

A Holistic Approach to Learning as Children Return to School

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This article looks back at a few of the things that were done in the immediacy of the crisis of lockdowns and upheavals and considers how we might best respond to children's needs as they begin to return to school, particularly the younger children.

With the first onslaught of COVID-19 and its devastating effects on people who worked within the unorganised labour force, there was an emergency where many lacked food, shelter and healthcare. Many children were exposed to hardships, neglect and deprivation and fear of what might happen to them as they watched the news or overheard conversations about the dangers and risks of the pandemic.

Over the past year, many organisations, schools, libraries and individual teachers and volunteers actively responded to children's physical needs and also tried to reach out creatively to engage them through craft activities, stories or close observations of their natural surroundings. Publishers, storytellers, library educators, illustrators and authors made a concerted effort to make stories available online and many volunteers read stories to children on mobile phones or provided families with 'book bags'. *Story Weaver*, set up by Pratham Books, provided free access to a wide selection of books online in more than 26 languages.

Among the books published by Story Weaver some related directly to the pandemic. These targeted different age groups and presented particular but very relevant perspectives. One such book is *Coronavirus: We can Stay Safe*.ⁱ This book helps children see some of the reasons things happened the way they did, in ways that even the youngest children can have a role in protecting themselves and others from the virus. *Superheroes*ⁱⁱ, another book, highlights our interdependence in times of crisis and how each one can have a positive response in taking responsibility.

In addition to focusing on telling and reading stories, some organisations also encouraged children to generate their own stories, images and journals.

Initially, this was specifically in relation to the children's experience of the pandemic. Following are two examples of how professionals sought ways to connect to children. One such organisation in Bengaluru is *Buguri*, working with the waste-picker community. They succeeded in setting up a radio station to share stories, news and information. This included a talking-tree puppet that answered children's questions about the pandemic. *Buguri* encouraged children to draw pictures and comic strips to express their understanding of the virus and their feelings about its effects.

Sharon English School in Mumbai reached out to children in a variety of ways. They encouraged them to think through metaphors to identify their changing emotions, the sense of isolation and frustration at the physical restrictions that were enforced.ⁱⁱⁱ One girl wrote, 'Life is a butterfly stuck in a web, who wants to fly but can't. We also want to go out and play but can't do it.' One boy said that life under lockdown was like a car without a key because 'we had legs to move about but no permission to go out'. Others described their experience as being like a lion in a cage or a person under house arrest.

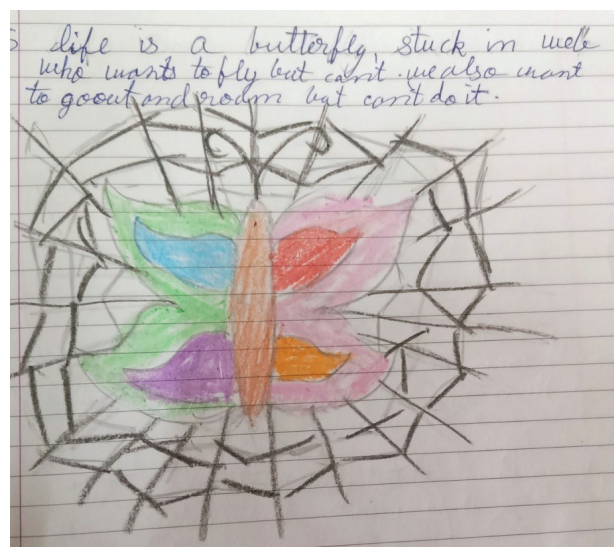
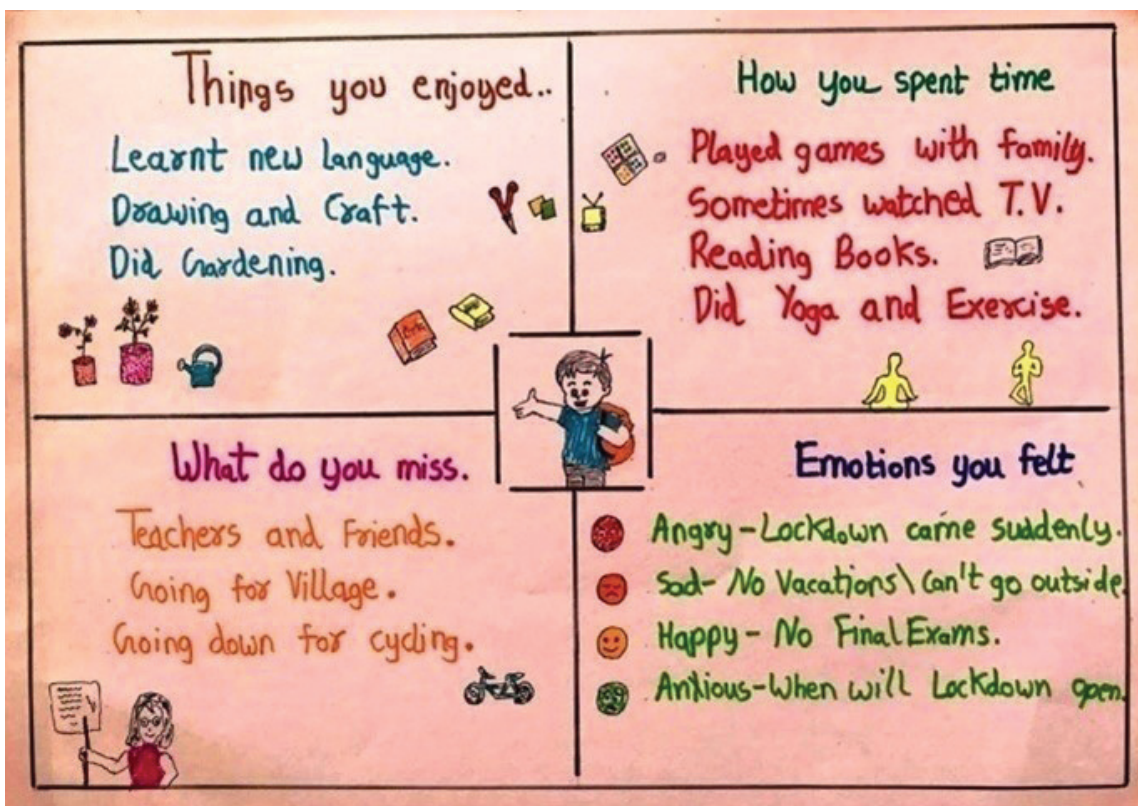


