Education | Which Way do we Want it to Turn?

Hridaykant Dewan

What is education?

'Education for all' and its purpose has been a contentious issue ever since it started being talked about not so long ago. The attempt was to make education a vehicle for preparing children for the economy and jobs, but now there is also an attempt to focus on education as a means of developing sensitive and concerned human beings; those who respect others and can show empathy. Woven into this has been a strand to promote the development of aesthetic abilities and a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, besides respect for working with the hands. This is not just for the sake of experience or creativity, but also for children to be able, in some way, to participate in something socially useful and productive.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) and the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) have stressed all these aspects and the development of rational ethics, scientific temper, a sense of fraternity and respect for plurality. There has also been an accepted commitment to providing quality education for everyone, which NEP 2020 strongly reiterates.

It is in this context that we should look at how education has been delivered and how the COVID-19 situation has disrupted it, analyse the different ways that seem to be suggested about how it will evolve in the future.

We also need to consider the lessons learned from people's responses to each other during the pandemic and what it means for educational processes and structure.

The current situation

If we examine the nature of education today, it is primarily directed at the learners' individual progress and their rise in the hierarchy. Advertisements are also directed at making the child the best, ahead of others and an unhesitating climber on the shoulders of others. The process has not been such that it makes the majority of the learners more sensitive to the pain of others or as a means of collective development and co-operation.

It has not been aimed at making learners pro-active interveners in unfair and unjust situations. It is merely seen as a means of individual escape and therefore, the aspiration is to get a role in the economy.

> The individual desire to do well and better than before cannot by itself be faulted, but in the absence of ethical rationality, fraternal feeling and scientific temper it is disastrous for the social fabric and the movement towards equity and justice to all.

Education not only existed but comprised and was delivered to different children in circumstances that could be inequitable. Thus, it has been and is 'iniquitous and exclusionary'; essentially maintaining status quo except for a few components that moved from one level to the other. Low numbers of participation in education exist in spite of the reservation policy.

Education, some argue, has been promoting and accentuating inequity among many other things.

Nai Talim

The *Nai Talim* movement criticised the-then school education as being too academically oriented and leaving out the *heart*, implying empathy for others as well as the *hands*, implying leaving out work with the hands. According to *Nai Talim,* school education produced literate people who were not actually educated. Proponents argued that education alienated children from their community and made them competitive, self-oriented and liable to exploiting others and that this education promoted disrespect not only for those who work with their hands but also for the work they did.

All policy and most curriculum framework documents acknowledged the relevance of *Nai Talim* and the need for education to include the development of the head, heart and hands. What they did not quite accept was the contention that the medium of learning should be useful, productive work: it was felt that some form of

work with the hands in the school programme was necessary. These documents also stressed the need for integration of many other areas into the school programme so that it did not remain a process that was too cerebral and academic.

In spite of all this, we have a system that promotes competition and places maximum emphasis on academic examination performance, be it through extensive coaching or any other facility.

Biased system

This system favours the resourceful and the elite in multiple ways, although it is not as if there has been no talk of improving the quality of education for the underprivileged. In the last three to four decades, there has been a lot of conversation in policy documents around this question and many programmes and missions have been implemented. There have been some resources (however inadequate) allocated and spent on these efforts as well. Some of these efforts have drawn in passionate and committed individuals, who have tried to support these efforts. The efforts have been of many types and with many different perspectives and kinds of investments, but the one thing common to all of these is that they have been largely input-driven.

In the late eighties and nineties of the previous century and in the first few years of this century, there has been a lot of work on materials, methods and training, inspired by attempts made by some non-government organisations (NGOs), some societies subsequently set up government education departments that involved many more NGOs. All these efforts excited and motivated people who were working with these NGOs and some teachers as well, but it all worked only till the people from outside the system remained in the projects. The larger government system did not accept it and since there were no major efforts to involve the community in clear roles, the energy of these programmes slowly dissipated. Teachers and the other workers in the system, who were deeply engaged with these efforts, attempted to find space in their work for the ideas and tried to continue, but the disabling and non-supportive environment did not allow them to.

The negative impact of technology

The inability to recognise the significance of the human element of the teachers' role in quality education has been disillusioning. Despite policy and system reform documents professing support,

the entire community of teachers was belittled as being disinterested, academically weak and irresponsible. Teachers were made accountable for results but were not given the independence to create and administer lessons and learning, which became increasingly more technology-oriented. No attention was paid to the background of the school, the number of teachers available in the school and whether the children could come to the school regularly or not. Documentation took precedence over teaching and teachers could not think about or plan what they wanted to do in class.

Testing became an additional burden as teachers were not allowed to plan their own teaching but were given prepared material. Testing through MCQs (multiple-choice questions) and other such processes for easy compilation of data delimits the nature of tasks that can be assigned and promotes rote learning which, as the Yashpal Committee (1993), the NCF in 2005 and, more recently, the NEP 2020 reiterated most emphatically, needs to be dispensed with altogether. A system of testing in which the teacher only thinks of results, and in which the child is irrelevant, leads to a hunt for mechanisms that are akin to rote learning in order to help students 'crack' the tests.

