key areas related to teacher education and the sharing of tasks based on detailed templates with very specific questions for inputs from experts as well as peers.

However, despite a pre-task to prepare the participants for the reflection required for the programme, the task spilled over beyond the stipulated time spent online. In a face-to-face programme, time for interaction would have been greater along with scope for discussion with peers and scaffolding by facilitators. This would have helped achieve the outcomes more efficiently.

Using tasks also puts tremendous pressure on the facilitator to go through all the submissions

and collate areas that need to be discussed again or need to be presented differently. At the same time, personal references to submissions also reassure participants that their thoughts are not going into some kind of a digital vacuum. This also implies that whatever the task may be, to ensure that the facilitator can read them quickly and make sense of them, submissions must be brief. Hence the need to create simple templates or questions for participants to place their observations and reflections for the facilitator to go through in a quick and efficient manner. While this restricts the autonomy of the participants, it is a necessary compromise.

Reflections on the experience

Technology-related issues persist throughout the programmes. While facilitators, at times, reported hardware issues, participants frequently had connectivity glitches which caused them to miss parts of the sessions. Time was also a constraint in many sessions. While some facilitators felt they needed more time to close discussions or take more responses from participants, a spill-over of 5-10 minutes meant some participants logged out due to battery issues or because their phones were getting heated.

At times, the transaction had to be one-way due to the need for structure and limitations of the medium. The lack of a black/whiteboard (although platforms offer this option, its use needs expertise) or the sharing of group work hampered the development of ideas using participants' own experiences. With a few groups, it was clear that due to the lack of facilitation during breakout sessions, discussions were not adequately scaffolded. Reflections shared by participants later indicated they were capable of far richer responses than they were able to contribute during sessions.

Facilitators are used to reading body language, which was entirely missing and caused unease at times on how well participants were following the line of discussion.

Another issue was that the participants took time to get used to the online platform – there is a clear need for a dedicated person to support participants in dealing with technology. It is impossible for the facilitator to deal with technology issues while managing sessions. Similarly, a single facilitator would find managing a session very taxing, particularly since participants tend to use the *Chat* function a lot. It is also easy to miss a 'raised hand' since the computer window shows a limited number of participants.

Detailed planning by facilitators, including practice in using various technology platforms and a quick shift to a transaction style required by the online mode, is necessary. Facilitators also need to be wary - it is easy to slip into the feeling that everything is going well since the Chat keeps buzzing and there are no disturbances (participants are on 'mute' unless they need to contribute to the discussion). However, it is difficult to be certain that all participants are engaging.

Lastly, consolidation of sessions in a structured manner is key, since it ties together all the discussions at the end, including for participants who may have missed something.

Final thoughts

There is no denying that technology increases the reach. It enables a single speaker to reach out to large numbers, but at the same time, meaningful interaction is only possible with small groups, over a period of time. Hence, this can be an effective means for small groups of teachers to come together as communities of learners provided, they meet in person periodically for formal lectures or interactions, or even to create materials, etc.

It is important to note that relationships can develop even in this mode – when groups are smaller, facilitators and participants get to know each other over a few days and a lively interaction is possible. At this time, when we have had to make dramatic shifts in the way we live and learn, it is heartening to know that human interaction, even if mediated by technology, still has priority.

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Young Children and Psychological Distress

Pinki Solanki

Sitting away from my clients (children and adults) and watching them on the screen talk about the way they are coping with the pandemic, I have been witnessing a lot of anxiety each one is dealing with. It is hard to say who is more affected, difficult to identify the depth of breakdown of internal coping for each one and decide the severity of the impact of the dilution of physical boundaries on each member of the family. The focus here is on the impact of these increased anxieties on the very young (children in the primary years of schooling) as unlike adolescents and adults, their dependence on family systems for attending to their emotional and learning needs are much higher. While one is categorising families and children's experiences based on reporting, it is important to highlight that there is a significant role that the segregation of home and school boundaries play as both spaces offer differing boundary settings and containment experiences that complement a child's holistic growth. The dilution of physical boundaries and classrooms moving into personal spaces has taken away the advantages of these two separate spaces for the child.

I am highlighting some of the recurring themes in counselling sessions with the objective of broadening the understanding of the psychological distress being experienced by children.

To begin, it is important to establish that a classroom is a place where children bring, create and carry back emotions. It is this continuum of learning between the family to the classroom and back to the family that has got severely disrupted by the entry of COVID-19 into our lives. As Vygotsky's Theory of Development states, the construction of knowledge and understanding is an inherently social activity. The adult and child interact and together they construct new knowledge (intermental). It is only by following this that it is possible for the child to internalise new knowledge for individual reflection and understanding (intramental stage). Intramental activity is accelerated by intermental (social activity). For learning to happen, the intermental zone needs to be successfully maintained. However, if the dialogue between the learner and teacher fails to keep minds mutually attuned, the intermental development zone collapses, and the learning comes to a halt.

Let us look at how the changes brought about by COVID-19 have impacted the intermental development zone, thus affecting the intramental space of children with the following example of a father.

Robert, a young, single father elaborates: *'It is so many changes in such a short period that Varun (his 5 1/2-year-old son) and I don't know how to adapt with it. Some days I know what to do, but I can't implement the said idea while earning my bread and butter. I have been managing my job, home and son for the last 4 years quite effectively with some support from my live-in caretaker and parents. But with the pandemic hitting our country in March, my parents are no longer visiting me, and the caretaker has moved back to her village in Sirsi due to the loss of her husband's job. The temporary caretaker is not as well known to Varun, which impacts his moods severely.'*

One of the first impacts of COVID-19 was the sudden changes in the entire functioning of all systems around us, be it family, school or office. As a result, one had to deal with new rules of conduct before one could grieve over the loss of familiar and safe spaces. This particularly increased fear and anxiety among young children who are usually dependent upon adult caretakers in school and home for containing it for them. In Varun's case, the loss of his caretaker, his grandparents, his peers and, lastly, his school, left him entirely dependent upon his father and teachers for containing his emotions. However, both these sets of caretakers were also struggling with the new and *unfamiliar*. The child's needs thus ended up competing with the adult's needs and increased anxiety at all

levels, disturbing the possibility of nurturing the *intermental connection*.

Secondly, when we look back at the last six months, we see that there were multiple layers of newness. Schools shut down as they neared the end of the academic year, as usual. But when they finally reopened, the children were abruptly thrust into an entirely foreign environment, that of online learning, with a new class, unfamiliar teachers, classmates who did not even know each other's names. It was exponentially worse for children with new admissions. As a ground rule, new tasks, routines and settings are introduced only gradually to young children as their cognitive and emotional development lacks the absorption capacity, unlike that of an adolescent or adult mind. However, in 2020, the enormous amount of newness in the environment was combined with learning goals and before attaining an optimum comfort with those, young children were expected to learn. No wonder we are observing an increased reporting of children's withdrawal symptoms in academic spaces. It is a sign that the intermental space between the learner and teacher is not attuned to the needs of the child and is showing up in the decreased intramental absorption.

Let us go back to Robert's example to understand this further. *'I notice my son being very sad and anxious in the mornings, unlike when he was going to school. I notice he is losing interest in attending classes and is not even doing any writing work despite multiple reminders by teachers. He was far more engaged with his studies last year. I think the loss of excitement is related to multiple reasons, such as loss of fun of getting ready for school, waiting at the bus stand, chatting with friends on the way to school. His young mind is finding it hard to adjust with so many changes and frankly, I am falling short of addressing his needs and so are his teachers.'*

I have been seeing Robert in therapy for the last two years and this is the first time I find him unable to support his son. What this is pointing to is that the children are shifting into primitive defences needed for their survival but in the absence of an understanding among adults regarding *'what is happening to them'*, they are genuinely challenged to support children to stay in touch with their feelings. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology and the founder of psychoanalysis, elaborates on the defences that develop in the context of anxiety as the life-instinct of human beings naturally/unconsciously triggers survival by distorting reality. As in the above case, Varun is just displaying some of the defences such as denial, repression, regression, dissociation and an instinctive shifting towards numbing his senses and this is clearly apparent through his withdrawal behaviours in personal and academic spaces.

Children's sense of loss

The loss is both at the inter- and intra-psychic experience levels. The physical segregation of spaces and activities conducted in these, in a normal situation, used to offer an opportunity for young children to systemically experience themselves through multiple senses like *touch, smell, sight, sound and finally, words*. In the last six to seven months, the experience of the self and learning is limited to two senses, i.e. hearing and seeing screens. In my experience, the comfort of familiar external physical contact that leads to the associated connection with the self and one's senses and varied opportunities of containment while engagement in learning has disappeared.

The newer ways of contact are hugely dependent on the self. This brings back the limitation concerning young children's development stage that interferes in their healthy engagement in learning if they have to heavily burden themselves with preparatory tasks for learning, such as switching on a laptop, monitoring the connection. As a result, they are arriving with their bodies switched off for learning and mind preoccupied with organising learning tools. To summarise, I can say that the pandemic has taken away the optimum level of hunger satisfaction on the continuum of three Cs in young children's lives to function and learn.

1. Comfort – When a child goes to the same class, keeps his lunch bag on the same table, sits on his desk and waits for the teacher to start the morning ritual, it is this comfort with the familiarity that supports learning.
2. Connection – The connection is at the kinaesthetic level that the child's body gets through moving, touching and feeling his surroundings and peers physically.
3. Containment – The trust in the possibility of containment of his anxiety (if something unexpected troubles him) is enhanced through the presence of his peers and teacher.

