Future-Ready Students

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The pandemic has been a turning point in the way we lived our lives - impacting livelihoods, health, relationships and most of all, education. As a result, children have grown up very fast and have lost social interaction, creative play and basic experiences of nature in everyday-life activities. These have been replaced by screen time, leading to their development being compromised.

As the realisation that schools would not open in the near future became a reality, the window of learning in the first quarter of the year was used in the online mode. This practice depended on the capabilities of each teacher as no accreditation model was in place.

A holistic approach

Various collaborative approaches to the construction of knowledge and building clusters of practices were experimented with. Students constructed their own knowledge through affirmation, discussion, sharing of thoughts, multiple analysis of resources and teacher feedback.

A platform was created where students shared experiences, discussed theories, challenges and learned from each other. The teacher was no longer responsible for delivering knowledge or even providing the resources for learning but maintained a critical role as a guide, facilitator and assessor of learning. Online classrooms became more active in this collaborative environment. Students discussed, graded, researched and created projects. Teaching was objective, not subjective. Online classrooms not competitive because each child chose his/her own content and method of study.

Synchronous and asynchronous learning

Learning commenced at two levels: *synchronous* and *asynchronous*. In the *asynchronous* model, students created their own projects based on reading and sharing with the teachers This took the form of online quizzes and online stimulation of data.

In the *synchronous* mode, discussion and clarifying questions took place through video-conferencing and shared online whiteboards. A variety of experts were invited to share their experiences and speak through podcasts and web chats on various subjects, such as sustainability, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), cyber safety, immunity, health, mindfulness, art, and environment etc.

This methodology helped in creating an interdisciplinary approach. Learning became innovative, experiential and self-orientated through research, 100-page projects, process books, documenting the background of projects, portfolios, self-made films and videos etc. Through this, children found their own knowledge.

Modalities of online delivery

Commitment to community

At Springdales School, learning is transacted at different levels because we have a heterogeneous community in the classroom. For over 40 years, the school has had a culture of bringing in children from the economically weaker sections. There are approximately 800 students from the lower-income group who are integrated into the school across classes and have always been given the same facilities which are provided to students from privileged backgrounds.

Our social workers and counsellors conducted telephonic surveys of children to ensure that children were equipped with phones or tablets for their online classes. A collection drive was conducted in which staff and alumni contributed by donating phones and tablets which were distributed to the children along with payment for their broadband connections with an assurance that their parents were not using the devices.

Attendance

Attendance in classes was checked daily. Absenteeism was taken up immediately, reported and phone calls were made to homes by counsellors, social workers, supervisors and even the Principal.

New tools as learning aids

Breakout rooms were created to split the classes into smaller groups for collaboration and discussion in the afternoons to scaffold the learning of children from economically weaker sections in small groups. They were helped to make projects, films, videos and

research modules. The breakout rooms had peers as mentors, along with teachers to assist the children. Further to these sessions, telephonic helplines were created every evening for one-to-one interactions for guidance and doubt-clearing.

Assessment

Across subjects, no marks were allotted, only grades were given. Growth ladder rubrics to measure step-wise learning progression became the tool for assessment where students created meaningful new ideas with imagination and originality, understood digital literacy by using multiple technologies to communicate, create and access information. The students were able to solve problems and work collaboratively with the peer group, apply meaningful knowledge and reflect on their own learning strategy. This helped them to move to the next level at their own pace and co-construct their personal goals.

Assessments were conducted through open-book tests, observations by peers, teachers and parents, portfolios, art, film appreciation and storytelling sessions. Research projects were also used as tools of assessment. The possibilities of learning became immense, which, in a school of stone and mortar would not have taken place at such a deep level.

Reaching the last child

Children with disabilities have been greatly impacted by the pandemic. Springdales School has over 400 students with disabilities who have a variety of conditions and learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and Asperger's syndrome etc. School-family partnerships helped in giving assistance to them. Children with disabilities were supported with special classes, organised helplines and integration into mainstream online classes. Both teachers and parents worked hard in spite of being equally technologically challenged.

Because of the pandemic, specialist educators – occupational, speech and behavioural – were not able to meet the children personally and parents and teachers had to take on these demanding multiple roles. To bridge the gap, the teachers of the school helped parents to connect with the therapists through helplines in order to assist their children.

For children with screen intolerance, parents endeavoured to sit alongside to help them connect with online classes. This proved to be a great challenge because very few of these children were screen-ready.

Hurdles and solutions

The stresses of the pandemic resulted in many children undergoing severe mental health concerns, loneliness, depression, anxiety. This was particularly true of children with cerebral palsy. Those with language disability were negatively affected due to difficulties in understanding the situation. In certain circumstances, children with disabilities were being abused and neglected. Counselling sessions were conducted by specialised psychologists and school counsellors to support these children.

The realisation that students with disabilities had fixed routines and needed regular occupational therapeutic inputs as part of their sensory integration programme led us to introduce assistive technologies which increased access to study material. Children with hearing impairments were helped through sign teaching and speech software.

