Is there light at the end of the pandemic tunnel for education of Pune's less privileged children?

Exactly a year ago in March 2020 the COVID pandemic led to a lockdown that announced closure of all educational institutions in India. Schools reopened in Maharashtra for middle and high school in November 2020 with School Education Department guidelines allowing 50 per cent students to attend a class at one time and there was some hope! Pune is one of the worst impacted cities. March 2021 about one in every eight new infections in India is in Pune, which is frightening. We are nearing 10,000 deaths, which unfortunately is next only to Delhi and Mumbai. This surge in the number of COVID-19 cases in March 2021 led to a complete closure of all educational institutions in Maharashtra. In the last academic year, barring the couple of weeks that some schools reopened children have stayed home.

My work in school education and also with local communities often leads to unexpected opportunities. Recently I was the resource person at an interactive session on "Covid 19 Pandemic and education of less privileged children: Challenges and way forward" organized by Fr. Mathew from Sarva Seva Sangh, Pune. Fr. Mathew shared that the organization is committed to the rehabilitation and capacity building of children at risk, especially street children and children living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. The objective of this session was to bring together social workers, field workers and other staff from different organizations working in and around in Pune who work in continuing education with the less privileged children to share their challenges and explore the way forward!

We had 30+ participants and the interactions began with their experience sharing.

Of course, these experiences were not an exception to the proceedings in education across the world. Over 90% of enrolled learners (1·5 billion young people) worldwide have been out of education. In fact, the UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay had warned that "the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption is unparalleled".

These interactions brought us close to how participants dealt with this unprecedented challenge. One of the major hurdles faced by the participants was the lack of resources to deal with disrupted academic life of the students. One of the other areas of concern was the nutrition of children. The stoppage of mid-day meals at school deprived children of food and also impacted their living. In addition, parents' loss of livelihood further led to disrupting learning.

The lockdown also brought in a revolutionary change in the mode of delivering education to less privileged children. It transformed drastically from physical learning to online learning reflecting another worldwide phenomenon that occurred after the closure of educational institutions. A rapid transition from physical learning to the digital sphere of learning emerged (Kapasia et al. 2020). However, several questions hovered over the discussions.

How did we embrace this transformation in India despite lack of resources?

Could the urban poor and especially the less privileged children access the digital sphere of learning for continuing the learning?

How did students and teachers tackle acquiring and using digital infrastructure and learning digital skillsets?

Pune Experience

The participants feared that many children that have dropped-out of school and were forced into child labour, beggary etc. directly or indirectly, as a majority of them were without access to e-learning. The reality is that even today parents of such children do not have a simple phone. According to Aucejo et al. (2020), generally students from the less privileged backgrounds experienced larger negative impacts due to the Covid-19 outbreak, which was also the case in Pune.

The participants shared that those of them who could use digital media, were initially intimidated of using digital technology, explored and more about the available online platforms and tools as they were left with no other option.

The schools and teachers reconnected with the communities and engaged with children online while exploring various tools to restart the learning process.

A small percentage of students, largely from urban communities, who had access to online learning had a different set of problems. For instance, if a family owned a smartphone, they lacked resources to recharge for internet. Inadequate internet bandwidth and interrupted supply of electricity were roadblocks faced by children to take lessons online.

However, they had another unexpected difficulty. Those who could access online classes, had no support at home to solve their learning problems which tended to frustrations in learning and eventually to drop off. Some students discontinued online learning as their parents had no resources to pay the fees. There were a few adverse effects. Those with access to digital technology, turned to misusing it instead of learning online, due to lack of parental control.

Interventions

Participants shared that the disruption by the pandemic required the organisations to come up with innovative solutions suitable to their local situations. They shared different approaches employed during the lockdown: mobile vans, conducted online sessions, conducted in person sessions in the communities, provided notebooks and worksheets for continuity and engaged children in the learning process.

However, in continuing the learning process, they were all at crossroads without any clarity on how to pick up existing school curriculum and teach the same. Some organisations used YouTube resources, story-telling and other activities to get children back to learning.

New challenge is with the current surge in COVID cases as they cannot bring the children physically to community centres or schools and need to work with smaller groups. At the same time, many of these families are still struggling with loss of income, and some organisations continue to provide food kits to address the problems of malnutrition.

Participants also discussed how to make learning fun for students so that they continue to attend the programs. How do they work towards building basic numeracy and literacy skills so that students can be brought back to schools in the next academic year. There is a need to identify and conduct activities to develop logical reasoning and problem solving skills in students. They agreed that they lacked resources and a list of defined activities to bring back students to learning.

A few Tools of Learning

As a volunteer with CSpathshala(www.cspathshala.org), an ACM India initiative, I have worked with 600+ government schools in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra and could demonstrate a few activities used by CSpathshala during the session. All these activities can be conducted in the communities using just a blackboard and chalk or pencil and paper. The participants found these methods useful as they required no additional resources.

For example, using patterns in shapes and numbers can help students revisit concepts in Maths, Geometry while patterns in words work well in teaching language and building vocabulary.

The participants found another simple activity like "Guess my birthdate" useful for learning with fun and how these tools could be used for student engagement.

Way forward

After this loss of learning during this academic year, the question was how to bring students back to the learning levels they need to be at. Although working with every such child to see where they are will be every effective, it may not be feasible to implement it. Currently one step could be to bridge the learning gap would be to identify a set of activities and follow a systematic approach to implement them in the local communities. The participants decided to

form an informal group to share resources, best practices and experiences to take the process ahead!

Despite various roadblocks it was heartening that we could see some light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, though a little far off.

Sonia Garcha

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