Another strongly associated loss for young children is the loss of an opportunity to be seen. It is important to highlight that children in their primary years of schooling are highly dependent on

external stroking to gain a sense of achievement. Their sense of self-worth is experienced through validation of what they do and the experience that stays through social interactions is, *'I do, so I am seen and when I am seen, I am good'*.

Development theorist Erik Erikson elaborates this in his identity theory where he has defined the development milestones for 6 to 11-year-olds of resolving a basic strength of competence. Children of this age travel between industriousness and inferiority while performing tasks and the greater the sense of industry, the greater is the strength of competence. Online classes are taking away the possibility of being seen in multiple ways and thereby directly impacting the psychological growth of children on this parameter. For example, a mother shared how her daughter stopped writing in her notebook because she did not see the point due to the fact that her teacher no longer rewarded her with stars. Another client shared that her 8-year-old loved school for the identity he got from swimming and basketball competitions. Now the only way he can be seen is through academic activities so, he rather not attend classes than feel side-lined.

A small population of children, who prefer fewer interpersonal contacts due to their predisposition towards social anxiety or introverted personality may benefit from not being seen. A couple who seeks counselling were sharing how both their children have shown extremely contrasting reactions to online classes. Their daughter of 6 years being an extrovert, has become extremely disinterested in any form of learning during school and non-school hours while the 10-year-old son, who been an introvert even as an infant has become quite self-generative in creating a lot of activities, tasks around his learning themes that he picks up from online teaching.

Lastly, the theme that is often presented in the counselling space is how diverse coping behaviours demonstrated by young children interact with their home environment, either by adding or reducing their burden. One notices three big categories of families. Firstly, families where there is a lot of space for interpersonal communication and parents who are highly attuned to children's emotions and available for supporting study at home. Secondly, families where parents are unavailable due to social, emotional or professional reasons resulting in children either missing an interaction or disliking a sudden increase in their parent's physical availability. Thirdly, families where anxiety absorption capacity is minimal and the child's home-schooling is being constantly watched and subsequently, being used to punish them.

As one can imagine, we are not noticing a high number of hurdles among the first set of families as the containment and support is the right combination for children and is, therefore, supporting their ability to learn. However, the bigger distress is being reported by the latter two types of families, as the child's experiences are bordering on neglect and abuse. For example, a young mother puts forth her experience, *'My daughter has never been good in studies and I would be called to the school, but I would often support my daughter and ask school authorities to also accommodate her preferences. But now when I see her being home-schooled, I notice she is just not interested and keeps running out of her room to my workplace. Since it happens daily, I don't have the bandwidth to understand her. Often, she refuses to go back to the study table resulting in me shouting and slapping her. On regular days, by the time she used to return from school, I would have finished my work and would have rested for an hour. This meant that I could attend to her studies without exhausting myself both physically and mentally. But now with the increased workload at home, and her needing my attention all the time, I find myself unable to support her like I previously could'*.

Mitigating distress

To begin with, the most important issue to consider is how we make the self the focus of all the interventions and support the validation of feelings for each member. The teacher who is stretched at all levels needs to be seen for her/his efforts and their feelings need to be considered before we expect them to support children. Parents who are as impacted by the pandemic need to hear that they are important and so are their feelings. And of course, the child who is dependent on both needs to experience that her/his wellbeing is more important than anything that they are doing. Overall a systemic approach is needed. We are noticing many schools have opened their counselling facility for supporting teachers by holding weekly and fortnightly sessions. Similarly, many companies that were not offering free counselling services to their employees have started this service. Such efforts are helpful and need to increase in intensity.

Having said this, a reinforced focus would be needed on children. The focus of educational and family

systems needs to be on building an understanding that many children will not be in the *doing mode* during the pandemic as their bodies have moved into coping, yet their *being* is still valuable. So how does one do that? The easiest and most helpful way is by bringing children more and more into a *feeling space* and letting them talk about what is happening to them in an unstructured way. For example, many schools are creating unstructured circle time and life skill classes. Similarly, children who are feeling more isolated due to lack of communication spaces also need additional support in the form of one-to-one counselling sessions and *feeling checks* set up by the school counsellors. Lastly, as discussed, children derive a lot by being seen through interpersonal contact, so creating group spaces for non-academic activities such as yoga, music, theatre class can be quite beneficial to enable children to come out of their *defence mode and become more present in their bodies*.

**Names have been changed to protect identities*

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Digital Education and Children with Disabilities

Pooja Pandey

Introduction

School education for children with disabilities (CWD) has always been in the doldrums in India. As per the Census 2011 (MHA, 2011), only 61 percent of the total number of CWDs between the age group of 5-19 years are going to school. Recent studies (*Swabhiman* 2020) have also suggested a large and increasing dropout rate of students with disabilities due to the inaccessible digital learning landscape (PTI, 2020). The situation has worsened with the spread of COVID because regular classes have abruptly shifted to digital modes and have sharply increased difficulties for CWDs, their parents and teachers. The pandemic has created unanticipated reliance on digital education- a relatively new and uncharted territory for these children.

The context

The responsibility of the education of children with disabilities lies primarily with two ministries, though in different capacities. The Department of Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities (DEPD) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Welfare is responsible for launching and implementing special schemes related to rehabilitation and education of persons with disabilities (PWDs) as well as regulating the education and training of rehabilitation professionals and special educators. The Ministry of Human Resource Department (HRD) addresses the educational needs of CWDs through schemes under *Samagra Sikhsha Abhiyaan* and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

With respect to education technology, in particular, the Central Institute of Education Technology (CIET) is involved in promoting the use of educational technologies, namely, radio, TV, films, satellite communications and cyber media etc. The CIET has also undertaken initiatives like the *Barkha* reading series, audiobooks (using DAISY) to facilitate the accessibility of school curriculum for CWDs (CIET, Accessibility in School Curriculum-NCERT's Initiatives, 2017).

In addition to this, the Central Government's recent initiatives (the CIET and ICT initiatives of NCERT) like the PM's *e-Vidya* platform (Times, 2020), PRAGYATA Guidelines (MHRD, PRAGYATA-Guidelines for Digital Education, 2020) (Section 3.4) recognise the needs of CWDs. However, there are no dedicated public announcements or actions addressing how online modes of classroom teaching and other forms of education will be used during the pandemic for children with disabilities. These children are also covered under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) Act as a '*disadvantaged group*' and are eligible for free and compulsory education.

Problems of policy

In the area of education, India has taken remarkable strides in protecting the educational rights of CWDs and putting in place a robust legal framework. The MHRD's *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan* has its roots in the United Nations World Declaration on Education for All (EFA, UN) which called for the Rights of Children (including children with special needs) and demanded an inclusive education environment. India was a signatory to the EFA.

Other mandates have reinforced these demands. However, the rapidly changing nature of education and the gradual onset of digital learning have created the need for developing a parallel legal and policy framework to make digital education inclusive and accessible. What we have right now is a fragmented and uncoordinated policy landscape around inclusive digital education in India.

The issue of digital inclusion can be understood from the standpoints of infrastructure and design. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has released a list of recommendations in 2018 (TRAI, 2018) to make ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) universally accessible to education. However, the document exhibits concerns of coordination and implementation. The recommendation also directs government websites to be accessible to persons with disabilities, which has still not been applied to a range of government websites including educational websites like

e-Pathshala and others (Rathee, 2019).

For education, in particular, the MHRD has released a National Policy for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in School Education (MHRD, National Policy on ICT in School Education, 2012), stressing on building inclusive and accessible digital infrastructure in schools. However, it is silent on including universal design principles in digital education technologies and is not reflective of the updated Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

Digital education is being made accessible in outdated and uncoordinated ways. The RTE Act, 2009 itself provides norms and standards only for physical infrastructure in schools. The Schedule to the RTE Act simply states that teaching and learning equipment will be provided to each class as required, without considering that such equipment might have to be digital for it to be inclusive.

Finding solutions

Fixing the policy

In order to re-work the digital education policy, the first step is a coordinated approach to inclusive education that makes universal accessibility norms an integral part of the content-creation process rather than a supplementary exercise. The MHRD should coordinate with the Ministry of Electronics and IT and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disability to devise standardised guidelines for digital education infrastructure for learners with disabilities that are in accordance with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

The next step is making these guidelines mandatory for all ICT service providers (public and private) of education. There is also a pressing need to ensure adherence to the long-overdue recommendation from TRAI (2008) to make all government websites accessible for persons with disabilities.

With respect to specific acts and policies, the National Policy for ICT in School Education needs a review and an update in order to develop comprehensive guidelines on the accessibility of digital education. Similarly, it is important to amend the schedule of the RTE Act to include norms and standards on inclusive digital education that are applicable to schools. In addition, the accessibility standards for ICT in education should be notified under Section 40 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

Lastly, hopes for Inclusive Digital Education also hinge on the much-awaited National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) which indicates in bits and pieces its visions for building more accessible and inclusive learning technologies.

Learning from experience

It is important to learn from practices and examples and COVID-19, while throwing at us some unprecedented challenges, has also opened the doors to innovation and reflection. It could offer a level playing field for technology-based learning and can empower not just children with special needs but also their educators and parents. There is a need to bring multiple stakeholders together and devise unique and adaptable solutions to enable inclusion of all children. Many multilateral agencies like the World Bank (WB, 2020), are already curating best practices from all around the world on innovation in education during this pandemic.

