

Emerging role of “Teachers” and “Community” in school education during COVID-19 emergency for effective teaching learning experience

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Abstract

In the COVID-19 context, education has failed to factor in the need for integrating community knowledge in building a resilient school system. Secondly, digital education is reducing education to a mere exchange of information. Without dialogue and engagement, remote learning loses education of its main meaning and purpose. Teaching learning experience through this mode reinforces traditional rote learning without connecting to the world view and lived experiences of teachers and students. In this manner, education becomes a hollow ritual and challenges the basic premise of free and compulsory quality education to all. Thirdly, role of community and their involvement in making education participatory and democratic is also getting challenged due to the COVID-19 situation. The concern in this situation is meeting the purpose of public education for responsible citizenship. Children of migrant workers and other marginalised groups not to mention will bear the brunt in a big way and may add to the already huge number of out of school children. What is required now is building a resilient school system rekindling the role of teachers and community not only for school education but for the entire community.

Keyword: *Teacher, Community, COVID-19, Teaching Learning experiences*

Introduction

COVID-19 has become more of a humanitarian emergency and not just a health emergency. Social life has been transformed, even militarised, by new regimes of social distancing, face masks, self-isolation, alternative handshakes etc. States of emergency have been declared in many leading democracies ostensibly to protect the elderly, despite creating a range of other problems. What at first seemed possible only in a dictatorship has now become normalised in constitutional democracies everywhere (Delanty, 2020). Closing schools has been one of the preventives Covid-19 response measures. Such measures magnify the already-existing disparities within the education system. India has a significant number of children out of school, of which the majority belongs to vulnerable section of the population. The drop-out rate is high among SC/ST and girls. Owing to the digital divide, many children have minimal or no access to online learning. Furthermore, the pandemic-induced crisis of migrant parents may lead to the loss of education of children, and girls will be more vulnerable to the discontinuation of education owing to societal pressure of focusing on domestic work and early marriage. The risk

of children falling prey to child labour and trafficking may also increase. Thus, the task of securing quality education for all and ensuring that the most vulnerable are not excluded in the ‘new normal’ in post COVID- 19 India is daunting.

Role of teacher and community for Quality in Education: A theoretical perspective

Education has an integral link to democratic practice. It seeks to give autonomy to the learner and her participation in the learning process. It wants the learner to think, interrogate, critique and question, and expects a more egalitarian relation between the teacher and student (Mannheim and Stewart, 1962). With the greater participation of students in the learning process, the incentives upon which learning will be built will tend to move from constraints, external awards like marks, prizes, ranking towards mobilising interest (ibid). Another critical theorist, Paulo Friere (1972), articulates through his writings that the school which we need is not where the teacher only teaches or in which the student only learns and where the principal is the all-powerful commander. On the contrary, the relationship between teacher and students should be such that through educational practice, an

access is established to the way they think, what they perceive, what they know and how they know. The spirit of learning lies in the pursuit of new ideas, skills, knowledge and developing the indigenous knowledge base of the community. Giroux (2010) emphasized on the need of an approach that focuses on creating centres of critical learning and the production of socially engaged citizens.

Recognising the importance of reestablishing school-community relationship, the NCF suggests five guiding principles of curriculum reform: “connecting knowledge to life outside the school, ensuring that learning is shifted away from rote methods, enriching the curriculum to provide for overall development of children rather than remaining textbook centric, making examinations more flexible and integrated with classroom life and nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country” [NCF 2005: 5]. This was further reinforced through the coming of RTE Act 2009 which brought a normative framework to facilitate universal access, a teaching learning environment in school and basic infrastructure along with trained and educated teachers. In section 29, of the RTE Act 2009, it specifically mention “learning through activities, discovery and exploration in a child-friendly manner”. The role of the school and the school itself is not complete without the experiences of transformation through the act of learning. The act of learning conform to the dominant culture or challenge it (Shor, 1986).

The agency of the teacher, community and the learner/student is critical for an effective learning experience and for quality education as a whole. The outcome of such a learning process is transformative and constructive.

COVID-19 and the emerging role of teachers and community

The temporary closure of schools and confinement at home which came about due to Covid-19 preventive measures has transformed the teaching and learning experiences of children and teachers drastically. Besides the lack of infrastructure, preventive measures like digital education are changing the nature of education. These technological barriers are impacting effective learning as it not always a viable pedagogical option. Access to electricity is crucial for digital education, both for powering

devices as well as for connecting to the internet. While the government’s Saubhagya scheme to provide electricity to households shows that almost 99.9% of homes India have a power connection, the picture is less luminous if we look at the quality of electricity and the number of hours for which it is available every day. Mission Antyodaya, a nationwide survey of villages conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-’18, showed that 16% of India’s households received one to eight hours of electricity daily, 33% received 9-12 hours, and only 47% received more than 12 hours a day. While 24% Indians own a smartphone, only 11% of households possess any type of computer, which could include desktop computers, laptops, notebooks, netbooks, palmtops or tablets.

