Pedagogical Research and Development

ARTICLE

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Challenges in Education Faced in India, During the COVID Times

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Abstract: This period could be called one of the most challenging periods, in the World's history. The challenge is not limited to a single phase, but to a multiplicity of phases, beginning with livelihood, education, economy, commerce, science, technology, and the list goes on. In this article the main focus will be on the challenges faced in the field of Education, in our country, India, during the COVID times. The pandemic will be remembered in the words of Dickens as "the worst of times" and, in the most unintended ways, also "the best of times". Before the lockdown, the challenge for the kind of schools that are existing today, was finding the sweet spot between theoretical and experiential learning. After the move to virtual learning, it has become about finding our reason for being. With the ongoing COVID-19-led lockdown, there are multiple challenges in education, for students, teachers, and parents. With the closure of educational institutions during the lockdown, approximately 1.72 billion learners have been affected worldwide, and around 32 crore in India alone, resulting in high socio-economic costs for education stakeholders. The inaccessibility to physical classrooms encouraged ed-tech platforms to announce free live sessions, thereby questioning the role of education institutions. In response, private schools were quick to adopt, mandate, and implement new educational pedagogy — learning through digital means.

1.1 Learning for all

In this situation, the teacher's role was challenging. Besides, teaching online, they also had to support students to complete assessments and tests. They stayed in constant touch with parents about their wards' progress through WhatsApp groups, and virtual parent-teacher meetings. This blurring of professional and personal boundaries took a toll but they got the opportunity to gain more knowledge and skills. Parents had to invest in seamless wi-fi connectivity and ensure that their children paid attention to classes. In some cases, new gadgets had to be bought as well. However, students were quick to adapt to online classes and, even if they missed a session, teachers shared recorded sessions. Thus, it became possible to independently navigate the world of online learning.

1.2 Blended learning

Various tech and ed-tech companies supported live classes, made recorded classroom sessions available on YouTube channels, allowed access to interactive study material rich in video and graphics, and helped students understand concepts easily.

Considerable planning will be required once the lockdown lifts. It is imperative to re-evaluate every school activity and emerge with new systems, which will become the 'new normal'. Following strict social distancing measures and regimented one-desk-one-child seating arrangement could be implemented once schools re-open. Parents may opt for home schooling, if the situation worsens. While this strategy may not result in finishing the quarterly curriculum, it will at least reduce the learning gap that students are likely to experience if schools continue to remain shut.

Blended learning could also be the next normal. Schools can explore tutoring platforms with video conference facilities, customised modules, and assessments using technology and data that can help analyse what students like, their learning patterns, and their understanding of the concepts.

With the challenges and gaps associated with digital learning, the launch of a new education policy could serve as the first step for Indian education to transition into the digital sphere. Apart from that there are quite a few

2.1 Mastering the virtual world

Just yesterday I listened to a plaint: "It's November and my partner and I have not yet met!" No, it wasn't a bridegroom complaining about the delay in meeting his arranged match. It was one of our kindergarten teachers talking about how even though she has been working with her co-teacher in the same virtual classroom since August, they have still not met face to face. "And yet", she says, "We are in sync with each other, our students and, our parents."

To start with, as a teacher of children, who primarily learn using all their senses and body, she was sceptical about the virtual world meeting the needs of 4 and 5 year olds. Six months into the lockdown she says it has had the most unintended consequence.

It has changed the equation between teachers and parents. "When we get sick our students' parents come into the room and give us virtual hugs", she beams, "And because they have been inside their children's classrooms, these parents are now following the same 'Essential Agreements' at home that we practise with our students inside the classroom."

We watch her and her partner teacher 'online', giving personal attention to each child, gauging the reading levels of every child, and celebrating the involvement of their parents as a valued partner who reads to their children and shares the joy of their enriched vocabulary.

2.2 Missing the physical connect

While our children are relishing the blended learning, from their home, almost all ache to get back to school so that they can be with their friends and interact with their teachers. There are many others for whom home is becoming somewhere in which they feel 'locked up'- their words, not mine.

And while they have access to co-curricular learning, we don't know a school leader who believes we are fully addressing the social, emotional, creative, psychological and, physical needs of our children 'locked out' of our schools

While as instructors we are truly excited by what feels like a once in a career-defining opportunity to transform learning, we cannot ignore the human impact that Covid is having on our learning community.

Stress from long hours in front of a screen is evident in our teachers' voices. Over time it has taken a toll on the health with increased episodes of backache and headache. There is an absence of regular exercise which came from walking around the class and corridors and up and down the stairs. The line separating the personal and professional life is blurred and teachers are experiencing a constant restlessness.

2.3 A world with no boundaries

A friend said, "In this new world there are no boundaries. Work never ends for the day." That sentiment could just as easily have been expressed by a parent as they too try to juggle working from home, supporting their child's learning and psychological wellbeing, struggling to make up for the absence of stimuli for their kids and the whole family. The lack of boundaries is heightened by the inability to socially interact or ask for 'the village' to take over the upbringing of their child for a few hours at least.

The safety blanket that is offered to our students is largely only accessible to the more privileged learning communities.

As we watch our students discussing machine learning, astronomy and, aerodynamics, it becomes painfully clear that there is a paradoxical chasm between their learning during COVID, and that of students who do not even have a device or a telephone signal and have suddenly been at liberty to spend time with their friends and family as apprentices in workshops and fields.

Out of the two different kinds of experiential learning, it is worth pondering as to which would our children would choose if they could.

2.4 Blended learning accessible to all

For many children across the nation, the worst is that there is little or no access to schooling, whether physical or virtual and where it does exist, too often it is examination year focused. As a result, many students in rural areas have reveled in the opportunities given to them to play, explore, roam the countryside and help their parents.

Suddenly, the world has become their experiential learning community, maybe richer than the text focused classroom. We wonder if the online "experiential" learning community such as ours, can appreciate and aspire to embracing the rich engaged collaborative learning that may not be founded on enquiry, but finds the joy of learning in the real world much like Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn!

3.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, we would remark that, finally, when we read the world bank report warning of learning loss and we wonder what it means for those who have worked so hard to come out of poverty only to be pushed back in because their children aren't 'digital natives' and so once again have an unequal playing field.

In the longer term, the ability to make a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning accessible to all, regardless of privilege, is the way forward for the whole world. This is true. But so is the ability for teachers to work together side by side. For parents to drop their children off in a facility that enables them to grow and thrive. For students to play together and live without fear of the future.

For school leaders, the welfare and wellbeing of learners, teachers and families that they are in contact with every day, excites them the most. The human connectivity and empathy that drives collaboration, creativity and innovation for planetary good can only be met if we care about each other. And it is this time of adversity that must drive our innovation.