In addition, many India-based civil society organisations are undertaking field-based research and data collection to assess the impact of COVID on the education of children with disabilities. Multiple reports and studies have pointed out the lack of devices such as smartphones, televisions etc. as an important reason for children being excluded from the online learning space. For others, it is the unavailability of high-speed internet, not knowing how to operate these devices/applications, inaccessible content form, inadequately equipped special educators etc. Several standalone organisations (Manral, 2020) are also actively producing, distributing and encouraging more viable, accessible and reachable online content to children who are otherwise left out of the discourse. States like Kerala are successfully employing more accessible and widely available infrastructure, like television, to ensure continued learning and are even providing tailor-made classes to CWDs through initiatives like *Whiteboard* (K, 2020)

The next steps

While this pandemic has created unparalleled difficulties for humanity, it has also encouraged introspection and innovation. Seen only from the point of access and not inclusion (Pandey, 2020), it could become an opportunity to enable inclusion for all children by building common bases in education through technology-based learning. Children with disabilities are often not included in strategy-planning for digital learning (UNICEF, 2020), a narrative that can be changed now. Deploying e-learning methods can also assist special educators to reach many children simultaneously. But all of

this can come together only when the government takes an active interest in building technologies and capacities to make education truly inclusive and universal. This will demand a 'well-directed and adequate public investment, sound policy-making and democratic participation of students, teachers, administrators and communities.' (India, 2020)

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Online Learning | Reality in the Hinterlands

Rammohan Khanapurkar

The disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic put India's education sector in a tight spot. It had either to adopt the new system of online education or languish with the offline one. The choice of online education ended up being a heavy burden for many schools, especially those in the under-served hinterlands, the primary reason being the absence of critical infrastructure to make the change seamless. It made critics question the sudden advocacy for digital education on a pan-India scale. In Maharashtra, surveys like the *Active Teachers' Forum* showed the discouraging reality of the 'digital divide'. In a mitigatory effort, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) issued the Alternative Academic Calendar (AAC) for students which laid out guidelines for teachers, students and even parents to ready themselves for online education during the lockdown period. However, these guidelines presume a certain digital preparedness and resourcefulness in adopting online education.

Practical realities

Contrary to the AAC's stated objective of providing ad hoc digital solutions, it presented unreasonable choices for teachers working with limited digital resources, as testified by those interviewed for this article. Since the lockdown started, rural regions in India have witnessed intense social churning, with migrant natives returning from cities due to loss of livelihoods. Even those tending small fields in villages have been feeling the pressure of the downturn in the economy. It was against this bleak backdrop that teachers were expected to engage children in online education on a day-to-day basis. Also, with the lockdown, teachers have had no recourse to in-person classroom sessions. Hence, maintaining regularity in formal education of many first-generation school-goers in the hinterlands has become a gridlock situation.

Specific concerns

Demographics

Discussions with teachers in a few *zila parishad* primary schools in the rural regions of Jawhar, Mokhada, and Wada blocks of the Palghar district in Maharashtra revealed some interesting details.

These regions are inhabited predominantly by Scheduled Tribes, mainly *Varli, Koli Malhar, Thakur, Mahadev Koli* and *Katkari* tribes. Of these, the Katkari is classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with a lower socioeconomic status than the others. However, due to the seasonal migration of families to cities as labour, some children from these regions drop out of school. This affects the children's learning levels in the early grades and has an academic impact on their later schooling. Thus, teachers expect these children to attend school from mid-June till the end of September. After that, even if a child migrates with her parents, the thread of learning can be picked up somehow after he or she rejoins the next year.

Keeping in touch

Young children have socio-emotional needs which are often met by the interaction within the social space of the school. Discussions with the teachers showed that their main concern was keeping children connected to the process of schooling - an objective to achieve which online schooling is too impersonal. This realisation also stemmed from the Maharashtra government's earlier (cosmetic) effort of converting state schools into digital schools under its *Educationally Progressive Maharashtra* drive in 2015. The reality, as field visits in the rural Palghar district showed, was that the digital school plan did not achieve much on the ground: it was just a flash in the pan.

The symbolic relevance of schools

The narrative of online education is tied up with the structurally distinct socioeconomic backdrop of the rural Palghar region. As the lockdown started, pictures of deserted city streets were splashed in the media. Rural areas received attention only when hordes of migrant workers from the cities started marching to their native places. In a similar migration, natives of the rural Palghar district, working in the brick kilns and industrial townships

of Thane, Bhiwandi, Vasai, Pune and towns of neighbouring Gujarat, returned to their villages. As the panic of the coronavirus set in, villagers started barricading entry points to their villages. Local teachers were pressed into service to address the panic and social tensions created by the return of migrant natives. Further, as the schools were within the village zones, the teachers had no access to resources in the schools as well.

For a teacher in a rural school, access to the school is symbolically significant. A village school located in an isolated hamlet acts as a source of hope for the locals that the perennial cycle of poverty can be broken. Also, the schools in remote villages are never shut in the conventional sense. Children always have walk-in entries to the school's premises. The school acts as a community space, epistemologically different from other structures nestling in villages. This facet is different than in urban areas, where schools can be just physical structures, empty after classroom hours and lifeless during long vacations.

One teacher said that keeping active the idea of formal schooling was of paramount concern during the lockdown. Anyone working in these regions knows how hard teachers work to raise the consciousness of formal education among local communities. Teachers did not want that consciousness to start diminishing due to schools closing during the lockdown.

Looked at in this context, online education would make the process of learning impersonal and distant, reducing an active teacher to a passive one. Understanding this background is necessary to perceive the unique set of challenges teachers face in these regions. Hence, when the government decreed online education would be the norm, teachers became sceptical and chose a different route.

Taking the school to homes

A strong emotional bond exists between a good teacher and children, particularly in rural areas. A teacher is not only an educator, but acts also as a counsellor, social worker, friend and even as a proxy parent in certain situations, looking after children's overall wellbeing. A good teacher is a greatly respected person in the socioeconomic structure of a village and needs no permission to visit homes and strike up conversations with members of the household.

By leveraging these familial bonds, teachers decided to take the school activities to the children. They also felt that this strategic coup was needed as formal education is still not perceived as a compulsory requirement among the communities in these regions. It also means the home support required for formal learning, like building informal conversations with children, encouragement for extracurricular reading and writing, etc, is non-existent. The absence of home support and print-rich surroundings make foundational learning an uphill task. Hence, the teachers strongly felt that reaching out to the children for the continuation of learning could not be supplanted by any other means.

Hands-on approach

The teachers decided to print assignment sheets and assemble the students every alternate day at a fixed place in the village. Children who had become used to wandering in the fields or working on their parents' farms in the absence of regular school, were happy to obey, even walking long distances to reach the assembly. Since the teachers have a keen understanding of the learning levels of each child, they were able to identify level-specific tasks for the children and even meet the requirements of any child who was lagging in grade-appropriate learning levels. Children were asked to take the assignment sheets home, work on them and bring them back to the next open class. One teacher even carried some tailor-made laminated sheets that could be wiped over and re-used. Another teacher carried tiles lying in his house and gave them to the students with a whiteboard pen to be used as a makeshift practice board.

The teachers would visit the villages every alternate day to review the children's learning process. One teacher from the hilly regions of Jawhar used the opportunity of doing a social survey for the State to connect with the children who were out of his sight due to the lockdown. Government teachers in urban areas were also compelled to undertake such surveys. While the density of the cities can lead a teacher to strangers' houses, in interior rural areas, a teacher knows the faces he meets during the survey.

Also, a visit to villages in the interior and hilly regions of Jawahar is nothing short of an expedition, particularly in the rainy season when in a downpour, one cannot risk descending the hill in the evening and is better off spending a night in a village. One teacher used the 'expeditions' to carry print-outs of

exercises to paste on the doors of children's homes. He requested parents to encourage children to spend time reading these sheets and in the next visit, he reviewed the children's understanding of the exercises and pasted new ones. One teacher carried a whiteboard with him and put it in a sheltered spot, thus making the whiteboard and the clean floor of a thatched courtyard a makeshift classroom during the teacher's unscheduled visits to these villages.

During all such visits, social distancing was followed to the best possible extent while interacting with children. Children were also repeatedly told to follow better hygiene and sanitation practices in daily life. Thanks to the endeavours of these teachers, learning continued in this hard terrain even in these difficult times.

Serious concerns

Efforts made by the teachers, however modest, matter greatly to keep the chain of formal learning unbroken. The system in which government teachers operate is hierarchical and bound by a top-down approach. Teachers get very little autonomy and even when they exercise it, the watchful eyes of their superiors often dampen their spirit. Although the teachers interviewed for this article were mindful of this reality, they still decided to follow their instincts in reaching out to the children by exercising their autonomy. They could easily have adopted a passive approach citing unattainability of the online education goal. However, it is their commitment towards the under-served children's formal schooling that prompted them to embrace the offline reality and work towards fixing it.

What if this entire academic year is a washout for face-to-face classroom sessions? Parents from poor families in villages may perceive irregular online education to be futile, knowing there is no substitute for in-person interactions inside school classrooms. In such a scenario, parents may force their children, especially daughters, into staying home and doing household chores. Hence, the efforts of teachers to keep the idea of in-person teaching alive matters a lot during these times.

