

*Madamji, school kab khulega?* (Madam, when will the school reopen?) This is a common refrain from the children every now and then to government school teachers who we work with in six districts of Madhya Pradesh. As they call students to check the progress of worksheets and digital lessons, they hear this appeal from students over and over again. The younger lot, class III, IV, V and VI students, seem to be longing for school the most. They crucially need the space and the peer interaction that school offers for the socialisation that goes alongside academic enrichment.

As most Indian states record a dip in COVID-19 cases, more and more states are announcing the reopening of schools and other educational institutions for in-person classes after nearly a year-and-a-half of closure. A few states, like Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Chhattisgarh and Delhi, are already experimenting with offline classes for class IX and above. Haryana and Chhattisgarh have also announced the opening of schools for primary and middle school classes in the coming weeks. However, the irony of the situation is that in most states, children of classes IX and above are being called to schools for offline classes, inspite of the repeatedly expressed expert opinion that it is the primary level children, with their foundational needs for literacy and numeracy, who need the direct, face-to-face engagement the most.

A Block Academic Coordinator (BAC) from the Hoshangabad district (Madhya Pradesh) recently shared his anxiety as to how the 6 - and 7 - year olds, who have not even been introduced to formal schooling and have missed out on it completely in the past one and a half years, would cope with the very process of schooling when they come to school. A primary school teacher echoed this saying, *'Yeh bachhe to ghar se door jakar seekhne ke bare mein jaante hi nahi hain. To jab yeh school aayenge, hum inhe uthna-baithna sikhayein, pahli ke path padhayein, doosri ke ya teesri ke?'* (These children do not even know what going away from home and learning is. When they come to school what should we teach them – formal processes of school, or class

I, class II or class III-level lessons?)

It is a cause for national attention and concern that these very children studying in classes I to VIII, who ought to be safeguarded by the Right to Education (RtE) Act, are the ones being pushed to an ineffective online mode of education. So, on the one hand, we need to rally together to demand the reopening of schools for the lower classes, and on the other, we need to plan creatively and constructively as to how schools need to prepare for reopening and functioning when they do reopen.

It is in the wake of these preparations towards reopening of schools that I would like to revisit some fundamental approaches to education that can guide us in the current times and later, when schools reopen formally.

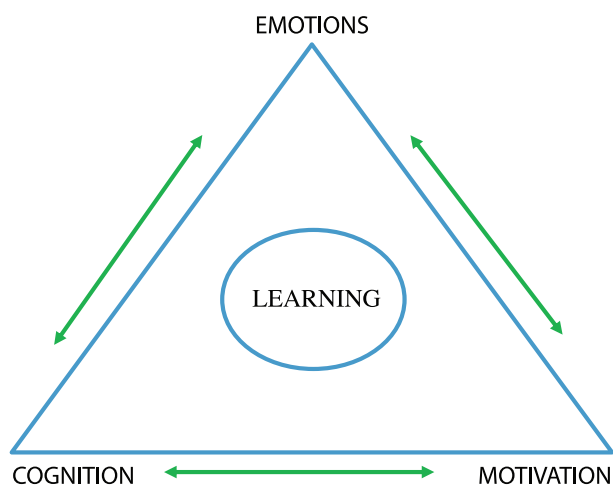
### **The ever-elusive Affective Domain**

We all know and yet, in practice, we often seem to forget, that learning is a psycho-socio-emotional process and that we learn best from the people we connect with or feel safe with. In workshop sessions with school teachers from both government and private schools, with teachers-in-the-making, and with grassroots-level education workers, I have repeatedly tried to map the emotions that children have experienced in early school life. I now have data from over 500 participants from different parts of the country, and *fear* is painted large on the canvas – pointing to the fact that fear is the predominant emotion that children experience in elementary school life. It is time now that we change this and provide a more positive, engaging, emotionally-enabling and academically-challenging atmosphere to our students.

COVID-19 has made many of us lose our near and dear ones and jolted us enough to realise that we need to build positive relationships among those we connect with in life. And for teachers, what could be a better way than to do this with students?

Already, the demography of children in government schools clearly shows a predominance of *dalit* and scheduled tribe (ST) children and girls.<sup>1</sup> This means that the children from families facing the most difficult economic situations are the ones attending government schools. This also means these children would be the most starved, both physically and emotionally, with parents caught up in the struggle of daily livelihood. For these children to be able to focus on a topic in the classroom would require a huge amount of acceptance and validation from the authority figure in the classroom – the teacher. As teachers, the best we can do is to realise this need of our students and provide them with an accepting and warm classroom atmosphere. To begin with, the least we can do is recognising and analysing our own biases and coming to terms with them. A constructive second step would be to question these biases and search for their source within. This would lead to better acceptance of our students and the socio-economic backgrounds they come from and could lead towards building a relationship of care and concern with them.

