Defining the New Normal

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It is important, first, to consider if one should talk at all about the 'new normal'. We may be justified in thinking that the COVID-19 situation, though long-drawn-out, is yet temporary and would eventually subside and schools can go back to being what they were. That response fails to take into account the intense experiences of the last one-and-a-half years and the conversations that they have triggered, pulling both, schools and education, in new directions. There are suggestions about the greater use of technology and the change to a more technology-linked educational system. There are suggestions about separating those attempting advanced learning and those who would be satisfied with some basic elements of learning, the minimum essential required. These and other factors are the reasons that we must talk about the new normal, so as to be aware of the drift, the shift and the struggle to ensure constitutional commitments and processes that are needed to sustain them. The reason we must think about the new normal also arises from the pressures we seem to be feeling as a society and the growing difficulty with the rising inequities and the non-sustainability of the ways in which we have been living and using resources. And we may realise that the basics of the new normal have been a part of public discourse for a long time and there are only some fundamental principles that are being restated in the context of the present times.

The experience of COVID-19 has been shattering in many different ways. It has not yet gone, and it is not clear when we might be rid of it fully, if at all. As it recedes, there is always the fear that it might come back again. This fear has changed us in some unrecognisable ways. While we continue to view social, cultural and religious gatherings as being inevitable, the opening of schools has taken a back seat. Children have started venturing out a bit more in many places and you may see some grounds full of children and youth playing. But a large number of people do not have that opportunity and are constrained to stay put inside their homes with very little outside interaction. In the context of children

and their education, we are confronted with many questions and few choices and options. The last year-and-a-half has been a different experience and children have had to cope with tensions, many also with extreme scarcity, displacement and worse: sickness and even death in the family. It is not clear what impressions the last year has left on them and what lies ahead till a hopeful semblance of normalcy returns. It is also not clear what the lasting effect of this pandemic will be on the large number of children whose families have always been struggling.

It is with this understanding that we must think of a way forward for the development of the next generation that will populate and manage the future. It has to be about their education, helping them rediscover their childhood, reduce the sense of anxiety and also help them build their cognitive abilities and their knowledge base so as to deal with their lives and be empowered in such a way that it benefits everyone, including the environment and the planet.

Living with the pandemic

There were many efforts of different kinds being made during the pandemic to reach and engage with children. This wide spectrum of programmes had different foci with respect to the children that they attempted to, and could, reach and the manner and content of what they reached out to them with. As we hope to slowly return to a state where the fear of COVID-19 is somewhat or largely mitigated and think about the world we would construct, we need to keep in mind the children and the pledges that we have made in the Preamble to the Constitution. It would be so easy to forget both as the challenges of livelihoods and persistent concerns about health continue to haunt us. It is safe to anticipate that the world would, at least in the medium- to short-run (still a couple of generations away) perhaps not go back to the pre-first wave days. So new norms and new ways of adjustment would evolve. What should the elements of this normal be and what should it include for the children and their lives and not just their education?

There is, of course, the realisation that children who have missed school in the last year and more (and this period could increase), have forgotten even what they knew. There are studies showing that during the pandemic, children have actually slipped in significant ways from their levels of learning of what is considered relevant and important in school. Given the way the school dealt with learning, merely as transfer of chunks of information mistakenly labelled as 'knowledge', there is a need to be clear about how we want to respond to this apparent falling behind from whatever levels the students had reached.

Among the many attempts to engage students during this time was one using technology as a principal vehicle. The efforts to start *mohalla* classes and reach children who could not access technology were sporadic and largely led by a few non-government educational institutions. The larger focus was on the technology-driven programmes and multiple channels blossomed as did many organisations preparing software for children. These, being market-driven, were obviously targeted at the elite and reflected their interests and experiences.