Efforts are now on to document the ways in which the coronavirus has impacted our beliefs, assessment methodologies and dissemination modes while educating young people. These efforts should also cast their gaze on the efforts of teachers in socioeconomically backward areas, such as those referred to in this article. If it was not for these teachers, several children would otherwise slip between the cracks of online education and remain there, their dreams broken.

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Handling Stress in the Young

Sharon Sylvia

'I need my space. Why can't you understand? You don't care about me!'

For the parent, who stood astonished as he heard his twelve-year-old yell this out, what was racing through his mind was: 'We're working hard to provide everything for our child during a crisis such as this! We're there for him when he needs us most. But nothing seems to make him feel content. He is constantly irritated and annoyed, both with himself and us.' This, or similar, experiences may resonate with parents of young children, particularly teenage children because the struggle is real for both the parent and the child. Today, we are presented with a *new normal*, comprising not only new work ethics and new familial engagements, but also new mechanisms to deal with the stressors of daily life. The unprecedented situation we are faced with due to COVID-19 has impacted our young people on various fronts, their psychosocial health being one of them. The pandemic has created an overwhelming sense of helplessness and this is being observed in homes.

Drastic changes in routine

A child wakes up to a certain routine almost every day, a routine that prepares him for the day, that sets the expectations from him and prepares him for socialisation. With the ongoing pandemic, much of that routine has taken a hit, creating a sense of confusion for the child. This has emotionally burdened different age groups differently. Little children might not realise that much has altered, apart from the fact that their parents and the rest of the family are at home all the time while school is closed. For them, this could be a welcome change because spending time at home with their families is what they long for. For teenagers, however, this pandemic could be turning their lives upside down because being in the company of their peer group is what that they look forward to. It must also be noted that COVID-19 has had a varied impact on children from different socio-economic groups. The geographical location of these groups has also had a role to play in the impact this has caused.

Our focus, however, is the impact it has had on school-going children in India, their families and their educators. The emotional challenges that exist in this space are vast. Let us take a deeper look into these challenges, children's needs and what we can do to support them.

Talking about COVID-19

The news around COVID-19 is nerve-wracking for most people and more so for children who do not fully understand the magnitude of the issue but are in fear of losing family members to this pandemic. Further, exposure to the media circulates a lot of false information, causing unnecessary distress to children. Also, a lot of unreliable information is exchanged among children during peer interaction, further building up a sense of fear.

What you can do

At home, approach the situation at hand from a *preventive* stance. It is important for parents to educate children about the pandemic, explaining in simple terms what the concerns about COVID 19 are. Avoid giving your child information that could unnecessarily exhaust her. Reduce the intensity and frequency of the news that the media has to offer which needlessly bogs down children and, instead, use trustworthy sites to help them understand what the virus is and the impact that it is making on the world today. Being ready and willing to have a conversation with them about it relieves them of baseless thoughts.

Schools could send out age-appropriate information regarding COVID-19 so that children have access to reliable information. The safety measures to be followed during the pandemic can be shared and discussed with children so that they can do their part and feel in control of the situation.

The need to be heard

Parents have their hands full with their daily work routine that involves taking care of home chores as well as their professional commitments. The whole family staying at home has paradoxically led to a *lack* of time rather than having *more* time, with each

other because of each one's workload. Families have very little time to interact with each other. The growing nature of this situation in families does not give children opportunities to share simple things, like daily experiences, at home.

With the rise in online academics, children are caught up in a monotonous roll of classes, which do not allow much space for discussions of any sort. Children have been found increasingly to shy away from interactions during online class hours. A child recently told me, 'The teacher has a lot on her plate. I would rather save my questions for later than disturb a class to get an answer.' Eventually, this is not attended to.

What you can do

Families need to set time apart for discussion and reassurance. The work at hand tends never to cease because such are the demands of the working world during the pandemic. However, the biggest support system for children is their family and so family-time needs to be increased in the present circumstances. Educators can begin classes with a five-minute *sharing time* to enhance the sense of togetherness in a class.

Being alert to online exploitation

Children are reaching out to others, sometimes strangers, to fill the social void experienced as a result of schools being closed. The struggle of staying indoors without a choice is making children restless. With schools shut, their lives are devoid of the structure that school provides. They lack the stimulation that is brought about by the school environment, further affecting their regular social interactions.

All of this directly impacts their mental wellbeing. The mediums of communication and social interaction for children have predominantly become digital. Since a substantial chunk of their socialising and academics is online, children are also being exposed to various threats in cyberspace. Today, with every academic transaction being on-screen, children unavoidably spend more time in front of the screen, with all its manifold distractions.

What you can do

As difficult as this may sound, devising creative spaces at home for children reduces screen time for them. Spaces that children can spend time in, doing tasks that enhance creativity and keep them constructively occupied are essential. Some ideas are: art spaces, reading corners and music spots (dedicated spaces at home where a child can listen to music or play an instrument).

Another aspect to take into consideration is making safety rules for internet use. Educators too could reiterate the rules for cyber-safety so as to emphasise the need to be conscientious about any online encounters. Some simple safety rules are:

- Avoid accepting requests from strangers and people you are not comfortable with
- Keep your passwords safe
- Avoid using the webcam for any other purpose apart from academic ones required by the school
- Avoid exchanging personal information.

Attending to high-risk children

Children who are predisposed to mental health problems and children with learning difficulties face greater challenges than the rest during this pandemic. A lack of routine may frustrate them, a frustration stemming from feelings of helplessness. It might feel almost like losing a strongly-held anchor because of which their symptoms could relapse. A structured environment of academics constitutes the core of learning for them. When this is disturbed, it sets off an alarm, causing distress.

What you can do

Access to special services needs to be continued during this time for high-risk children. To maintain familiarity, this could be done through the special educators who the children have already been working with.

Parents could also set up schedules at home for children to reduce the anxiety induced by uncertainty. Schools providing special education services for students could enhance teaching by spending longer periods of time with the students not only for academics but also for emotional support.

Abuse and exploitation at home

Exhaustion is the word that surrounds homes at a time like this. Parents are overworked, worried about losing their jobs and struggling to fit in time for domestic chores. Added to this, having to deal with the misbehaviour of children is understandably even more trying. On the other hand, spending time at home with already stressed-out parents might not be a pleasant experience for the children

either. Some homes have children facing the brunt of these stresses.

The ambient stress in a household in which parents are fretting, perhaps quarrelling, does not go unnoticed by children. Children are observant of these cues and these episodes come to them as an unpleasant shock. The UNICEF has claimed that *Childline* has seen a 50 percent spike in the rate of calls during the pandemic to help children, not only with basic nutrition but also to protect them in environments of abuse and violence.

What you can do

Parents could pick a time when they are themselves calm to focus on concerns around a child's misbehaviour, as a frustrated adult correcting a frustrated child will not address the situation at hand. Parents could also seek help from the mental-wellness departments of schools to assist them with the issues they are facing. Physical and sexual abuse at home is on an increase where many children are unfortunately stuck with their abusers and parents must remain alert to the signs. Teachers must let children know about and encourage them to use the *Childline* for expert, professional help and action, in case of an emergency.

Need for emotional support

The changes that children are facing during this time are emotionally overwhelming for them and could make them experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, insecurity, aggression, frustration, fear or loneliness. These feelings could stem from news around COVID-19, interactions at home, lack of regular social interaction or the problems of handling online classes. All of these directly impact the mental and emotional wellbeing of children. They need mental space as well as the support of adults to address these emotional concerns.

What you can do

Parents need to empathise with children and hear them out. Allowing children to express these feelings in a constructive manner will be beneficial for them. Allow children a set of *feeling* words- such as lonely, sad, bored, anxious, scared - to enable them to express what they feel. Another simple strategy could be to give children love and attention and thereby address the issue of the fear that surrounds them.

With online education systems in place, schools should spend more time emphasising emotional and mental wellbeing. Discussing mental health awareness as part of the school curriculum will build a good, trusting relationship between the school and the child.

Understanding common emotions

Loneliness

A lack of, or reduced, social interaction might increase feelings of loneliness for children. Though communication is being carried out by means of the phone or the internet, there is an emptiness that arises from being unable to meet physically and interact with peers.

Boredom

As much as children thrive on routine, a monotonous lifestyle can bring about an increased sense of boredom. While children usually build on creativity during times of boredom, it can also set a tone of lethargy.

Anxiety

The lack of structure in their everyday environment leads to anxiety in children. Added to that is the unease built up due to the news about the pandemic. Repetitive negative news affects the mind, more so in children who do not know how to handle that information.

Fear

The loss of lives from the coronavirus has been extensive. Everyone is living in constant fear of losing a loved one. The fear brings up insecurities, especially for children, who have learnt that the most affected group of people in this pandemic are the elderly, who are already predisposed to illnesses, as grandparents and even parents fall into this category.

A final word

It must be mentioned that for children who find school an unpleasant experience due to issues of bullying or lack of a supportive peer group have found solace at home during this time. Being at home has brought a sense of calm and security for them.

Watching out for our children at this time can be the biggest help we can provide to them. If you do sense any child needing more help than you can offer, please encourage them to seek therapeutic assistance from a counsellor or psychologist. Positive intervention by professionally trained counsellors may be the support your child needs

at a time such as this. As parents and educators, promoting positive mental health will bring about a balanced psychosocial environment which is essential for children's learning and growth.

