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Re-emphasising the Physical School: Lessons from COVID-19

Background

COVID-19 brought about several unforeseen situations. One of them was the virtual locking up of children and their inability to go to schools or anywhere else. They missed their peers and their friends, their school and their classrooms, their freedom and their exploration, and for many, their midday meals too. Not surprisingly, given the overwhelming fear of the pandemic, these concerns about what was happening to children lay buried for a long time. Even when the conversation began around school closure, it was largely around the learning gaps that were accruing consequent to the loss of school time. There was pressure on the system to start some teaching process so as to mitigate the time lost and urgency for the school to start doing something to ensure that children were occupied with studies and did not lose out.

This anxiety took time to surface since initially the pandemic was viewed as a temporary phenomenon. The urgency of just managing the everyday amidst severe restrictions that had been imposed overshadowed much else. Another reason for the delayed anxiety was that the lockdown began close to the annual school vacations and the worry about missed learning began to mount only after the vacations were over and the pandemic was still all around us. The anxiety around missed learning and the absence of contact possibility, naturally led to a demand for online classes, and very soon, there was pressure on all schools (and teachers) to begin online classes. Online educational software companies suddenly found a huge market and put this opportunity to good use in order to make money. A vernacular Hindi newspaper carried a headline a few months back stating that educational apps had added tens of crores of new members, and just one channel had added 40 million new accounts in the last few months. There have been many webinars and conversations around online education, and the advertisements to join these have increased too.

However, this spurt in demand for online educational platforms is not merely a pandemic-induced phenomenon. This is a part of the growing discourse on individual-focused programmes and the need to overcome learning gaps through technology. There has been a push towards reducing the human cost in the teaching-learning process and that can be done through technology.

A May 2017 study conducted by KPMG and Google titled *Online Education in India 2021* had envisioned an 800 per cent growth for the online education industry. The study had stated affordable online education as the cause for this spurt. It further added that online education could attract those who have surplus income and want their children to get special coaching. It anticipated a large increase in the primary and secondary supplemental education expense. They expected that this would add to but also displace the tuition market[1]. Clearly the education industry has been attempting to access the increasing surplus

1. Online Education in India: 2021 - KPMG India https://home.kpmg › Home › Insights, May31, 2017

in some families and their willingness to spend more on education. There has been a push towards fueling parental anxiety and offering exclusive learning software to help children be better prepared for competitive situations.

It was, therefore, no surprise that the lockdown triggered these anxieties of middle class parents leading to the push for online classes in elite schools. The schools were also keen to start such a process so as to build a case for collecting fees. Slowly similar concerns about the accumulating learning gap in case of poor children also started to be expressed. This required attempts at providing some kind of online education to these children as well. For both the low-cost private schools and the government schools, the challenges in the way of starting something and also having an inclusive classroom were many. This paper questions some of the premises inherent in these discourses and presents the experience of online teaching in schools during the pandemic.

This paper began with the authors' desire to understand the perception towards online education on the ground. The authors saw reports from surveys with teachers and parents but wanted to hear it directly from children to ascertain how they felt about online learning and staying away from school. This paper tries to capture insights from a quick assessment of school children in Alwar, and how they viewed the experience of education during this period. The authors also summarise some other studies and present the essential principles that should form the basic tenets of the way forward for education post pandemic.

The study with children and some teachers

The motivation for the conversations with children was to understand the crisis, the lockdown, the continued physical distancing and its effect on children. In this study, 97 children were interviewed. They comprised a purposive sample that could be contacted over phone and agreed to these interviews. The structured interviews were recorded and data mined from the recording. The sample comprised 76 private school students and 21 government school students. Of the 97 children, there were 32 girls and 65 boys. 10 children were from the age group of 4–7 years, 70 from 8–15 years and 17 children were between the ages of 16–20.

Most of the children came from low-income families, with 51 per cent stating their fathers were daily wage labourers. A majority of the parents of government school students were only educated upto the primary level (55 per cent of fathers and 80 per cent of mothers), while a larger proportion of the parents of private school students have an education level above primary school (only 16 per cent fathers and 38 per cent mothers did not go beyond primary school). A majority of students were not happy with online classes. Girls were more dissatisfied with online classes (75 per cent girls compared to 65 per cent boys who did not like online classes). This could be because the closure of physical schools for girls meant greater confinement within their homes and the added responsibility of housework. It could also be because girls may have had lesser access to mobile phones necessary for online classes.

The very young children (below 7 years) were all unhappy about the online classes, with older children liking them a little bit (only 26 per cent of children between 8–11 years and about 36 per cent of children older than 12 years seemed to like the online classes). Interestingly, the private school students seemed to have a worse perception of online classes than those of government schools (68 per cent versus 50 per cent). While our sample is too small to provide a clear insight, but this could be because children from government schools are from poorer families with lower expectations.

We also asked students what they missed the most about school. For most children (48 per cent of private school children and

40 per cent of government school children) what they missed most was 'playing with friends'. The second most missed thing about school was 'talking with teachers' in case of government school children (30 per cent) and 'studies' in case of private school children (29 per cent).