Background

The haunting images of the children walking huge distances have already been forgotten. In the larger discourse, there is no cognisance of the fact that many children would take a long time to come out of the traumas they have been through. There are many who would have to be located and rescued to be brought back to the school. There is now occasional talk of schools, children and their learning. The main concern in reopening seems to be the fact that children have not learnt enough and that there needs to be some way of covering what had to be done in a shorter time and in a hurry. However, even before we think of the mathematics, science, social studies, reading and writing that students have missed from their textbooks, we have to remember that they have missed many more important things. They may have lost many things and gained intense experiences. The question is: what is society and the school going to do about that? With livelihoods not improving and the pandemic persisting, many realities for children have changed for the worse. What existed earlier was not acceptable and it put students from economically and socially weak sections at not just a disadvantage but even at the risk of falling off, which almost all of them did at some stage of their education. We need to consider that even those possibilities would now not be available to many families and children. The exercise of thinking about the future of education after the pandemic needs to consider these concerns.

This analysis of the education experience during the pandemic should therefore help us think about what the new normal should be. The education system has been plagued by extreme inequity and lopsided priorities. The culture and direction of the system are controlled by the anxiety of a set of over-concerned parents putting pressure on the system and their children, urging the children to compete, providing them with all the materials and means to learn and excel, and expecting them to show faster and larger output with noteworthy results. They are able to muster all the resources for expectations that are difficult to attain for most others. The diverse range of facilities available to different children in the extremely stratified school system makes the chances of their learning very different. Children with limited means feel overpowered by the handicap with which they begin. In most cases, their parents do not have the time, resources, will or confidence that their children can overcome the handicap they have in learning or make use of their education.

The reality of the schools is that instead of bringing children from different backgrounds to interact and learn about one another's lives so as to be able to empathise with the situations some live in, we have stratified schools, many of which are becoming more and more ghettoised. There is another kind of segregation emerging in schools, fuelled by the desire in the system to classify and categorise children as capable of developing higher-order thinking skills from the rest. Children categorised in this manner will be offered different curricula and hence, many can only have limited aspirations. This is, in one sense, a formal confirmation of the intent of the system (already on the ground) and means that now children could be segregated even in upper-primary as those who study a 'lighter' curriculum to branch off into practical vocations and programmes of skill development and others who will follow the 'academic' curriculum for attempting higher studies. With no revision in the way work with hands is compensated and this being identified as 'menial' labour, the consequences of this segregation are easy to imagine.

While the pandemic brought to the forefront staggering disparities, for a brief while, it also showed the importance of co-existence and compassion rather than competition. The extreme disdain and disregard for the suffering of those who are considered to be 'the other', and therefore unequal, were mixed with a concern for their wellbeing and some community systems of support and collective action were set up. There was also, albeit briefly, a realisation of the importance and essentiality of the so-called 'menial work'. The challenge for us is to make this a lesson that education instils as a common sensibility. The key to the new normal, therefore, has to lie in setting up processes of education that are more equitable, more inclusive, more participative and focus on developing persons with kindness and humanity, imbued with the values of the Constitution. The stark disparity that the pandemic has exposed between the affluent and the deprived is likely to get legitimised and cemented, as the options for the deprived to educate themselves get diminished further due to reduced access to resources and possibilities. There is already an ever-increasing emphasis on performance as essential for opportunities for 'academic education' from an early stage. This would not only restrict the possible openings into the economy but also into idea-forming analyses and literature. The process of sorting would be considered fair and just as it would be based on the present notion of what is perceived as merit. The hype over medals and lucrative opportunities in sports could lead to similar processes that benefit the capable elite. The new normal can thus slip into being the reification of this or emerge as a clear attempt towards equitable possibilities. The consciousness of this possibility requires us to make a choice about the new normal.