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> Equally disturbing is that there is so little discussion or serious national debate on what can be done to address the issue of education and learning. Online education privileges the already better off, leaving the poor to fend for themselves. Notwithstanding the warnings of so many educators and educationists about the ineffectiveness (and even harmful) effects of passive, one-way online communication that passes off as education, governments and several corporate supporters continue to talk about online classes as the only solution in the times of the COVID-19 lockdown.
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> *Vimala Ramachandran, Preparing to Reopen Schools - What Needs to be Done, p 03.*

Digital Learning in Government Schools in Rajasthan

Shobhita Rajagopal and Mukta Gupta

Background

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, with its high incidence of fatalities, has affected large populations globally. The impact of the pandemic on social, economic and political spheres has been extensive. In India, the countrywide closing of schools and colleges has affected the large majority of students across geographies and has had a significant impact on students, more so those in vulnerable and underprivileged contexts. In response to the crisis, State Ministries of Education have put in place strategies to address issues arising out of the disruption of schooling. There has been a push to provide digitally-based distance learning opportunities: use of text/video/audio content through SMS, *WhatsApp*, radio and TV programmes to reach out to the students.

The Government of Rajasthan introduced the *Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement* (SMILE), an e-learning platform via *WhatsApp* in April 2020. The stated objective of the initiative was to provide online courses and classes to all students enrolled in government schools of the state.

This article analyses the experiences of students and teachers of online teaching-learning through SMILE. It is based on qualitative interactions with them across government schools in different districts in Rajasthan. The argument is that, given the current disruption in schooling, any strategy to continue educational engagement with students should be guided by a concern for equity and inclusion and create an environment in which learning can continue.

The context

Geographically, Rajasthan is the largest state in India. It is one of the eight states under the Empowered Action Group (EAG) with low socio-economic indicators. Despite considerable investment from the government in the education sector, ground realities make it evident that several longstanding and systemic issues pertaining to quality education, equity and gender continue to influence education outcomes in the State.

In response to the current crisis and extended lockdown period, the Government of Rajasthan postponed the Board examinations and decided to promote all children to the next grade, except those in grades X and XII. To ensure continuity of learning for students during the pandemic, three policy initiatives to deliver online education were introduced between April and June 2020: first, *Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement (SMILE)*, an e-learning platform through *WhatsApp*; second, *Hawa Mahal and Shiksha Vani*, both radio-based learning initiatives and; third, *Shiksha Darshan*, a television-based programme in collaboration with UNICEF and Ekcovation, a social learning platform.

Field experiences with SMILE

Qualitative interactions with sixty teachers and students from fifty government schools were held across ten districts in Rajasthan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the discussions were carried out online and via phone in both urban and rural areas.

The SMILE programme was introduced by officials of *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* (SamSA) through a video conference with district officials. The directives were to implement the SMILE programme as per the guidelines in the box below:

The Rajasthan State Institute of Educational Research and Training (RSCERT) is the nodal agency for SMILE. The e-content for various classes comes from the following: NCERT website - *e-Pathshala*, the DIKSHA programme and other open sources. Subject teachers are also uploading additional content in PDF format in a *WhatsApp* group.

Children's engagement

The first step to taking advantage of online resources is establishing a link to the programme. Field experience and responses indicate that access to online resources and modes continue to be a challenge in most districts of Rajasthan.

Student interactions reveal that older students and those in transitional stages are worried about their future. They had not been able to attend coaching classes or access a library. Some of the students

Guidelines for Implementation of SMILE

- The e-content will be uploaded at the state level on School Education Department *WhatsApp* group; it will be sent further to the Chief District Education Officer (CDEO) Group, from there to the Chief Block Education Officer Group (CBEO) and then Panchayat Elementary Education Officer PEEO) Group or Free Textbook Book (FTB) Nodal officer in urban areas.
- All PEEOs will be the group administrators of the *WhatsApp* group. They will create two *WhatsApp* groups - one of the teachers and another of parents.
- Online teaching will be started with the help of videos.
- The content will be uploaded at 8 a.m.in the CDEO group and then made available to the block level CBEO group.
- The competency schedule for the subsequent day will be shared the previous evening.
- Only the PEEO can upload messages in the group. He/she has to ensure that only academic content is shared in the *WhatsApp* groups.
- The CBEO will upload details of *WhatsApp* group in the tracker sheet.
- The CBEO has the responsibility of updating the Google sheet.
- Teachers can also submit their own content at the state level.
- The RSCERT is the nodal agency for preparing the content; all DIETs are expected to support the preparation and reviewing the e-content.
- Districts with less than 40% entries should improve their performance.
- The goal of the department is to reach all the children enrolled in government schools through this initiative.

(Extracts of Minutes of Video Conference Meeting held by SPD (SamSa) with districts officials, April 2020)

were unhappy that, due to movement restrictions, they could not meet their friends, consult them for studies and go out to play. Students recounted that the class teacher had contacted their parents (mostly fathers) and enquired whether they were willing to link their children to SMILE. The teachers would explain the process and, on consent from parents, add the phone number to a *WhatsApp* group. Students in rural schools in some districts complained that the teachers had not shared the information regarding online classes on time. They pointed out that they were keen to study and get linked to SMILE, but in the absence of a smartphone, internet package and bandwidth, it was difficult to take advantage of the programme. The lessons were usually viewed whenever a phone was available.

The lessons come to my brother's phone. I am able to view them only when my brother returns home from work. I cannot view the lessons every day. Given the economic condition of our family, it is not possible to purchase a phone for every family member (grade XII student, Dausa).

The schedule

The content is uploaded daily at 9 am on the *WhatsApp* group. Grade-wise lessons in video/ audio/PDF format are sent out. The students are expected to view the lessons and make notes. If the lesson is long it is split over two days. Since the students did not have the textbooks of the new grades, in one district, the entire Hindi and Sanskrit textbooks were uploaded. More recently, worksheets have also been added and students are given home-based tasks to complete. The students are advised to contact the subject teachers in case they are not able to understand a lesson.

We have never been taught in this manner, so it is not easy for us to understand the lessons. Learning in school from a teacher is so much easier! (A student).

In a context where students face multiple challenges to learning, ensuring that they undertake self-study and learn without guidance seems unrealistic.

Gender inequalities

Gender-equitable access to digital devices is also an important aspect in view of the gender-based roles and responsibilities within households. Teachers in girls' schools in urban areas reported that girls were making an effort and those who were able to access the lessons often called in if they were not able to understand something.

However, in rural areas, girls' access to mobile phones is curtailed as parents are not willing to hand over their mobile phones for long periods of time. Their fear is that daughters may be exposed to 'wrong' information on the internet or talk to friends.

Teacher perceptions

In both urban and rural schools, teachers were of the view that education had been affected severely during the pandemic. They feared that when schools reopen, some of the students will not be able to cope with studies. Teachers also feared increased dropout rates in schools as many children from migrant households had left with their parents for their hometowns.

Teachers reported that the objective of SMILE was to keep children connected to education and ensure learning- *'padhayee ke prati rujhan rahe'* (keeping up interest in studies). Some teachers felt that the initiative was beneficial as some continuity in studies was ensured and the lockdown period was being used constructively. Online platforms had got the children interested in learning. A few rural school teachers, though non-committal, expressed their reservations regarding the feasibility of SMILE in the long term. They felt that, in the absence of digital services and internet connectivity, online learning was only partially effective.

Teachers pointed out that in most cases, the parents' struggle for their livelihoods during COVID-19 has been acute. It is difficult for them to afford smartphones and internet for the exclusive use of children. Teachers felt that the department should have factored this in when the programme was launched.

There are more ST, SC and girls enrolled in our school. The parents do not have the resources to buy a smartphone; the internet connectivity is erratic; in many areas, there is no electricity too. (Teacher, Baran)

According to teacher estimates (both urban and rural) the percentage of students that they have been able to connect ranges from 25 percent to 50 percent of total enrolment in schools. The phone numbers of several parents were not available. The teachers were of the view that the initiative had been implemented without prior information and preparation. The district/block functionaries and teachers merely followed the orders coming from the state or district level. The lack of orientation is inhibiting because many of the teachers are not familiar with the use of digital technology for distance learning. However, more recently, some training and orientation programmes have been organised to equip teachers with skills for online teaching and learning.

Additionally, teachers have to contact five students daily and take feedback on the lessons. Two sets of Google forms – one for recording call details and the other for eliciting teacher suggestions on e-content – have to be completed and uploaded by teachers. Both of these are mechanical and time-consuming tasks. One state official remarked that the status of teacher feedback is uneven across districts.

Teachers felt that the push for digital learning in government schools has made the digital divide prominent as a large number of students in government schools are being excluded due to several reasons.

Conclusion

The experience of digital learning discussed above illustrates the sporadic reach of the SMILE programme. The gaps are accentuated in the rural areas of the state. The problematic issue is the assumption that online learning can be introduced by a government order from above to a highly heterogeneous population of students, parents and teachers, under conditions of stress and scarcity and that they should comply and adapt to a new pattern of engagement without necessary support and preparation.

If the desired outcome of the online learning initiative is to provide continuity in learning, mere provisioning and delivery of content/lessons through *WhatsApp*, cannot be equated with either academic engagement or quality learning. Student experience indicates that, given the various constraints they face, navigating online content itself is not easy.