Image and description of life in lockdown by a student of class VIII

The same school asked children to describe through word and image what they enjoyed, how they

spent their time, the things they missed, and the emotions that they felt. The responses were very

varied and below are two examples:



Nevertheless, the vast majority of children were left with their anxieties unspoken and unheard. In addition to the physical and academic challenges, many children have not had the opportunity to express their experiences of relocation, death in the family, conflict at home, loneliness or acute shortages. These, of course, would have impacted children differently according to their age, temperament and circumstances. But even for children who were not directly affected, many would have been exposed to media coverage of the chaos and panic. Not all children have suffered or been traumatised, but children's lives have certainly changed and been disrupted. For many, there has been a kind of vacuum with little to stimulate them. A number of children living in rural areas have at least had the advantage of open space and the company of each other and some would have even benefited from the relaxed and unmonitored time; but for children in urban areas, life has been more restricted.

Different perspectives on priorities

As children begin to return to the classroom, there may be a tendency to 'move on' and try to forget the problems that many may have faced. Children's powers of resilience have often been commented upon, but these very survival strategies sometimes bear long-term consequences as children struggle to adapt or adjust to the stress of difficult situations. If these disruptions in their lives are not addressed, children's readiness for learning might well be hampered.

The discussions around the effects of the pandemic on children have mainly been seen in terms of loss, or what has been termed as 'learning regression'. For many children, their literacy and numeracy skills have been severely affected by the lack of resources and stimuli. One particular concern has been for migrant children whose home language is different from the medium of instruction at school and who now face learning in a half-forgotten language. However, perhaps the greatest loss for offline students has been a shift away from a positive learning environment where interaction was encouraged. The school offers the potential of a learning community where there are expectations and responsibilities on both, the students as well as the teachers. It is a context where students also support and learn from each other. The apathy of

most state governments to provide these children with any incentive or support for nearly over 17 months has been alarming. Jean Drèze writes how the system dropped 'offline children' like 'hot potatoes' (The Hindu, August 15, 2021).

Most teachers working with children who had no access to the internet felt they had nothing to offer without the framework of classroom structures, a fixed syllabus and assessment systems. It has become clear that the over-centralised system has deprived not only children, but also their teachers, of autonomy. A headline in the newspaper asks the rhetorical question, 'What can children learn without textbooks?' This seems to suggest that learning and textbooks are synonymous! In Karnataka, there has been a belated effort to hand out worksheets for children to complete, but this is hardly an adequate response to children's real needs.