These findings, even from a limited sample, corroborate with inferences from the studies done by Oxfam India[2], Azim Premji Foundation[3] and the survey of Dainik Bhaskar[4]. According to the Bhaskar survey (carried out across 12 states and 65 districts, with a sample of 1,500 parents, teachers and students), nearly 93 per cent parents, 92 per cent students and 97 per cent teachers prefer face-to-face teaching and learning. Teachers state that face-to-face interaction gives students greater self-confidence. In all the studies, an overwhelming number of parents and teachers of all backgrounds were seen to be unhappy with online classes.

The study by Azim Premji University was conducted in states that were attempting to implement state-level online classes and some other states which did not have any state level intervention. The study is based on data received from around 400 parents and 1,500 teachers of government schools across 26 districts. According to the study, teachers were frustrated with online classes and found that one-way communication was very difficult. Teachers also admitted to being ill-prepared for online classes and felt handicapped both by the lack of emotional connect with children and the absence of any meaningful assessment of learning. They felt that the time available for online classes with each grade was much less than normally available in a face-to-face teaching-learning situation. The actual time for which online teaching is possible is even smaller as a lot of time gets wasted with connections dropping and delayed responses. The parents shared the view that online classes have failed to be effective, and 90 per cent of those interviewed were in favour of opening schools with safeguards. Most of them in fact felt that opening schools would not add any additional risk. The study reports an access to technology gap and points out that 60 per cent of students lack access to online classes.

The study done by Oxfam reports that 80 per cent of government school students are excluded from online classes due to lack of digital equipment. This is in alignment with the global studies that show that workable digital solutions are not possible without adequate and appropriate digital infrastructure being available. In fact, the Oxfam study points that it is not only students but also teachers who lack appropriate devices and bandwidth to access online classroom and teach. As in the other studies an overwhelmingly large number of teachers in these studies found delivering classes digitally challenging and difficult.

Another piece of input is from a detailed conversation with the Principal[5] of a mixed clientele school whose teachers had engaged in online classes. He shared many insights from the focused individual conversations he had had with his own teachers as they started conducting online classes. Some common concerns clearly emerged. Many children whose parents were daily wage workers had lost their livelihood. This affected their whole life, of which education was a small part and thus, not an immediate priority. This school is partially residential with a mixed community of students—while some on government scholarships are from rural poor families and local low-income families, others come from relatively better-off families as day scholars). The poorer and the rural students were hit the hardest. However, it is not as if the middle class children were unaffected—they too were neither happy

2 Vyas A 2020, status report-Govt and Privat schools during Covid-19 Oxfam India https://www.oxfamindia.org › oxfaminaction › status-re... 04-Sep-2020

3 Azim Premji University, (2020) Myths of Online teaching, Field studies in Education, September 2020, Bangalore

4 Dainik Bhaskar (2021) page 1, Feb 4, 2021, New Delhi, Published in Rajasthan edition

5 Pushpraj Ranawat, Principal, Udaipur

with the classes nor with their inability to meet friends or come to school.

The teachers noted that in addition to formal teaching sessions, children needed some interaction and sharing. They recognised that the school lacked sufficient information about the extent of digital access of students and struggled to reach them initially. They pointed out that poor children and those living on the outskirts of the town as well as the countryside were unable to join classes, and that the rural-urban divide was staggering. Mostly, these students could not have access to a device and even if they did, connectivity became the reason for their not being able to participate in the classes. It was difficult to find a quiet space for study in the house or academic support for learning. The extent of support that parents could provide in spite of their interest in education and well-being of their children was extremely limited, and many children just gave up. The teachers felt that for many children this gap would be difficult to overcome and feared that many children would not come back to school. They feared that for some children education may suffer permanently.

Teachers also shared their impressions about the online classes. They were unhappy with the experience. The most critical factor mentioned was the lack of a connect with students and also among students themselves. During online classes, the teachers felt disengaged as they could not get any cues from the students. They felt that the extent of active attention was very short and many students were likely to lose network connectivity in between or be non-responsive under the excuse of poor network connectivity. Teachers also felt ill-prepared to suddenly take online classes but felt that even after a lot of effort, this could not be an effective mode of teaching for their students.

However, while the teachers seemed unhappy about online classes and their inability to connect with students or assess their learning, they also felt there had been some changes in their attitude and relationship that may influence future work. They felt that they had developed a communication with parents, understood parents' concerns and also realised how parents could somehow support the learning efforts of their children. In spite of the academic unpreparedness of parents to support their children's learning efforts, they were still able to scaffold it in many other ways.

Teachers also felt that the WhatsApp communication groups with students will most likely continue to supplement classroom interactions, even after schools reopen. They were also happy that they had learnt new pedagogical tools, such as e-worksheets and the use of online resources. Some occasional training sessions became possible as people could connect on the internet. This would become far more effective when face-to-face meetings start. Teachers also recognised that the concern of parents about the education of their children had become evident during this period. They now believed that there can be collaborative efforts between them and the parents to help facilitate learning among children.