In a state where educational challenges abound, it is imperative that there is a judicious mix of

blended strategies for meeting the learning needs of children which address the social, economic and structural barriers that the students face. The feeling of deprivation among the have-nots among the student body can also have a long-term impact on their health and education. Many of the students may be forced to drop out of the educational stream. Educational planners and managers will need to address these concerns and work towards building more inclusive, efficient and resilient education systems in the long term.

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Reimagining Education

Shubham Garg and Vishnu Gopal

Demographics

Gramin Shiksha Kendra works in villages on the periphery of the Ranthambhore National Park in Sawai Madhopur and the Khandar blocks of the Sawai Madhopur district. The total population of the district is around 14.5 lakhs, having a sex ratio of 897* females per 1000 males. Around 80 percent of the district's population lives in rural areas. The female and male literacy rates (7+ years) in rural Sawai Madhopur are 42.40 percent and 79.40 percent, respectively. In 2006, the district was declared backward by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

Sawai Madhopur is largely an agriculture-based economy. The *Gurjars* (traditionally pastoralists) and *the Meenas* (a Scheduled Tribe but now mainly involved in agriculture) are the two majority communities here. There is a small but significant population of other caste groups - *Malis, Bairwas, Harijans, Bhopas, Jaggas*, and some de-notified tribal groups - *Gadiya Lauhars, Moghiyas, Bawariyas, Kanjars*, to name a few. Tourism is another sector in which the rural population is engaged in, as cleaners, cooks, or tourist guides. Some of them are also running their own *dhabas* (roadside food-stalls).

Effects of the pandemic

It has been observed that, historically, every disaster tends to weaken the social fabric of the nation by creating more inequities and injustices around us. The pandemic and its aftermath have brought all our lives to a standstill. India, currently, has the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases globally. We are now witnessing the penetration of the virus even in rural areas. The worst affected are those who are at the bottom of the pyramid, that is, the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of our society. The loss of livelihoods during the pandemic has caused significant distress in these communities.

Of those impacted by the pandemic children, especially girls, from the disadvantaged communities are affected the most. It is unfortunate that children are compelled to stay away from their learning spaces. For a child coming from a disadvantaged household, the school is a safe space which not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and essential life-skills, but also ensures her psycho-emotional wellbeing by engaging her with her peer-groups through various scholastic and co-scholastic activities. The absence of these spaces at such a crucial developmental phase of children's lives is a threat, both to their learning and to their holistic growth.

At present, these children (more so, the girls) spend most of their time doing household chores and in income-generating activities such as farming, cattle-rearing, selling vegetables, etc. Sunita, a student at *Uday Samudayik Pathshala, Jaganpura* sold vegetables to support her family, as during the lockdown her two elder brothers were laid-off from a hotel where they worked.

The longer the children stay away from education, the lower will be their chances of getting back to school, when the schools reopen. In such circumstances, children are likely to drop out and engage in supporting their families economically or will be married off early. It is important for educational organisations to think of alternative and safe ways of imparting inclusive education to children.

Digital learning - an effective alternative?

Digital Learning is seen nowadays as an alternative mode of education. The NEP 2020 also highlights and emphasises the use of technology in education.

In a diverse society like ours, however, relying on virtual learning is not in the best interest of our children and will not help in attaining the goals of inclusive education because education is not just the transmission of information from teachers to children. It is an experiential and interactive way of acquiring knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. Social connect between a child and a teacher is an essential factor for quality education. This crucial element is missing in the case of virtual learning in which teachers and children remain distant from each other.

Another disadvantage is that the digital divide promotes inequity as it excludes children from the weaker sections of our society. We work with communities where only ten to fifteen percent of the households have access to digital equipment. Then again, in rural households, children often do not have the space to study at home because large families reside in small houses. With all these constraints, we realised that this mode of education could not be a way forward for us.

Small steps towards inclusive education

During the lockdown, we began by interacting with children by regularly calling their parents to know about their wellbeing. It was difficult to reach every child because many of the households in our communities do not even have mobile phones.

Once the lockdown was relaxed, our teachers began to visit the communities and meet children and their parents, while following the safety measures recommended by the government. The children were ecstatic to see their teachers back. Both the parents and children were anxiously waiting for schools to reopen and the parents demanded that we resume the education of their children so that their time could be constructively utilised. After discussing its feasibility with parents and teachers, we decided to resume the education of the children.

The learning spaces

From July 2020 onwards we - the *Uday Community Schools*- have been engaging with the children by creating learning spaces within village communities. Different approaches were adopted for children of different age-groups depending upon their educational needs and safety requirements.

Primary classes

For children in the age-group 7-14 years, learning spaces were identified collectively by parents and teachers within the villages. In these learning spaces, the children can engage, play, learn, express and socialise with each other.

Early Childhood Education

We work in the early childhood education space with the children in the three-six years age group, who are enrolled in three *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* and two government *anganwadis* of Fariya and Kataar villages of Sawai Madhopur. Our teachers are working closely with the parents, especially the mothers, to engage the children in activities which help their motor and cognitive skills and psycho-social development. They develop easy-to-comprehend assignments for parents to carry out with their children at home. A teacher spends around half-an-hour to one hour with the caregiver going over previous activities and sharing the next activity.

Our teachers also educate parents regarding the nutritional requirements of the children. They monitor the growth of children using the WHO recommended growth monitoring charts which indicate the level of stunting and wasting among children. We have also involved the *anganwadi*

Our teacher monitoring the weight of a child, Jaganpura village

Our teacher having a discussion on ECCE with a mother

teachers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) in this process. Teachers also speak about safety measures and the importance of hygiene with individuals and households for prevention from COVID-19.

Academic sessions

The objectives of conducting these sessions are to ensure inclusive education for the children as well as to protect their basic rights during these difficult times.

Preparations

Teachers formed small groups of eight to ten children each to work with. The children come from the local village communities and so it was not difficult to connect with them. We ensured that the children did not have to travel far. The sessions are held for four hours every day in open spaces within the villages, such as under a tree, or in an open *chaupal/verandah* where there is sufficient light and ventilation. With small groups, it is easier to maintain physical distancing of at least one meter.

The community took charge and arranged soap and water at the centres. Both teachers and children wear masks during classes. Parents are encouraged to provide home-made masks and children have breakfast before they come for the classes. They bring their own learning kits, water bottles, and mats to sit on so that there is no physical contact among them. There are short breaks after every 45-60 minutes of class when children and teachers wash their hands with soap. These small steps also reinforce and create opportunities for discussing hygiene and safety measures with children.

The teachers assemble daily at *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* to share a review of daily activities with their team. They prepare their daily lesson plans for the next day based on the review of their work with the children.

Seating arrangement with safety measures

A child demonstrating his working model of pull-cart at Uday School, Fariya

Single-teacher classes

To minimise the risk of infection during travel, teachers stay in the village where they teach. Every teacher is assigned a group with which she works on all the subjects - Hindi, English, mathematics, social science, science, and arts. The children work on co-scholastic activities, such as creative writing and arts at home. Since the children within a group have varied learning levels, teachers are practising the multi-grade, multi-level pedagogy. The subject teachers at *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* assist their fellow teachers in preparing lesson plans for the respective subjects.

Creative writing

A learning process is not effective unless it gets related to real-life experiences. Since the schools are closed, children are confined within their houses during which each one must have gone through different and uncommon experiences. Children in rural areas do not often get opportunities to express themselves. Creative writing is an area where the children and teachers deliberate on what they have experienced during the pandemic and share their experiences and thoughts in the form of reflections, stories, poems, songs, and essays.

मेरा तोता

अप्रैल का महिना था और लॉकडाउन चल रहा था| हमारे स्कूल का अवकाश चल रहा था| एक दिन, हमारे बाड़े में एक नीम का पेड़ है, उसमे एक तोता बैठा था| मेरी निगाह उस तोते पर पड़ी| मैंने

उस तोते की तरफ हाथ उपर किया, लेकिन वह नही उडा और वह मुझे उदास-उदास सा दिख रहा था| एक बार मैंने फिर उसको उडाने की कोशिश की, वह नहीं उडा| मैंने धीरे-धीरे अपना हाथ उस तोते की ओर बढाया| वह नहीं उडा इसलिए मैंने उसको पकड़ लिया| तोता मुझे उदास ओर बीमार सा लग रहा था| मैं उसको वहां से उठाकर घर ले आई| उसको एक कटोरी मे पानी रखी, कुछ अनाज के दाने डाले| उसने एक-दो दाने खाये ओर उसी जगह पर बैठा रहा | मै रोज उसको दाना–पानी रखती| वह दो-तीन दिन बाद धीरे–धीरे घूमने लगा| अब वह ठीक हो गया था| वह कही जाता नहीं था| धीरे–धीरे वह हमारा दोस्त सा बन गया| लेकिन कुछ दिनों बाद एक दिन वह गायब हो गया| हमने उसको तीन–चार दिन तक खूब ढूंढा, लेकिन वह नहीं मिला | मै अभी तक भी उदास हू क्योकि मुझे मेरा तोता नहीं मिला|

लाली गुर्जर, कक्षा 7, उदय सामुदायकि पाठशाला, गिरिराजपुरा

The above story in Hindi by a grade VII child is about her rescuing an injured parrot, taking care of it till one day it flies away. It highlights how creative writing helps language-learning, creative expression and understanding emotions as she expresses her sadness at the loss of her parrot. We compile their work to publish it in our bi-monthly children's magazine called *Morange*.

