A Will to Teach and a Will to Learn

Yash Kumar Singhal

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. It hit everyone regardless of their status or background. And with schools closing, exams getting cancelled and over one billion learners impacted worldwide, education is among those fields that have been hit the hardest.

Institutions tried to provide temporary relief through online classes and asynchronous learning, but these too have their problems. Students were missing out on things like practical exposure and peer-to-peer discussions that would take place in a physical classroom. On top of that, increased screen time, unresolved doubts, load on teachers and unequal access to technology were also barriers to effective learning. The education system began to suffer because it is not resilient or adaptive enough to work under such drastic turbulence. It has been due for a complete redesign from some time now and this pause that COVID-19 has forced upon us is the perfect time for us to do just that. As no one can understand student problems better than students themselves, we needed to take matters into our own hands.

Finding solutions that work

During the lockdown period, my school organised a *Changemaker Challenge* which I entered with some friends. The task was to come up with a solution for making learning more efficient and inclusive during the pandemic and then pitching that solution to a panel of judges who would fund the project. After brainstorming for days, listing down all our crazy ideas and doing all we could to get inspiration, my team and I still had nothing.

Micro-schooling

Finally, on the solution submission deadline, with some help from my parents, I thought of *micro-schooling*. The rationale is fairly simple: we cannot go to school because if so many people from all parts of the city collect at one place, the virus becomes impossible to track and can very easily create hundreds of carriers every day. So, the main idea behind micro-schooling is - *if we can't go to school, why can't school come to us?*

Think about it like this. At home, we are living with our families, interacting with them, talking to them, hugging them… all without fear of catching the virus. This is because we know that within our respective homes, no one is infected. Similarly, if the city were divided into *micro-geographies* with few or no cases, everyone within those bubbles of safety can interact freely! This way, with the necessary precautions, students and teachers from within the same locality can meet up in small groups to continue education without the problems of online school.

And why just students and teachers? 'Learners' and 'volunteers' from all ages and backgrounds could share their skills and knowledge to create a web of learning, eventually enhancing the education of the entire community. The classes could be conducted out in the open air, we can have a *gurukul-esque* exchange of knowledge enriched with discussions, demonstrations and conversations. All this, while not having to worry about the virus.

Starting off

As our project did not need any funding, we did not win the *Changemaker Challenge*. My friends lost interest after this, but I remained passionate about the idea and decided to test it out within my own residential complex. So, armed with a hastily-made Google form, a simple poster and my sister's small whiteboard, I set out to make a difference.

In my first pilot session, I had just two students. I remember standing there in the middle of the park in my apartment complex, trying to teach these two middle-schoolers about punnet squares and blood types when a primary school girl came up and sat down for my class, eager to learn.

Seeing how even such a young girl was able to learn concepts of genetics, made me realise that all it takes is a will to teach and a will to learn. Her enthusiasm gave me the push to come back the next day for another class. This time we had nine learners and, just like that, one day at a time, the class size grew and the sessions evolved – from volunteers teaching science, maths and English to

professionals teaching about the Design Process, architecture, public speaking and even the German language!

My experience

We were a few weeks into micro-schooling when I read the news about the state government's ban on online classes. Realising that the need of the hour was to help students continue their education without schools functioning, I organised a few syllabus-oriented classes for younger students from grades III to V. In our first such class, which was about fractions, there was just one student. Nevertheless, we started the class and sometime during the session, my little classroom caught the attention of two children who were playing nearby. Although they were wary at first, curiosity got the better of them and soon they had joined the class, proving that learning is also contagious.

I truly believe that this concept is an awesome solution to education during an emergency situation and could even be continued post-pandemic. I hope that others will follow my example and step forward to solve other problems in the community too. To complain is to have identified a problem, but one must then go one step further and actually try to solve it.

Currently, I am working on creating a write-up that can help guide students in other areas on how they can set up their own micro-schools. Through this, I want to further expand this network of learners and volunteers and spread the motto of *schools can close but learning cannot stop!*

Yash Kumar Singhal is a high school student at Inventure Academy, Bengaluru, studying for a future Biology Research career. He is passionate about spreading knowledge and is always trying to learn new things. He loves experimenting whether in the kitchen or his school lab and enjoys blogging. He can be contacted at yashksschool@gmail.com.