Counsellors conducted sensitisation workshops with parents so that they could involve their children with domestic chores as this would help in building life skills. Children with disabilities started washing up, laying the table, watering plants, folding clothes etc. all of which brought a sense of responsibility and participation. Individualised home programmes were created for parents. Worksheets and behaviour modification plans were sent home, helplines were put in place as a support system for parents who were going through emotional turmoil.

Creating counselling sessions for children and parents, tracking children in their regular teaching classes and following up with skill-building sessions after classes and helping in remedial work continued to be constants.

Humanising technology

As a school, we made sure that the time spent online was not passive but active and productive. We reviewed our strategies in humanising the online content. Personalised learning became integral to classroom transaction.

The greatest challenge that we faced was in crunching the content to process the syllabus into smaller components. This was attempted through a concept-based understanding of topics. Children were taught through competency-based learning rather than through the text, which gave them a deeper understanding of what they learned.

We noticed that young children in the foundational years were not able to devote screen time to their lessons, so we painted small aluminium boxes and placed multiple worksheets, indigenous toys,

drawing material, Play-Doh and other resources which would engage a child for a month. These boxes were sent to their homes. This helped nursery and kindergarten students to continue to learn offline. It also created a sense of a student's voice, agency and ownership with the material. Teachers went online with parents for twenty minutes daily and explained the use of the *magic box* for their wards. This whole involvement helped in breaking away from screen time and creating a link between the parent and the child through experiential practices.

We realised the difference between *doing digital* and *being digital*. *Doing digital* is enabling students to learn online from home while *being digital* is having a system that unlocks the benefits of technology. We moved from *thinking* technology-enabled teaching to *understanding* the extent of its actual potential. So, both culturally and digitally, we were able to change to a student-centric learning channel, based on a child's own pace, aptitudes, experiences, background knowledge, competencies and strengths. New ways of classroom delivery were imagined along with an analysis of student progress. Learners worked like one community, enjoying interaction along with benefiting from experiences that were customised for them. Inequity in teaching was addressed through digital learning technologies.

As a school, we have tried to embed purpose and humanity into our teaching and learning processes because learning must move beyond *batch-processed testing and ranking*. We believe that we cannot ignore this opportunity for change that will shape our education systems for the next 50 years. We learned that students master higher-order thinking skills because, today, *what matters is no longer what students know, but how they apply* that knowledge.

Innovations

We attempted to shift to Education 4.0 in which 21st-century skills became the focus of learning and introduced text chats that ran simultaneously with open discussions, thus maintaining the interest of the class. Attractive and precise PowerPoint presentations/slides, videos that guided students on activities were created. Teachers ensured that the content was qualitative rather than quantitative which helped to curate the signal from the noise. Screen time was used exclusively for one-to-one interactions in order to prevent aggressive gaming, browsing the internet and watching videos. Additionally, the notion of toning down assumptions of student integrity by re-examining assignments

that allowed room for cheating and creating strong relationships between the teacher and the student was revised by rethinking contact hours. The questions that children were assessed on, essentially dealt with application and reflection rather than rote learning.

Throughout the pandemic, we have developed a strong organisational structure by ensuring students and teachers have voice and agency. We have strengthened relationships with parents and community, created opportunities for professional development, transformative learning and cultivating an ethos for inclusion and diversity. Our pedagogical practices were influenced by collaborative strategies in supporting sustainability and wellbeing. Our view was holistic with a commitment to enquiry-based strategies and student-centred differentiated learning.

The school and the community demonstrated practices which developed emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of students and teachers. We organised virtual health promotion programmes, assemblies, observations, memorials, celebration of all festivals through dance, music, art, theatre, sports and explored the link between human health and nature, happiness and wellbeing, creating effective communication in the classrooms. Slam poetry, stand-up comic shows, declamations, debates, environment days, personality and speech development sessions were also undertaken.

Every child matters

As the pandemic continued, we became a different school, unstoppably and irreversibly. Teaching and learning have been completely transformed. The online phenomenon has given students an experience of personalised learning.

In order to prevent any divides in our community between the privileged and those from less privileged backgrounds, we created a model of equity and opportunity by constantly revising our definition of quality.

Technology maximises the potential of each student if the school personalises it and brings in real-time feedback. This helps to identify students who are at risk and need extra attention. Our model of assessment is student-centric which integrates social and emotional wellbeing and helps educators to grasp student interest and willingness to learn. Through courage and commitment by rethinking the future, we have transformed our school into a larger ecosystem which is both humane and edifying.

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Of those impacted by the pandemic, children, especially girls, from the disadvantaged communities are affected the most. It is unfortunate that children are compelled to stay away from their learning spaces. For a child coming from a disadvantaged household, the school is a safe space which not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and essential life-skills but also ensures her psycho-emotional wellbeing by engaging her with her peer-groups through various scholastic and co-scholastic activities. The absence of these spaces at such a crucial developmental phase of their lives is a threat both to their learning and to their holistic growth.

Shubham Garg & VIshnu Gopal, Reimagining Education During the Pandemic, p 93.

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