Another important concern about the new normal is about adjusting the focus of the cognitive aspect of education as well. In the last 20 years, concern continued to be expressed about the content covered in the syllabus and the ability of the learners to perform as per the syllabus. The advocacy for the need to develop *abilities*, rather than be a store of information, has been on the back-burner of all conversations, with assessments and performance-tracking of elaborately defined outcomes taking centre stage. Assessment is an attempt to measure the learner against some ideally-defined expectations that have strangely come to be accepted as standard and appropriate for an age, in spite of the reality that a majority of the children are not able to acquire those abilities and perform as per the expected learning stages. And when the schools open, let us not rush to have the students complete all that they would have done in the period when the schools were closed. Students not only have not been able to add to what they knew and could do, but they have also forgotten a lot of what they did know.

Technology in education

The issue of the use of technology in education has to be considered carefully in the present situation, where society is stratified. If resources are not a concern, then the question becomes: are there enough grounds to suggest that technology substantially helps in learning? Is it the direction to move towards as better supplementary support? This argument is different from the view that, given the reality that the pandemic is not going away and more such crises may get generated, it is appropriate to move towards more and more technology-focused teaching and learning processes. Such processes are also better monitored and central guidance has been available to teachers and, more importantly, to the children themselves.

There is already a growing clamour for more technology and development of software as well as increased access. We need to consider the question of the use of technology and the kind of directions it would inadvertently promote. We know the children have almost universally disapproved of online classes and have shown keenness to return to schools. We have seen with the increased use of technology, the increased fragmentation of people and the spread of misinformation including ideas that are divisive and socially harmful. As human interactions and experiences of mixing keep getting reduced, the dangers of segregation and the spread of distrust would keep increasing. Any new norm that for some reason brings in less human contact as a basic practice is not a good option. There is no harm in using technology in an equitable way, but it has to be in addition to the school as we knew it, albeit more collaborative and fostering cooperative learning and reduced competition and pressure. The educational system cannot reduce the stakes and pressures unless the options available are more equitable and the process of filtration does not start early.

The question is: do we strengthen the technological devices aimed at tracking centrally- defined learning

outcomes and standards to continuously compare children or do we move towards community- and teacher-led processes of setting expectations? Given the urge to use technology to replace human interaction, it would be essential to recognise the importance of human interaction and make it possible. It would be so easy to slip into excessive use of technology which could, after substantial investments, be better than what exists today. There has been considerable investment in online learning in the last 20 years and the pandemic has increased this manifold. The concerns of the children from deprived backgrounds going to schools run by the government are very different from the concerns of the parents of the children from high-end private schools. Children from economically weak backgrounds would like the schools to open early and continue working regularly. While the elite would be looking towards a blended mode, leaning towards technology-supported individual learning, the interests of the rural poor children are in the opening of schools. Even for children from the slums, there is no alternative to having some form of a regularly run *basti* school with full precautions. The solutions we look for in the short term are linked to long-term concerns and our views on how education needs to be structured.

To summarise

The task of rebuilding the education of children after the pandemic abates is fraught with challenges. There is a serious risk of a large number of children being further marginalised and completely excluded from certain opportunities of education and thereby, possibilities of obtaining certain roles and positions in society. The promise of inclusion of all children into an equitable education system as a means of building a democratic and level playing field with equal economic opportunities, leading to gradual social mixing and fraternity has to be fulfilled. This can be done only if there is an unqualified attempt to ensure that children from the deprived backgrounds get all the extra facilities that are needed to compensate for the huge handicap they face in resources and scaffolding in their struggle to keep pace with the children from socially and economically well-endowed backgrounds.

The reconstruction of education must recognise that, at best, technology is a supportive element, and the larger part is achieved through human interaction with the teachers and peers, using reading materials including textbooks and other resources. The 'new normal' must be chosen, only if we get to work towards it constructively, by ensuring that it does not exacerbate the existing disparities in the opportunity of getting an education and choosing social and economic roles. These require totally changed assumptions and beliefs and cannot happen quickly. But the effort has to consciously move towards this goal, rather than slip into accepting and supporting increased stratification and ever-widening gaps.

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