The opening of schools

As concern for education grows among parents, it is very likely that schools will reopen soon. Many states have allowed both secondary as well as upper primary schools to open. As schools open, fears of large number of students (up to even 40 per cent) dropping out and the immense learning gaps have been expressed6. While there have been anxious suggestions to develop capsule modules to facilitate faster teaching so as to cover the gap, there are also voices recommending a slower pace to ensure assimilation and bringing the rhythm of learning and children back to the school.

6 Behar Anurag (2021) https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/our-children-should-not-have-to-pay-the-price-for-our-follies-to-day-11611765264097.html, Compounded loss of learning Mint, Updated: 27 Jan 2021, 10:08 PM IST

Among all this is the overarching fear that life would not be the same even after this pandemic is over. Education and schools would have to be structured somewhat differently and would need to be re-conceptualised keeping in mind the need for physical distancing. There have been two divergent recommendations in this direction. On the one hand, there is the urge to move towards more and more technologically driven solutions for students. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, this push is not merely an outcome of the pandemic. Much before the pandemic, the technological push was driven by the need for a greater opportunity to self-learn, thereby allowing each student to follow his/her own pace and method. Studies have been showing an increasing market for online education for some years now.

At the level of development, a lot of effort is going into attempts to optimise and improve the delivery products for the online learning market. The underlying belief is the faith in such technological solutions and artificial intelligence to function as teachers or at least as guides[7]. In fact, several products are directly for students and do not require mediation by teachers or any other adults. This is along the almost axiomatic belief held by many people about the need to provide individual trajectories of learning for each student. Their belief is that this task can neither be left to the teachers nor to peer exchanges and the learning derived from that[8].

In this respect, there are two major concerns that emerge for India. One is about the meaning and purpose of education and pedagogy and the second is about the resource feasibility of such an alternative. There may be other dimensions of concern, like the impact on health due to increased screen time, and the emotional loss in terms of being with peers and even interacting with adults. The points of concern with respect to resource feasibility are around both the software and the hardware of online education. Studies and surveys with children, teachers and parents show a common fear. The fear is that over 85 per cent of rural children could be excluded from this process as they cannot access the internet[9]. These numbers may have improved a bit by now but they are still far for being inclusive particularly for Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim children. Besides, as our study and other studies have found, it appears that women and girls have much lower access to devices that can use the internet. Then there are concerns around the instability of internet connections, the lack of adequate bandwidth and the cost of data. While some of these constraints may get diluted over time, there are deeper concerns around the very meaning of education, which are less likely to go away.

The concern of teachers and parents has resulted in the setting up of small '*mohalla* schools' at some places. Some of these have been supported or set up by non-governmental organisations working for education of children. But in each of these situations, the *mohalla* schools have been strongly supported and at times even led by government school teachers as well. The enthusiastic contribution in the functioning of these and the participation of almost everyone in running them is indicative of the role a school can play in the life of parents, children and entire communities[10].

7 Addressing the Strengths and Challenges in the EdTech world during Covid-19 and beyond Webinar (2021) Edufront CodeFest 2020 The Bug stops here, Jan 15, 2021, 5 30 PM, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=863&v=WEajV-FlplU8&feature=youtu.be

8 https://www.india-briefing.com/news/investing-indias-education-market-after-covid-2019-new-growth-drivers-20330.html/

9 Vyas A 2020, status report-Govt and Privat schools during Covid-19 Oxfam India https://www.oxfamindia.org › oxfaminaction › status-re... 04-Sep-2020

10 Transform Rural India (2020) Restoring Childhood and Missed Schooling : Mitigating COVID losses in rural Primary Schools, Webinar Aug 5, 2020 https://www.facebook.com/TransformRural/videos/293412735214667

Way Forward

The need for closer human contact and fraternal feeling is a must-learn from the pandemic. As we re-envision schools, we must take cognisance of children and teachers' own sense of absent real-time contact. There is a need for the system to become aware of what the school means in the lives of children. For most children the authors spoke with, the school is not merely a place of learning, but it is a space which belongs to children in a very wholesome way. Online and individual pathways to learning may help achieve the learning objective of school (though even that seemed suspect in the authors' interrogations), but this is the one place where children from different ages, castes, classes still come together (even though intra-school diversity is now much lower than earlier). It is a space that they miss very strongly when denied. It is not just a meeting ground with friends or a place to escape to or a place with books and for study, but a complex mixture of all this—one that provides a unique experience to students. With new lessons from the pandemic, the system can strive to make this place much more the space for and of children.

The second concern we should have is the way we deal with the after-effects of a long absence of education for children during this period. Do we take account of the break and therefore start with going over already covered ground, or do we fret about the 'learning gap', and push more inputs and press the schools and children to catch up? Is the most crucial thing at the moment to make children feel adjusted and comfortable in school and consider themselves capable, or should we hurry with a shortened capsule-kind input? Should students be allowed to take their time and schools and teachers work with them with the confidence that all students would eventually learn? Can we avoid a centralised imposition of ideas and methods that are generated by 'experts' and leave the effort to improve to the collective sensibility of school teachers? This can be done in partnership with parents. This would require allowing a specific methodology to emerge from the ground situation keeping in mind the broad perspective of education, its purposes, principles and key ideas of the syllabus and pedagogy as per the NCF 2005 and NEP 2020.