Community libraries

The closing of schools also stopped children's access to books in school libraries. We have now set up libraries within the communities to provide access to books to children of all age groups. Children run these libraries by managing distribution, record-keeping and coordinating with teachers to replenish the books at regular intervals.

Children reading books at Uday, Fairy

Learning through projects

As the hours of engagement with children have significantly reduced during the pandemic, the emphasis is on creating opportunities to self-explore and self-learn. The teachers play the role of facilitators. The children are engaged through a variety of creative projects - illustrating a book, setting up a restaurant, framing house-rules to keep COVID away, etc. All these activities improve their life-skills, especially critical thinking and teamwork. Every child has been completing an average of three projects per month. When a project is completed, feedback is collected from both children and parents to create the next projects.

Project 'Restaurant' by the children at Uday Samudayik Pathshala, Girirajpura

Encouraging girls

Adolescent girls are the most at-risk group due to the current situation. As they are mostly engaged in performing household chores, the chance of their dropping out of school is very high and there is an even greater chance of their being married off. We are engaging with the girls who recently passed grade VIII and working with them on their academic and life skills so as to strengthen their agency and help them continue their education.

Health and hygiene

As schools are closed, the restriction on sports activities has significantly affected the physical, mental, and socio-emotional development of children. At the request of the community, we have opened our school playgrounds for the children for two to three hours every day. Our sports teachers

facilitate activities on the field and reinforce the safety measures to be followed by the children.

Teachers are working to build community resilience towards COVID-19. In this process, they are having dialogues with the children on the pandemic and measures to prevent its transmission. The children are running campaigns in their neighbourhood to build awareness on preventive measures from the disease.

Technology-aided capacity-building

During the strict lockdown, technology proved to be a boon in facilitating our teachers' capacity-building process. Teachers could connect with each other for co-learning because of technology and attended several webinars on their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

With these efforts, despite the lockdowns and the disruption they caused, we have been able to reach out to all the 325 children enrolled in Uday Community Schools and the two government *anganwadis* where we work. Many parents whose children are in government schools are now demanding similar initiatives from their schools after observing our work for over a month.

The community is happy to see their children learning and engaging in various activities in their presence. They are also satisfied with the fact that while government schools are closed because of the pandemic, the teachers at *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* are still working with the children to provide quality education in these challenging times without compromising on the recommended safety measures.

**Source: Census Data 2011*

Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.

Shubham Garg is the Executive Director of *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*, an organization working with rural communities to enhance the quality of education in government schools. He oversees the operations, partnerships, and capacity-building functions at *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*. Shubham holds a Masters' degree in rural management from the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA). Shubham can be reached at shubham.garg@graminshiksha.org.in.

Vishnu Gopal Meena is the Academic Coordinator of *Gramin Shiksha Kendra* and has 20 years of experience of working in the school education space. He has played a key role in setting up *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* and introducing Sports to connect children with education. Vishnu is also the editor of the children's magazine, *Morange*, published by *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*. Vishnu can be reached at vishnu.gopal@graminshiksha.org.in.

Community Supported Learning in Rural Areas

Tultul Biswas

COVID-19, declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization, might well change the world forever! It has shattered lives, disrupted markets, challenged our social fabric and the long-term impact is yet to be seen. It has completely halted formal education activities across the world. Children are unable to go to school and attend classes, interact with their peers and engage with formal academic activities. Across India, children have been out of school and at home since March this year.

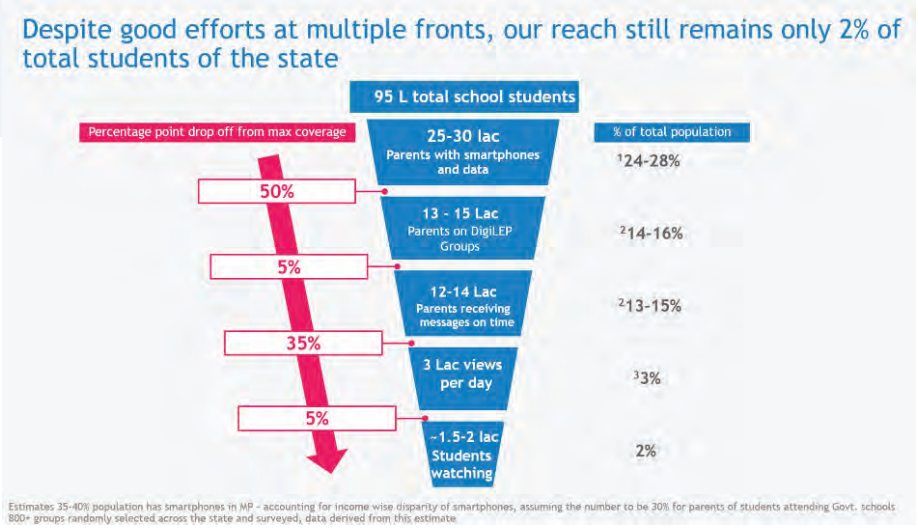
The background

Children going to government schools are facing double disadvantages as the midday meal (MDM) that gave them at least one assured hot meal a day as well as the long gap in any kind of formal teaching-learning exposure, have both been snatched away from them. Closed *anganwadis* will additionally also cause roadblocks to children's access to immunisation. Once schools reopen, we will be facing children who might have compromised immunities, nutritional deficits and formal learning gaps.

In the initial few days or weeks of the lockdown, parents, families, communities and even all philanthropic organisations were overwhelmed by the immediacy and horror of lost livelihoods, of worrying about the next meal. For millions in India, in addition to the struggle of finding food for hungry mouths, there was the challenge of finding the means to reach their distant village or small-town home from a faraway and suddenly alien and unfriendly metro city. Children and schooling were largely forgotten.

Then, as months passed and the summer vacations were nearing an end with still no end in sight of the pandemic tunnel, panic set in. Many private educational institutions started considering e-learning and, since then, most of the high-end and middle-of-the-spectrum private schools have been conducting regular online classes. This has further divided the haves and have-nots, especially in the rural stretches of the country. The lack of infrastructure in villages, much less in their own houses, for any kind of e-learning further deprived the already marginalised children going to government schools.

The following data, shared by *Rajya Shiksha Kendra*, Bhopal and Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital (SATH) – a *Niti Aayog* initiative supporting digital learning in MP – reveals the dismal state of affairs when it comes to reaching out to government school students through digital media. It clearly points out that only about 30



percent of the parents of government school-going students own smartphones. Further, the actual reach/usage of the material being sent through the Digital Learning Enhancement Programme (DigiLEP) is only about two percent of the total government school student population.

Add to this the inability of a large number of parents and other adults to support their wards in the expectations of the digital learning processes and the deprivation of government school students increases exponentially.

Making each neighbourhood a school

Lament time is over. It is now important that we find innovative ways to address this challenge.

Working with over 60,000 children and around 2000 government school teachers spanning the rural stretches of MP and Maharashtra, *Eklavya* teams were struck by this sudden challenge of not being able to reach out to students. The summer months are usually full of hectic activities, like summer camps for students and teachers, training workshops for teachers and the youth in villages who are supporting educational initiatives, etc. However, the teams started interacting with teachers as early as May 2020, even during the lockdown phase. These interactions were mostly built around the challenges the teachers were facing in different COVID duties being entrusted to them, together with their own learning needs in these challenging times. These interactions also threw up very similar and disheartening images as most of the teachers had been entrusted with the duty of ensuring their students' digital learning and were quite frustrated in trying, with very little success, to connect with them through cell phones.

This interaction with government school teachers and our dialogue with the *Rajya Shiksha Kendra* (RSK, MP) brought into focus the great digital divide we are living in and re-emphasised the need to reach out to children in a face-to-face manner. In a series of meetings at the state level, the RSK team along with a few invited NGOs working in education, jointly worked out a campaign called the *Hamara Ghar-Hamara Vidyalaya* (HGHV), in which teachers would visit their neighbourhoods and work with parents in extending formal schooling activities to children.

Within the HGHV campaign was mooted the idea of *mohalla* or neighbourhood classes – an idea that *Eklavya* had already successfully tried out in few of our field areas and hence, advocated strongly.

Building on experiences

Shiksha Protsahan Kendras (SPKs) are community-based learning centres that bring formal education to the most marginalised first-generation school-goers to provide them with the academic support that is needed to sustain them in mainstream schools. The SPK centres have been a model of reaching meaningful learning experiences to children from the wage-labourer, landless agricultural labourer, *dalit* and *adivasi* families in remote rural areas. Since education is not the sole result of schooling and has a lot to do with the home, parental, sibling and neighbourhood support, an SPK serves to create community-based nurturing in places where children are deprived of home support.

The second and long-term objective of the SPKs is to positively impact the teaching-learning processes as well as the overall functioning of government schools. To achieve this, an active, cooperative relationship is fostered between the SPK in a village and the local, government school teachers.

A local village youth is selected by the parent's committee formed to run an SPK. These youth facilitators regularly carry out two hours of teaching-learning work in the SPKs. Community ownership of the SPK is built from the start and monthly parents' meetings are organised in every SPK centre. Parents of the children coming to SPK attend this and discuss issues such as their child's monthly educational progress, the reasons of irregularity or late-coming of some children, role of parental support in their child's education, attendance of parents in the monthly meetings, the functioning of the village school and school teacher, the place for stories and storybooks in a child's learning, etc.