Another important dimension to this discussion on the importance of bringing in the *Affective Domain* in early age classrooms is how learning is related to and dependent on emotional health.



As the triad above shows, Emotions, Motivation, and Cognition are the three interconnected areas that influence each other and work together to make learning possible. Hence, for any meaningful learning to happen, it is imperative that, as teachers, we engage with the emotional state of the learner, value the emotional energy that they bring to the classroom and use it to create a motivated atmosphere that promotes cognition.

To begin with, as teachers, we need to realise that we have to build an emotional connect with our students. We have to accept that we like some of them, dislike others, and may even be averse to some. Can we, as humans, check these emotions and find their source, which may lie within us? Can we be more aware and accepting of what we feel and try to process it within?

### Build on what children know

In the past year or so, there has been a hue and cry over the terms ‘learning gap’ and ‘learning loss’. It is important to study the learning gap/loss to help policy-level changes and to work on pruning the syllabus so that the uphill struggle that children face on coming to school after the one-and-a-half to two years’ gap is made somewhat easier. However, aren’t there a totally new set of experiences that children have had during these months of closures and lockdowns? Is it not possible that in their formative years, when they were going through the pandemic, lockdown/school closure, children may have learnt some other things as well? Perhaps resilience, perseverance, some new craft or skill or the new language of the pandemic?

On a recent visit to Hoshangabad, a child of 8 or 9 years, asked me, ‘*Madamji, lockdown aur lock-up mein kya farak hota hai?*’ (What is the difference between lockdown and lock-up?). I was aware that she was exploring conceptual terms in English like in-out, small-big, up-down, thin-fat etc., but this use by the child of her current explorations of conceptual English language terms to make sense of what was going on around her, astounded me.

Within the classroom, it may be worthwhile to pay attention and try to understand what children have experienced in this phase. Questions like what happened to their families, to their parents’ work, what they did about food and ration supplies, did they meet neighbours and friends, what did they talk about, had anyone in the family contracted COVID-19, what kind of medical support did they get, who helped them in times of need and so on.

The list is never-ending, and teachers can build on it according to the context they and their students live in. This could be a good way to build a dialogue between teachers and students on what the past months have been like and to understand the challenging conditions that students live in. Sensitising teachers to talk to children and listen to them, to understand the information and knowledge base they have built in the past year and more, could

lead to (a) a positive teacher-student relationship and (b) a strong foundation for learning, based on what knowledge children bring to the classroom. Better learning will take place on this empathetic and constructivist foundation.

### **Classroom design and seating**

Physical distancing is part of the new normal we are into. Even in classroom settings, the need for seating children apart from each other will continue for some time to come. This gives us an opportunity to break the rigid classroom architecture and examine if students sitting in passive rows, one behind the other, is really a good way to learn. The question we need to ask ourselves is: what kind of seating fosters more inclusive and participatory learning?

Another COVID-19 reality is that we need to call students to school in batches. In remote government primary schools, the enrolment numbers may hover around anything between 20 to 80. So, for those schools that have only two or three rooms and some open spaces (like verandas), it only makes sense to group children according to their ability levels and make them sit in spaced-out circles – an arrangement where all the children can see each other as well as the teacher/facilitator. Schools that have higher enrolment figures and either not enough rooms or not enough staff to attend to smaller groups, calling students in batches either for part of the day or for certain days in a week, could be a strategy employed.

In both cases, this is the time to break away from the teacher-centric classroom design of rows of students and shift to the more inclusive circle-seating arrangement – where children sitting one hand away from each other and yet facing everyone in the classroom is possible. This would also enable peer interaction and shift the focus from teacher-driven learning activities to shared cross-learning among students and the teacher.

Another exploration that can further help this process of a shared and interactive way of learning is to divide the students into small groups and allow them to perform some activities/tasks in these groups according to directions given by the teacher. Where rooms are small and sitting in a big all-inclusive circle is not possible, making smaller groups is a way in which more peer interaction can be facilitated even while maintaining the necessary physical distance norm.

### **Role of nutrition and health in learning**

COVID-19 has taught us to pay attention to our own health and that of those around us. School

education too can learn from this experience and build a robust system of nutrition and health support within schools. Awareness about one's body and the way it functions, and basic healthcare are areas that have to find an important place in every elementary school curriculum. Another step schools can take in this direction is to incorporate minimal, basic healthcare facilities within the school premises.