The impact of COVID

All this may seem unrelated to the main theme of this article, but there is a very important connection: the relevance of past experiences to understand the situation we are in now. The drive towards finding solutions in spite of teachers has led to thinking about smart classes, voice or audio-visually compiled lectures, self-learning materials etc and now, the new situation finds us in a position where it is not clear by when the teachers will be able to start functioning in the conventional sense.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unhappiness and brought difficulty to all and for many, it has unleashed unimaginable misery. Forced out of their livelihoods and homes, often going without even one square meal a day, many were forced to travel long distances to places they had left in search of livelihood. Their plight and the response of the educated and those who hold resources pointed to the lack of empathy and laid bare their self-seeking mercenary character.

This outlook was not just reflected in their attitude towards the poor who were dependent on them for their employment and shelter, but also towards neighbours who were unfortunate enough to

contract the disease, even if it were because they were helping those who had become ill or reaching those who needed help in some way. The total and blatant lack of the feeling of being a part of society and the system that was protecting and sustaining them was very evident.

Distancing

In this short period of a few months, we saw how the oft-repeated term, *social distancing*, blended into the earlier disdain for the people who make the system function for the comfort of the elite, whether it is house-maids or anyone else from that background. The feeling of empathy and collective identity seemed to be totally missing. The sense of co-operation and collaboration was also absent, as people looked out for their own safety and attempted to form bubbles of insulation that provided them with all that they needed, but with no concern for those who worked to make it possible. It is not surprising that they were anxious about their children missing out on learning and making the effort to sharpen their edge over others. The idea of education has already got reduced to learning only to crack entrance examinations. So, there was no sense of need for the children to interact with or mix with other children. The perception was that children were wasting their time and widening the learning gap and hence, we need to start them on their regimen.

Mechanical responses

This pressure made all private schools start online classes. While there were parents who could provide their children with smartphones and unlimited internet access, there were others who were unable to do so. For those with no immediate means of livelihoods, providing even one smartphone to siblings competing for phone time, the access to the phone as well as the internet was a challenge.

There were immediate announcements for training sessions for teachers to take online classes. The discourse moved in the direction of this being a long-term solution and as a system of promoting and strengthening self-learning. The education industry started visualising recorded lessons that could be shared with students and not leave the burden of preparing and teaching the lessons to the teacher as they are not equipped to do so. The post-lockdown norm has been one of moving towards more technology, less human interaction, reduction of syllabi and, as already mentioned,

more individualised learning. Cutting down on time and content implies that we still look at learners as being unable to read and understand texts on their own. The teacher is expected to explain the content and give the answers to the children: so much for the idea of self-learning!

Critical juncture

So, this is a juncture where we need to revisit the questions: What is education? What is education for? Why should we have schools? What can online classes do and what do they totally miss out on?

The small sample that I have interacted with and some that others have reported reveal that the children who are being engaged through online classes have all been unhappy with them. The thing they miss most is being with other children, whether in class or in the playground. They want the school to reopen soon and it is imperative to consider their point of view and think of the possible reasons why they are missing school. This has a critical bearing on the sudden push towards more technology-driven schools and learning. It emphasises the point about the inequity in access to avenues of education as it becomes more technology-driven and strongly bolsters the view that this form of education is in any case inferior to the education which ensures interaction with teachers and peers in schools and classrooms.

Revisiting the definition of education

Apart from this, it is necessary, firstly, to think of the way development is structured and secondly, how we want to organically address some of the major gaps that have remained in making education meaningful for children and the community. We have to consider ways to involve more people and children in the educational process and promote the role of education as a part of *collective development and sustenance* rather than a means of making individual progress and maximising profit.

The time has come for us to decide what we must do. Should we move towards more online, cerebral and iniquitous education processes? Or should we move in the opposite direction, towards an education system that has more closeness and contact? If we choose the latter path, we have to invest in ways to bring together children even in the smallest villages (with all the precautions of masks, hand-wash and physical distance) who can be with each other and a teacher, the adult who can facilitate conversations and learning and even

work with books, pencil and paper.

The question is: Can we work towards temporary *mohalla* centres that bring children of local communities together to learn to be human to each other and share our diversity within human and constitutional values along with rational ethics and scientific temper, values that NEP 2020 has also advocated so strongly? It is the answer to this tough question that will determine the direction of education in the future.

Hridaykant Dewan currently works with the Translation Initiatives of the Azim Premji University. He has been a member of the founding group of *Eklavya* and Educational Advisor of the Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur. He has been working in the field of education for over 40 years in different capacities. In particular, he has been associated with efforts on educational innovation and modification of state educational structures. He can be contacted at hardy@azimpremjifoundation.org

Our biggest concern was: are we bringing elements like economic inequality in the minds of our children? This was something which we had always tried to avoid in our school, with its environment of providing the same resources for all to learn, to use, to play etc… Were we ignoring ideas of social justice and humanistic values in the name of addressing a temporary gap of academic support through the online mode?

Anil Angadiki, Using COVID-19 as a tool for Learning, p 43.