***Mohalla* Learning Activity Centre**

As the health and safety measures forecast is that schools may remain closed for the better part of the academic session 2020-21 and large congregations of children and group activities are totally unadvisable, we at *Eklavya* decided to go back to the system of neighbourhood schooling and decentralised the SPKs further by taking it to each locality/hamlet where children reside.

Thus, emerged the idea of a *Mohalla Learning Activity Centre* (*Mohalla* LAC), a comfortable

learning space in the immediate vicinity of the child to continue engagement with meaningful and joyful learning experiences, scaffolded by either an older sibling, local youth or a young parent.

Mohalla LACs are held in open or well-ventilated spaces within the neighbourhood or village with a maximum of about fifteen children of the elementary school level invited to attend. Where the numbers are bigger, to ensure a smaller number per batch and appropriate physical distancing and other safety precautions, the LACs have more batches. The *Mohalla* LACs function for two hours daily from Monday to Friday. Saturdays are utilised for planning and review of the previous week and capacity-building of the facilitators

The initial investment is a small mobile library (a set of books for the facilitator to refer to and give reading exposure to children), a set of few necessary teaching-learning materials (TLMs) and the bare minimum of stationery. The emphasis is on developing the capacities of the facilitator towards the use of everyday materials as learning engagement tools – so that dependence on external TLMs is minimised and the ideas of learning from the environment by doing and from each other are fostered.

Shahpur, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh

Sangakheda, Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh

Our experience from the approximately 430 *Mohalla* LACs that we are now running in MP and about 40 in Maharashtra tells us that the most crucial and immediate need is to help children get out of their homes and meet their peers and deal with the prolonged stress that they have undergone.

Children who study in government schools come from some of the most socio-economically marginalised families. Stress has been high in these families for many months – leading to both oppressive and depressive circumstances within households. The *Mohalla* LAC space allows children to get away from these stressful situations at home and be with peers, express themselves by talking, writing and drawing their experiences of the lockdown and more. As they are conducted in the neighbourhood, parents often drop in to check what children are up to in these *mohalla* classes! They find their wards engaged in fun activities dealing with basic reading-writing and numeracy.

Since the RSK has also accepted the idea of *mohalla* classes, teachers in many villages have come forward to support these and a synergy is being developed between the government school teachers and the local youth.

Shahpur, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh

Khedla, Hoshangabad, District, Madhya Pradesh

Shahpur, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh

Children as torchbearers

From the start, some precautionary best practices are being followed in the classes that could lead to developing a behaviour change in children. Some notable changes:

- As small closed spaces are like hothouses for the virus, the *Mohalla* LACs are held either in open spaces or well-ventilated rooms.
- Wearing masks is compulsory for all students and facilitators.
- Soap, clean water and clean cotton towels are provided in each *Mohalla* LAC and everybody washes hands for 20-30 seconds on entering and leaving the class.
- Physical distance is maintained during all activities.

Practising these procedures like a drill on a daily basis, children have now become the messengers of change in their households too.

Engaging with the community

It is well-known that parents and the community have a large and important role to play in the education of their children. It is just that the present scenario makes us realise this fact even more starkly. In the absence of a formal structure like the school, the time is ripe to look at learning beyond the school building and the designated subjects. The importance of community engagement in educational processes has been a central idea of *Eklavya's* work in education. And our long practice of this has given us the necessary readiness to adapt quickly to the challenges of the COVID situation and implement the *Mohalla* LAC idea.

Through a process of dialogue with the parents' committees set up for the running of the *Mohalla* LACs and the local school teachers, these community bodies are now being entrusted with the responsibilities of reviewing the day-to-day functioning of the *Mohalla* LACs. Awareness is also being spread for bringing in the most marginalised children of returning migrant families into the fold of *Mohalla* LACs and subsequently enrolling them in the local village schools.

These community forums have become a platform for sharing of COVID-related information about ways of keeping the virus at bay along with the rationale behind the various precautions being taken.

There are other messages exchanged in the community related to education, such as enhancing home-based activities which children can do with a little guidance from parents, maintaining a schedule for children even though there is no school and setting up a small study corner for children even in a hutment.

Salutary results

All of this has led to:

- Parents building up their engagement in the learning of their children, making homes places of positive engagement to rediscover childhood and learning.
- Building a young community cadre who willingly give time to support children's learning by convening village-level learning centres, calling for meetings with parents and teachers and together creating conditions in the village to enable each home in every neighbourhood becoming a school.

As the school system faces prolonged closure, the *Mohalla* LAC effort has constructed a new social infrastructure with an embedded teacher-community connect. It has created a platform for communities not only to come together to ensure learning for elementary students but also to learn and adopt protective measures against the pandemic and build neighbourhood, hamlet-level resilience.

In contrast to urban settings, rural areas face low COVID caseloads, have low population densities and dispersed habitations, as well as a significantly lesser infection spread. Hence, the social bubble of the villages offers opportunities for the community-led education approach to mitigate the negative impact on children with the closing of schools. It may well be time for urban centres to pay attention and learn from the example of villages.

Vejavane, Khed, Pune District, Maharashtra

Photo credits: Amarwati, Ankit Lilhare, Akash, Nanda, Khemprakash, Sarita Abhang

Tultul Biswas coordinates the Teacher Education, Outreach & Advocacy programme of *Eklavya*. She is part of the team engaged in designing learning opportunities, workshops, short courses for teachers and grassroots-level education activists and bring about change in classroom practices. With a Master's degree in Chemistry and Sociology, Tultul has been with the organization for almost three decades, earlier working with its flagship children's magazine, *Chakmak*. She has a keen interest in folk and classical music. She can be reached at tultulbiswas@yahoo.com

Letters to the Editor

The significance of the magazine lies for me, in its design -- the thematic approach and the entire issue on a specific theme provides comprehensive solutions/perspectives and practices of the same. Every issue has something to take to the field. Rudresh's article, **Guru Chethana: Teacher Professional Development** provided pointers to make the environment conducive for the teachers to learn. Andre Beteille's article, **Social Sciences in Schools** divulged that importance of teaching the subject to younger kids. R S Krishna's article **Exams: The Need to Restore Credibility and Sanctity** on assessment and Umeshankar Periodi's, **Beyond Dates and Fights** on other resources to teach social sciences and reduce the dependency on textbooks, were very helpful.

The special edition on TLM helped me in teaching and learning a particular theme holistically. When we were conducting the EVS workshop, we used Chandrika Muralidar and Ronit Sharma's, **An EVS Textbook – Cover to Cover**. The latest issue, **Every Child Can Learn (Part I)**, instils confidence in teachers and readers that it is not impossible to achieve equity.

I would suggest that in the future, themes like the Head Teacher's role in the school, community involvement and lesson plan can be taken.

***Anil Ausha**, Kudligi, Ballari, Azim Premji Foundation*

The article in the previous issue, **Innovating Processes to Help Every Child Learn** by Anil Singh was a very motivating read for me. The innovative measures adopted to reach out to children with challenges, understand their situation, expand resources to accommodate and place them at the centre is a happy reminder for me on how to continue my work in the field. The stories about the transformation in children are awe-inspiring to read.

Animating Children's Energy and Engaging Minds written by Asha Singh gave me several ideas and practices that I can use to help children observe and learn from the surroundings. Apart from the various practices, this article also gave me an insight into the difference in the learning styles in an urban setting versus a rural setting.

Learning Curve motivates me with various perspectives, amazing practices, stories of remarkable human beings who do remarkable things.

***Sameera Vasa**, Bangalore District Institute, Azim Premji Foundation*

Since we are working rigorously in the field of early literacy and numeracy, the article **Language Teaching in Pre-Primary Classroom** by Roshni Dewangan caught my attention. In our formal and informal discussions with primary teachers, they show their main concern regarding teaching reading and writing to students. Despite several discussions on importance and effective role of alternative methods of teaching language, teachers are stuck to the traditional way of language teaching. Since this method works for a few children, they think others cannot because of their individual problems, such as their background or economic condition or the disinterest of parents in their education. But in this article, the author has shared her practice of language teaching in pre-primary classes by using 'whole language approach' and she has succeeded too. She shares that she connected oral language to reading and writing. Also, for teaching matra, she used familiar words, like the children's own names or names of their family members or teachers. This article shows that the 'whole language approach' works not only for reading and writing but for an overall understanding of the language.

***Richa Patel**, Rudraprayag District Institute (Uttarakhand) Azim Premji Foundation*

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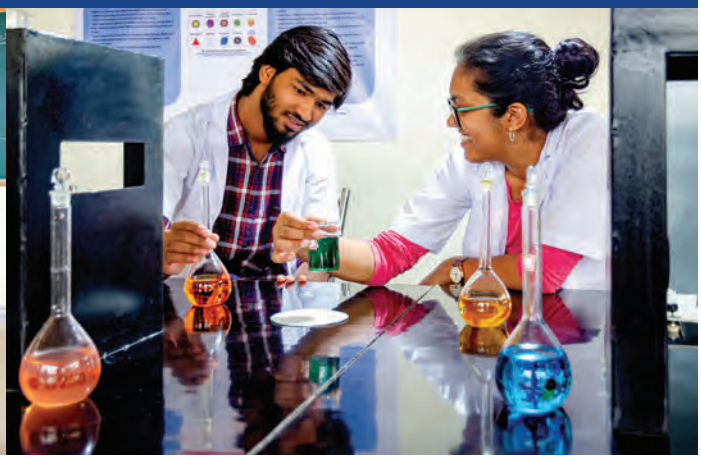

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