Opinion | The unexplored potential of learning beyond schooling

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The Covid crisis should push us to re-imagine education in radical ways that we'll be thankful for

At six, in grade 1, my daughter returned from school in a chirpy mood. "What did you study today?" I asked. She was puzzled. "I didn't study anything," she replied, "but I learnt a lot." Education in the time of Covid-19 offers a similar and radical opportunity: to let children learn effectively without being burdened by having to study unimaginatively.

The nation's education system is in turmoil. While it has been disrupted before, due to wars, strikes, or floods, never has it had to stop all physical proximity. Governments, teachers, parents and students are all asking the same questions with differing levels of anxiety: What should we do now and how long will this go on?

Education analysts have opined for decades that the current schooling systems don't work as well as they should. Education can be understood as of instrumental or intrinsic value. The education infrastructure is simply not creating the kind of learner, the kind of citizen, or the kind of workforce that society needs or individuals may want. There is a growing consensus that we mainly need to teach children "how" to learn, so that they can continually educate themselves. With the world in rapid flux due to emerging technologies, climate change and now this pandemic, everyone needs the agency to acquire new knowledge and skills on the go.

Through this crisis, there have been intense consultations between the Centre and states, between states and civil society, and among communities of schools, educators and parents. What needs to be done immediately to sustain children's learning? What must be done if schools remain shut for a long time?

At Ekstep Foundation, we undertook a lightning survey to understand what parents, teachers and students are feeling. There is apprehension all around. For students, there is uncertainty and fear, especially at the higher grades, in this exam season. Parents are equally frustrated and cannot shoulder the additional task of teaching their children. They don't know what or how to teach. They are also worried about letting their children spend too much time online. Lower-income parents have the opposite concerns, of a lack of access to digital devices. Teachers want to quickly find ways to stem a loss of learning among their students. Interestingly, they themselves feel inadequate in teaching their children at home. The role of parents cannot be easily infused

with the authority of a teacher. It is a herculean challenge to keep young minds engaged for long. But we have no choice other than to figure out how to do exactly that. This will need a new social contract between the education system, including teachers, and the community, including parents. Roles and responsibilities will have to shift quickly.

Amazing innovations have already come about. The internet is full of options for parents to play and learn with their kids at home; to go beyond curriculum-based thinking. Many content platforms are curating content and offering it for free. Elite schools have created virtual classes and parent conferences. The government is working to increase the utility of its digital platforms such as Diksha, which bridge the physical world of the textbook with a virtual platform through a simple QR code. This allows children continued access to compatible syllabus and teacher-created content. Already, parents and teachers are adapting to this innovation, with millions of downloads and sessions on Diksha. More is on the anvil from the government.

We can choose to look at this phase as an opportunity. It is inevitable that we will need digital technology to re-imagine learning beyond schooling. Even if it is only to inspire people to do more things physically. Now is the time to let go of the technophobia, and understand the power of open digital public goods. Now is the time to make sure that children without access to digital devices are not left behind. Even if this means the state having to ensure a digital device and connectivity for each family. No doubt there are dangers involved in letting children go online unsupervised. So, now is also the time to set new normative rules and behaviours around what, how and how much children should go online to learn.

There are other creative opportunities too. Children's ability to learn is infinite when they are engaged. During a lockdown, children could learn physics through helping in the kitchen, learn literature through storytelling or more conversations in their own languages, and understand the circular economy through changed consumption patterns in households. None of these are easy tasks, and parents across the board may reject this burden. Yet, uncommon times call for unconventional wisdom. Can we use this time to re-imagine learning itself, so that post-virus, we can implement schooling with better learning? Can we finally listen to those who have been advocating a different approach for decades? Can we restore individual agency to learn at pace, can we involve parents and communities more structurally, and can we restore the primacy of the caring teacher? Can we reinstate the primacy of critical thinking and of upholding universal human values?

This is not mere idealism. The current crisis gives a chance to transform education across the country. Let's open this window of opportunity together, so that every child can truly feel that she did not study but she learnt a lot.

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