Meaning-making through stories

The urgent challenge is how we can best support children going back to school, especially those who have not had support from home or school. The priority would seem to be to make up for lost time and accelerate children's mastery of literacy and numeracy skills, by first assessing children's learning levels and then by providing relevant remedial work for them. This would address the issue of the critical need for differentiated learning in the classroom. However, even this would only be a partial response to the more deeply-rooted problem of learning readiness. The danger is that we may be reducing language learning to the bare bones of acquiring decoding and encoding skills, and maths learning to drilling children in mechanical tasks. Further, other aspects of the curriculum, such as art, music, drama and practical work in environmental studies and the sciences will be sidelined. There are even suggestions that holidays should be cancelled! More than ever, at this particular time, children need a balanced, holistic approach to learning, and this must include some occasions of celebration.

I would suggest that a balanced approach to the present concerns of educating young learners would mean giving attention to basic skills in language and maths for individual learners, and also to include meeting children's needs to do things with their hands, relate to the immediate environment, and give space for imaginative, reflective and creative activities both individually and collaboratively.

Sharing stories is one way to engage children imaginatively and thoughtfully. Teachers, library educators and social workers can support children in listening and reading stories and further encourage them to tell and write their own stories.

Stories, like life itself, can be ambivalent and of mixed quality. Like food, they can be nourishing but they can also be indigestible and unpalatable when used instrumentally. Some stories help in the process of healing and consolation through humour or by evoking feelings of tenderness and compassion; however, children's responses cannot be predicted or manipulated. Stories work best when they are multi-layered and arouse curiosity and give space to children to respond in their own ways. Children need a wide variety of stories to choose from.^{iv}

There are stories that deal with personal memories; there are others dealing with the everyday reality that may include elements of fantasy. Some books use a story framework to convey information. Beyond these stories, there are those that create alternative worlds of 'far away and down below'. Tales of magic and enchantment, for example, deal with an alternative reality; but these stories can provide a way of understanding or engaging with everyday predicaments and conflicts.

Some stories that do not deal explicitly with specific problems, work subliminally by giving a voice not only to fears and despair related to loss, risk and injustice, but also to hope. There are many stories that trace a protagonist's perilous journey through difficult, painful and even violent ordeals. In such stories, the hero – male or female – eventually triumphs by an inner steadfastness aided by benign forces at work in the world. Classical stories, such as that of *Uttanka*, as told in the Mahabharata, who is compelled to travel through the underworld on a quest that is not of his own choosing, or of *Dhruva* who searches for acceptance by facing the terrors of the forest alone, present pathways to resolution. A valuable source of stories of wit and magic is Sudha Murthy's *The Bird with Golden Wings* (2009, Puffin Books).

There are contemporary writers who draw on the power and metaphorical language of traditional tales but reinvent them, such as Salman Rushdie in his children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The 'happy ending' exists as a vitally significant symbol to show that disaster is not the final state. Tove Jansson suggests that an alternative is 'a way left open for the child to spin the tale further.'^v

Tales of wonder exist within a magical world where there is no clear line between the animate and the inanimate: rocks can talk, rivers can change direction and trees can walk. There is fluidity between living creatures where frogs can change to heroes; heroes can change to caged birds and birds to golden fish. The stories carry an underlying belief that life is connected and there is continuity in life, beyond breakdown and death. At first sight, these stories may appear just fantastical, but there is a subtle moral framework that undergirds the kind and good are eventually rewarded and the greedy, lazy and selfish are punished. Unlikely helpers – whether human or animal – aid those who are truthful and caring. Such stories have been criticised for their lack of realism; but it could be argued that les', as Italo Calvino calls them, confront the harsh reality of injustice, violence and death and act as our guides as we navigate our way through an ambiguous world which is both full of light and darkness.

When Janusz Korczak worked with children in the Warsaw Ghetto of the 1940s, he adapted Tagore's play *The Post Office* for dramatisation as a way of supporting children to meet the nightmares of the present, and the terrors of an uncertain future. The play is an allegory about life and death and yet has been described by W B Yeats as a story that conveys 'an emotion of gentleness and peace'.^{vi}

Children need a wide variety of stories to choose from. The *Story Cards* offer a wonderful resource of stories for young readers across genres. They have been thoughtfully selected and include a wide range of stories on themes of discovery, friendship and empathy. These are carefully formatted to make them child-friendly and accessible for multiple uses in the classroom.

Stories are an organic way of trying to make meaning of the bewildering assortment of impressions and interactions that are encountered and nourish the imagination to think of 'possible worlds'. Children also need to live in the present moment by connecting to nature through sensory experiences and by being involved in doing, making and growing things.

Krishna Kumar wrote in the midst of the lockdown about the essential value of 'learning outdoors' and its rich potential in rural areas, 'The monsoon creates great opportunities for noticing, recording and examining nature. Egrets and other large birds tread at leisurely paces in wet paddy fields,

looking for food. They are a joy to watch and sketch in their different postures. Ants come out of their subterranean homes when the rainwater floods them. Butterflies migrate in this season. These are just examples; there are a hundred things to observe in plants and trees.^{vii}

One of the most significant ways we all thrive is by being 'awake' to our surroundings whether in a city, peri-urban area or village.



