

Being Schooled in Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has changed our lives in unimaginable ways. A 'new normal' has become our default living condition, online teaching-learning has become part of our everyday lives. The online classes, bring a sense of continuity of schooling experience during a pandemic but is riddled with various concerns as well. As an educator and a parent, I express my observations and reflections about the new ways in which schooling is being carried out. The virtual schooling experience is characterised by regular engagement between teachers and learners with the key focus on the completion of the syllabus. This often leaves a limited or no scope of interaction and informal/ unsupervised conversations amongst the learners. There is always a sense of a 'watchful and omnipresent eye' on teachers, children and their families in online classes. It pertains to the process of teaching-learning, learner participation and response, parental involvement and family background.

Keywords: *schooling, online classes, teaching, learning, parental involvement*

Introduction

With the advent of COVID-19 and the nationwide lockdown, many schools almost immediately or eventually shifted to the online mode. Almost no time was spared to consider teacher preparedness, learner readiness, difficulties (health crisis, anxiety about one's and others' wellbeing, economic uncertainties) posed by ensuing pandemic and challenges of schooling in an online mode. This article is an attempt to reflect on a child who has been closely observed, while he attended his online classes, over a span of four months. A daily journal was maintained in which observations related to teacher-student interactions, learner and parent participation and the nature of home tasks were noted. These observations were shared with fellow educators and their remarks/suggestions were noted. This article is a compilation of my thoughts on 'being schooled' in the pandemic. The article has been divided into three sections - Boxes on the screen, being watched and becoming watchful and Learning must go on.

Boxes on the screen

A typical online class requires children to be seated at a given time with their cameras turned on and their mikes turned off. Their faces appear in boxes along with their names and classes. The children can also see each other and their teachers (who also appear in their designated boxes). For a young child, who has never been to

a school, the school gets reduced to the talking boxes on the screen sans a physical building where face to face human interaction could have been possible. The teacher gets to know about the learners mainly by observing them in their designated boxes, often following the instructions given by the teacher or being busy with the assigned task. The young learners (4-8 years old) who are in the Pre-operational or Concrete-operational stage of Piagetian developmental stages, the absence of physical space bereave children of sufficient opportunities to touch, feel, manipulate things in their environment to make sense of it and learn. At times, children are allowed to be unmuted and can converse briefly with the teachers during the classes. However, the scope of getting to know the peers, having regular interactions and learning from them is completely absent. Almost, all conversations are scheduled, monitored and supervised leaving little scope for children to engage in informal interactions beyond what is required for the teacher governed learning process.

It is also enthralling to see these boxes emulate the ethos and routines of everyday school-exchanges such as reciting of daily prayers, listening to teachers and following the instructions, being told on how to sit and behave in a class and so on. The sanctity and sacrosanct nature of a classroom and learning process are also established well in the everyday boxed interactions. The habits and behaviours that are

stressed in online classes increasingly manifest in other interactions at home. For instance, the child in the study responds with a thumb up in case he wants to eat something that has been offered and a thumb down in case he doesn't like something such as if his favourite cartoon was interrupted. Response by a thumb up or down is the most convenient way to gather a child's response or ascertaining his/ her participation in an online class. The next section discusses another aspect of online schooling- being always watched not only as a learner but as a teacher and a parent as well.

Being watched and becoming watchful

Since online classes are fairly transparent (in terms of visibility), every stakeholder watches the other with the consciousness of being watched as well. As if looking at and teaching a screen was not sufficient, teachers have to teach in the presence of parents who at times pass judgements and often have high expectations from the teachers. Even the slightest lapse on part of the teacher gets highlighted- she mispronounced a word, a child's name was not called out today, she did not smile enough and so on. Teaching gets reduced to a theatrical debacle expected to not only woo and amaze young minds but also appease the consumers (parents) who are paying a high fee for the commodity called 'good education'. Not to disregard, the monitoring and surveillance of these online classes by higher authorities of the school adds to the mental stressors and anxieties of a teacher.

It is not only teachers who are being constantly watched but also the child, her family members and her home environment. The pervasiveness with which the school has infiltrated the homes lays bare the cultural capital possessed by the child and her family. Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1985) refers to the advantages that an individual has owing to her education, that helps her achieve a high social status in the society. One can clearly see the class differences in online classes through the visuals present on the screen - availability of laptops or sustained internet connection, kind of clothes worn by the child and her parents, presence (or sheer absence) of expensive home furniture/ other household objects, patterns or paints of the walls and kind of language being spoken at home. It is no wonder that children and parents belonging to the economically weaker groups (EWS) are engaged in very different ways than the others.

The names of these children are repeatedly called out to check if they have finished their assigned work, instructions given to them are specifically given in Hindi, the tone used by the teachers in addressing and correcting them is authoritative and they are singled out more for the delay in joining classes or movements during the classes. The subsequent section discusses the impetus of online schooling experience- learning must go on.

Learning must go on

Parental involvement in a child's learning is crucial but are the parents equipped or prepared enough to take on the roles of the teachers altogether? What about the children coming from a single-parent family or where both the parents are working? In the absence of regular schooling, the responsibility of teaching-learning of the children has fallen entirely on the parents (predominantly on mothers). Parents of young children, especially, have to participate in their child's schooling on daily basis. Some of the ways of participation are- sitting with children during online classes to enable the use of technology and to act as an effective mediator between teacher and child (learner), help simplifying teachers' instructions to make them comprehensible for learners, help in completion of the assigned tasks during and after the classes, being a substitute for any peer interactions or engagements.

The schools may take pride in covering the syllabus on time over the online mode as well, however, it certainly becomes an added burden on the parents. The parents are already engaging with stressors of working from home, domestic chores, mental health concerns and anxiety about wellbeing of the loved ones. Add to it, the pressure to ascertain continued learning of children (as per the expectations of the school) which often strains the parent-child relationship by pedagogically driving the home space.

Being schooled in a pandemic is characterised by a continuation of the school-sanctioned learning process, increased parental involvement and watchfulness in the teaching-learning process, constant surveillance on teachers supervised and restrained participation of children in the learning process and minimal or absence of peer interactions and learning.