The deficient and limited access to online education will exacerbate the already existing inequalities in education. A factsheet released by RTE Forum in 2019 found that girls are twice less likely as boys to receive 4 years of schooling. 30% of girls from the poorest families have never set foot inside a classroom, and 40% of adolescent girls between ages 15-18 years are not attending any educational institution. There is a risk that these children will be doubly jeopardised in the current digital mode of education. Further children from SC, ST and minority families will also face similar difficulties if education continues in a digital mode. COVID-19 has shown how educational inequalities overlap with other form of inequalities, mostly social and economic. Children of migrant workers will bear the brunt in a big way and may add to the already huge number of out-of-school children. The second major challenge to digital education is reducing education to an exchange of information. Without dialogue and engagement, remote learning deprives education of its main meaning and purpose. Teaching-learning experience through this mode reinforces traditional rote learning without connecting to the world view and lived experiences of teachers and students. In this manner, education becomes a hollow ritual and does not fulfil the basic premise of free and compulsory quality education to all. The third challenge is the role of community and their involvement in making education participatory and democratic. In most cases, an online mode of education promotes individual-centred learning, where the child receives basic

information of the subject taught. The collective spirit of education and social transformation is not possible through this. This defeats the purpose of public education for responsible citizenship.

The challenges have emphasised the critical role played by teachers and the community in making education transformative and universalised. Digital education has reinforced and deepened the already existing inequalities in the country. If the country aims to align itself to the SDGs, particularly SDG 4, in achieving the universalisation of education from pre-school till higher secondary education, digital education cannot provide the solution. The role of the teacher and community is critical for universalising school education in India and for a transformative teaching-learning experience. The following section of the paper makes an attempt to discuss the role under the broad rubrics.

Creating both social and physical access to schools

Access to schools is equivalent to breaking both structural and systemic barriers for children belonging to marginalised families, particularly girls. This has been highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis. Only 12% of households in the poorest countries have internet access at home, and the access to mobile internet is 26% lower for women and girls over their male peers. In India, the gender gap in internet access is substantial. Schools are more than just learning centres for poor children. They provide social protection, nutrition, health and emotional support that offer life security for the most disadvantaged, and this applies to low to high income countries. 9.12 crore children are not receiving school meals during school closure. School meals serve as a safety measure, as economists estimate that 75% of the income is spent on food. Further, the virtualisation of teaching may impact the social relation between peer, teachers, and school and community on the whole. The social class gap between the teachers and students may widen after the school reopens post- disaster. This will prove to be a major hindrance to girls' education.

In the COVID-19 crisis, it is seen that the traditional challenges to access have resurfaced. The narrative towards the universalisation of education and reaffirmation of education as a

human right brought a transformation in education towards an innovative teaching learning experience based on co-construction of knowledge. For the first time, the agency of teachers and students and their lived experience was given importance in the teaching-learning process. The RTE Act 2009 and the NCF 2005 was instrumental in this direction. This not only enabled physical access to schools for the girls and other marginalized children, but also led to the recognition of the knowledge of students, communities and their families in the school system. The School Management Committees represented the community, teachers and students in the first level of school monitoring and development process. This proved absolutely critical in the sudden surge in enrolment of children in schools, particularly from marginalized families.

The sudden confinement of children through school closures due to the Covid-19 crisis will raise challenges similar to those prior to the coming of RTE Act 2009. The pandemic has once again shown the overlap of education with the social economic realities of society. The children on the margin will be further marginalised due to the pandemic. In these situations, there is an emerging need of building a strong community led school system, through the agency of the teacher, student and community at large to rebuild social and physical access to schools, especially for children who are at risk of being pushed out of the system.

Dialogue for building linkages

A public good like school should provide public spaces in which diverse individuals have opportunity to debate, deliberate and acquire the know-how to be critical and effective citizens (Giroux 2001, 21). Dialogue and dialogical relation between the teacher and student is the basis of education. Without dialogue, students are disengaged in the school process as they fail to connect these values with their experiences. In the COVID-19 situation, the policy employed to address the educational need of children through digitalization has raised serious doubts in the effective teaching-learning experiences of students and teachers. The virtual community in which the students and teachers interact has led us back to rote learning and symbol interpretation. The subject matter is reduced to centrally prepared worksheets that fail to connect to the milieu of the child and his/her world view,

thus limiting the horizon of learning or any learning at all. Time and again, surveys (mostly done online so the respondents are mostly subjects of study and do not participate actively in the process of research in such surveys) conducted have shown this limitation.