Then, we are aware of the significant role one hot meal a day in the form of the mid-day meal (MDM) plays in making the child ready for some cognitive work in the classroom. The MDM is now available only to students of ages 6-14 years (and to 3–6-year-olds in *anganwadis*). As students enrolled in government schools come from the most deprived and under-served sections of any society in India, the availability of food may not be a guarantee for them at home. This nutrition deficit is taken care of through MDM till class VIII in MP and some other states, and class VII in some states, like Maharashtra. However, a study carried out by teachers in Chhattisgarh clearly indicates the need for the continuation of MDM for students in the higher grades. However, as soon as the student graduates to high school (whether it is class VIII or class IX), the MDM facility stops, although the situation at home continues to remain the same. This drop in nutritional input causes a dip in the nutrition status of the student, pushing many into a state of mild or moderate malnutrition.

The COVID-19 situation and livelihood losses have further aggravated this situation. The pandemic has also caused children to go hungry or manage with less than normal food for many months. Hence, a quick shift back to providing one hot mid-day meal to all school children is a necessary step today.

### **Recognising stress in teachers**

Teachers themselves have been under huge stress during the pandemic. In states like MP, they have been entrusted with the responsibility of running the quarantine and isolation centres; ensure surveys and vaccination drives; visit *mohallas* to take classes; go from house to house to supply textbooks, dry rations and worksheets; work at the grain *mandis* to supervise grain purchases, and more. With no training in handling these tasks, no PPE kits and no extra insurance support, many have risked their lives and some even lost their lives to COVID-19 or other stress-related illnesses.

Learning and handling digital techniques for their own capacity-building as well as carrying out their teaching responsibilities through the virtual medium

is only adding to all this stress. In such a situation, it is vital that efforts are made towards equipping teachers better, both physically and mentally, to go out and work in critical situations. Teachers need to be equipped to identify, acknowledge and manage their emotions and work towards stress-busting.

Our efforts to carry out workshops with teachers on Mindfulness practice in all the blocks of Hoshangabad district has proved to be very useful, where teachers are made to just be with themselves and focus on things around them – sounds, visuals, tactile experiences. We plan to (a) hold more such workshops with teachers at the block level, and (b) adapt such activities so that teachers can do them in their classes too, to help the children address their stress.

### Use of technology

Technology is here to stay – in schools and in other aspects of our daily lives. So even though in the school context, especially pertaining to government primary schools, we have to acknowledge the fact that most children are unable to access digital learning content and even fewer are able to engage with it meaningfully, we cannot ignore the ‘new normal’. There is merit in the move towards digitisation for simple processes impacting the life of a child – like filling a *Navodaya Vidyalaya* form or applying for a scholarship.

In MP and Maharashtra, one of the attempts the *Eklavya* Foundation has tried out is the use of low-cost *Raspberry-Pi* set-ups in the community with individual log-in accounts for students of classes V to VIII. The students can come in batches to these centres and log in to [www.teysu.in](http://www.teysu.in), a platform where they can work on pre-designed, interactive learning modules in Hindi, English and maths. The response of students, parents and teachers has been very encouraging. The local youth and teachers have

worked as anchors to help students work on the modules and address their increasing curiosity and explorations triggered by the learning experience.

In a nutshell, avoiding or being averse to technology is a thing of the past. It is now time to think creatively as to how to make students technology-trained, even while respecting the crucial place a human teacher holds. As schools prepare to reopen, the need for repair and maintenance of the digital devices and continue to use them in a blended manner is a strategy that teachers could use to their benefit and to that of the students.

### Reimagining assessment

Online schooling has turned the enterprise of assessment into a fallacy. Since simple questions requiring direct answers are not suited to online assessments, this is the time to work with teachers so that we understand what assessment for learning is and develop systems to assess the actual capacity of the children to understand a principle and apply it to a new situation.

One such way is to hold open-book exams and prepare question papers that require a child to think, connect different pieces of information, and apply what they have learnt to some new situation.

As schools across India prepare to reopen after about a year and a half, it is important to use this opportunity to upscale some changes that have been proposed by policy documents and experimented with on a small scale. Hence, here is a chance to change a challenge into an opportunity. How we make the most of it and reawaken education will depend on whether we see the glass as half-empty or half-full.

### Endnotes

- i More girls enrolled than boys in ages 4-8 years (ASER report). <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/number-of-girls-getting-enrolled-in-govt-schools-more-than-boys-in-4-8-years-category-aser-report-1636731-2020-01-14>
- ii [https://www.eklavya.in/pdfs/Sandarbh/Sandarbh\\_116/01-11\\_Malnutrition\\_Among\\_High\\_School\\_Tribal\\_Children.pdf](https://www.eklavya.in/pdfs/Sandarbh/Sandarbh_116/01-11_Malnutrition_Among_High_School_Tribal_Children.pdf)



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