Nature study: Children working in small groups

Activities that connect children to their surroundings

Recently, two of the teachers from the Learning Centre in which I am involved shared a newly published book called *Pishi and Me*^{viii} with a group of children from the nearby government primary school. It tells of a child's journey through suburban streets with an aunt. What makes this a story is that the child is allowed to stop and look, smell and touch things and to collect and treasure them.

The reading of the book in a local government primary school was followed by making origami boxes from waste. During the following session, the children returned to show the 'treasures' that they had collected. Many of them made lids for their boxes and some decorated their boxes with coloured paper and seeds. One child reported that he had shown his mother how to make a box. They collected a range of items to put in their boxes including stones, feathers, seedpods, shells and

flowers along with scraps of lace, *kappechippu* (seashells) and bits of string and thread.

Over the last few months, with the exception of the second lockdown in April, three team members from the Learning Centre, with the support of the Nature Conservation Foundation, have worked with children from the nearby village on library activities and nature study.

More recently, the children have been engaged in a project related to flowers and patterns.^{ix} This has involved many practical activities such as drawing, making pop-ups, sharing stories, learning songs and poems about flowers, doing observation exercises that have helped children realise the complex network of links between soil, air and water and flora and fauna. They have also begun to understand how patterns of day and night and seasons affect the natural world.



Children engaged in creating a mobile display of flowers and patterns

Looking at flowers closely can give children a sense of a life cycle where decay and regeneration are an intrinsic part of life. Seeds, buds, flowers, fallen petals and fruits are all part of a single process moving from one seed to creating another seed, from life to new life.

Being in touch with nature makes us realise our fragility and resilience and our part in the wider world. Some may feel looking at butterflies and

flowers at this juncture is not very useful. However, the children's excitement and questions – 'Why do some flowers have more than one colour?' 'Why do some flowers bloom in the night?' 'Why does the hibiscus have long threads (referring to the stamens)? These questions seemed to show that this was one possibility of grounding children and fostering their imagination and a spirit of enquiry.

Books on the natural environment in English and in different regional languages have been published by Kalpavriksh.^x These are an excellent source of information and are imaginatively and sensitively presented for children of different ages.

Conclusion

This period of the pandemic has been disorienting for most people, whether children or adults. For many children, it has perhaps shaken a sense of confidence in the stability and health of the world.

The word 'catastrophe' comes from the Greek word meaning 'a turning point'; and although there is a tendency to want to return to familiar ways of doing things there is an awareness that a change in outlook is needed to meet the demands of the present and the future.

As children go back to school, the sense of emergency of the immediate situation does not mean only pressing forward to accelerated learning to catch up with what has been lost. There is also a need to pause in order to recover, refresh and acknowledge what is meaningful and substantive learning for growth. Sharing stories, noticing and being attentive to nature, practising skills that enrich others' lives and our own, making things and being sensitive to others' needs are some of the ways that will prepare teachers and children for a more life-giving future.

Endnotes

- i *The Novel Coronavirus: We Can Stay Safe*, Pratham Books.
- ii *Everyday Superheroes*, Minakshi Diwan, Pratham Books.
- iii Maher M and J Thomas have kindly shared these photos and texts.
- iv Story Cards are a rich multilingual resource of stories for young readers across genres. They are published by Rajalakshmi Srinivasan Memorial Foundation. See <https://rajifoundation.in/storycards/about.html>
- v Quoted in Weinreich T. 2000. *Children's Literature – Art or Pedagogy?* Frederiksburg: Roskilde University Press. pp112.
- vi One adaptation of this story for children is *Amal and the Letter from the King*, retold by Chitra Gajadin and illustrated by Helen Ong. 1993. Rupa & Co.
- vii Krishna Kumar. *Schools Without Freedom*, The Hindu, August 20, 2020.
- viii Timira Gupta. *Pishi and Me*. Pratham Books.
- ix Roshan Sahi, Gousia Taj and Sarojini Ramachandra Hegde facilitated this project.
- x See <https://kalpavriksh.org/product-category/childrens-books/>

Resources

For more games and activities, visit Nature Conservation Foundation website: <https://www.ncf-india.org/blog/hidden-housemates-part-1>



Jane Sahi has taught in an alternative school for several years. She is presently engaged in teaching the Library Educators' Course at Bookworm, Goa. She is also involved in a learners' centre that works with local government schools, particularly in relation to library activities and sessions with children focussed on looking at nature through observation, stories and artwork. She may be contacted at janehelensahi@gmail.com