

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 *asynchronous* 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 Harvard¹ 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 scholarsⁱⁱ 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 studyⁱⁱⁱ 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 Shiksha 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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ⁱⁱ <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai20-226>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>



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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.*