Integrating Community Knowledge

Integrating community knowledge has an integral link to democratic practice. It is based on the premise of giving more autonomy and participation in the learning process. With greater participation, the school is transformed into a social site for questioning the dominant ideas and knowledge and creating a new system of indigenous knowledge. Local knowledge has been emphasized on several occasions, however if it is not taught in schools, it will not provide the space to articulate and practice it within the school. This is also critical in a disaster situation, as centralised knowledge and resources may not be able to register the local needs for building back better in a resilient manner. This will facilitate the process of building the relationship between teacher and students so that through educational practice, an access is established to the way they think, what they perceive, what they know and how they know. This will further facilitate the process of developing the indigenous knowledge base of the community. Thus creating schooling and learning for democracy begins with creating centres of critical learning and the production of socially engaged citizens.

Teachers and Students are transformative agents

Virtualisation of teaching makes one ask where the agency of students and teachers has disappeared. Or has the changing definition of learning also changed the role of teachers and students? The impact of such a major change is likely to be felt by all children, and doubly by the children on the margins of society. The alternative measures adopted to ensure continuity of education in the light of school closures such as special television programming, radio broadcasting, and virtual and particularly online learning may serve to further marginalise under-privileged learners. This is on account of several factors; firstly, they have fewer

educational opportunities outside school, secondly, owing to poverty and social exclusion, their nutrition and health is compromised; thirdly, parents with their limited education and resources cannot facilitate alternative means of ensuring continuity of learning; and fourthly, the lack of access to technology or good internet connectivity prevents access to digital learning (UNESCO)²⁸. Due to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, there is little empirical evidence to illustrate the impact on school education, however, frontline workers, civil society and rapid surveys have indicated that it has led to an individualised form of learning, which is reducing education to an information receiving mechanism rather than a transformative tool for social change.

Agency of teachers and the community in school education has been recognized across countries, including India. The NCF (National Curriculum Framework in India 2005) has taken the historic step of re-establishing the close relationship between school and society, and the central role of education in enabling social transformation (Batra, 2005). To address the current crisis in education due to the COVID-19 emergency, of access, lack of dialogue, risk of dropping out, it is extremely important to rekindle the agency of teachers and students for transforming this crisis into opportunity.

Education for transformation

An effective teaching-learning experience is at the centre of making education transformative. Including more online and e-learning options at the school level to make it more technology-oriented²⁹ may challenge the importance of dialogical relation between the teacher and student. It may also challenge the role that teachers and community play in engaging children in the school as a social site for learning, socialising and expanding their world view for enabling social transformation.

The bigger challenge which lies ahead is the shift in the National Education Policy, which has overlooked not only the previous policies on effective teaching-learning but, also neglected the learning from the COVID-19 crisis. Online education in few months have shown its major shortcomings. It is not only impacting equity in

²⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/news/half-worlds-student-population-not-attending-school-unesco-launches-global-coalition-accelerate>

²⁹ <https://theprint.in/india/education/govt-plans-tech-savvy-additions-to-national-education-policy-to-adapt-it-to-covid-reality/432364/>

education, but the quality of learning has taken students on a reverse gear to rote learning and symbol interpretation. Conceptual development through ed-tech platforms and apps is an advertising gimmick of a billion-dollar business proposition. In reality, conceptual development without any connection to the experiences of the learners is near impossible. Furthermore, the individualistic notion of learning which is promoted through these mediums also challenges the notion of learning through collective collaborative methods. It also recreates obedience, silence without critical thinking and behavior which leaves little or no scope for questioning the mainstream culture and the production and reproduction of dominant education discourse.

In lieu of a conclusion

The school is a social site, however it is not a neutral institution. School, as pointed out by Gramsci, plays both the role of 'covert' and 'overt coercion' (Gramsci, 1977). This has resurfaced in the COVID-19 emergency, where

voices have been curbed and teachers and students have been confined to their private spaces and online education has been created to demonstrate continuity in education on record. Further, teachers have been assigned several non-academic works without any safety measures or equipment for protection from COVID-19. The COVID-19 disruption is normalised in many ways, and interestingly, the National Education Policy which has been passed by the Cabinet, has reinforced it instead of paying heed to the multiple voices of dissent emerging from the ground. In this race for legitimising the new normal, a new common sense is required to counter it so that the deepening inequalities are addressed and redressed. For this, it is important that the role of teachers and community for effective teaching-learning is brought to the core; instead of giving into the business proposition of the Ed-tech companies that want to turn education into a commodity, we need to focus on making education into a right for transformation.

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