

Remodelling School as a Social Space

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A school may not now be what we think it is

On a field trip to UP in 1995, I visited a school in a remote area. At the time it was being rumoured that a big World Bank scheme that had funded infrastructure development of schools was being discontinued. Everyone was worried, afraid that once the funds stopped flowing, the school's infrastructure would 'fall apart'. However, a teacher said something that completely changed my view on education. 'I'm not worried for my school at all,' he insisted, 'because my school is not in the building or the furniture or the supplies – it's in *what happens* between my children and me. People can come and remove the doors or even the bricks, but they can't destroy my school.'

Powerful perspective, isn't it?

It is worth asking ourselves: what exactly does happen in a school that makes it a school? Let us not just say 'learning' – think of all the verbs we can use: talk, play, work, write, listen, draw, experiment, connect, read, explain, ask, instruct, narrate, try, encourage, exchange, meet, discover, argue, care, make, create, conclude, agree, help, compete, explore, reflect, admire, give, lead, share, enjoy, dislike, bond and so on. And even the ones that appear to not involve others, (such as 'reflect') can be done with others or can be triggered because of what someone else said or did.

You can see that most of these 'verbs' involve other people: teachers, fellow students, school employees and community members. In fact, a school *is* in what happens between people – essentially a set of relationships, within which a set of processes take place to ensure the all-around development of students.

If you think back on your childhood, you will find yourself recalling being with your friends, what your parents did to help you get to school, how your teachers spoke to you, maybe the functions you attended with classmates. In fact, it is the connections, the relationships we had, that stay with us.

This is why it is a mistake to think of conducting learning assessments as soon as schools reopen. This assumes that a school is primarily an academic place where children go mainly to be able to pass examinations. It is equally, if not more, important to gauge what children have missed out in terms of their social relationships and the impact this has on their emotional development and mental health.

Value of 'social spaces' and 'social role' of school

This is not to argue that these social interactions are important in themselves, or these are all that there is. To begin with, the academic learning we prize so much cannot really take place without considering the social aspect. Theorists, such as Vygotsky and Bruner, have repeatedly told us how the construction of knowledge is a social process, not only between the teacher and the student but among the students themselves. It involves the teacher in creating a classroom situation where children need to work and think together, with occasional support from the teacher. It is this bouncing of ideas off each other, sharing experiences and views, and reflecting with their peers that leads to a newer and richer understanding than before.

The teacher's 'scaffolding' role is a social role – instead of simply presenting what you know, the expectation is that you will observe children and respond to their actions by providing inputs as and where needed. For instance, you can say, 'Develop a plan for creating a children's park on the land near the school – make it as detailed as possible and try to work out its costing. Discuss this in your group and start by agreeing on *how* you will go about doing this.' You can imagine the steps that follow. Nothing prevents you from providing inputs on, say measuring perimeter and area, or ways of calculating costs or the kind of signage that would be required – but only when the children are at a point that they need it. This makes the teacher an observer, an occasional participant, a responsive

supporter. In other words, a *social* being who also happens to have an academic role. Can all this help us ‘complete our syllabus’? Short answer: yes, I have written about this in another article.¹

However, in all this, children are also learning to become adept social beings. The interactions on the playground or on the road to school or inside the bus, during the mid-day meal or at the water tap, all add to a child’s development. (You can think back on your childhood and list for yourself all the things you learnt in these settings, including how your personality developed.) The kind of ‘social construction’ of knowledge mentioned earlier and the interactions children experience in school are valuable preparation for a future life, living and working with others. They also form the basis for children’s emotional development. Both Gandhi and Tagore talked of this education of the ‘mind, hand and heart’ (the ‘hand’ part involves children working with each other). Going beyond the individual, though, to the manner in which children learn to relate with each other ultimately forms the basis of a functional democratic society.

In the last two years, the pandemic has repeatedly shown how dependent we are on each other – to survive as well as to flourish. The impending climate change too requires that we go beyond our individual spheres to see how we affect each other, and the measures we need to take as a collective global society. Our future lies in cooperation and collaboration, in being on the same side of the problems we face and working with each other. From trying to succeed at the cost of others, we now have no option but to succeed together – and the school is the place where we need to enable this kind of learning, deliberately and by design, instead of leaving it to happen on its own.

So where do we go from here? How do we handle school reopening, especially for younger children? How do we move towards creating this new kind of social space that is needed in these times?

What we need to do in the coming months

In the coming months, more and more schools will open. And there may be phases when they are closed again. It will help, therefore, to think of social interactions both in the immediate and the longer term. The long break caused by the pandemic also presents an opportunity to re-start and rebuild schools as a social space.

In the reopening phase

During lockdowns and restrictions, we have depended on parents, volunteers and communities in order to reach children. It will be useful to build on this and work with them before the school reopens. Some steps here could include:

- Hold pre-opening meetings with the community to develop a re-opening plan, including working together to ensure that the hygiene and safety requirements are met.
- Share with the community your academic plan for the coming weeks – and what they would need to do.

Through all this, it is important to keep emphasising that the community has a future role as knowledge partners of the school and are not merely responsible for the logistical aspects involved.

On the reopening day and for the next few days, it is important to build enthusiasm and hope, through steps such as:

- A ‘reopening mela’, a celebration with parents and community, now that we are coming together again
- Have families narrate the experiences of the past two years
- Agree on the health and hygiene protocol to be followed (do not just impose it on the children)
- Give children time to be with their friends and play with them; keep the first few days somewhat unstructured
- Spend time listening to each child’s experiences, share your own too, discuss what all of us learnt through what we have been through, and how we would respond differently the next time
- Share how children’s role in learning is changing, how we will all support each other in the coming year, that their role will be to display initiative, cooperate with their friends, and keep track of their own and each other’s learning
- Discuss the areas they feel weak in, discuss your teaching-learning plans with them, agree on academic rules/protocols to be followed
- Take children into confidence and tell them that in order to get back to teaching-learning in full flow, you need to know where they are
- Finally, with their permission and willing participation, conduct your assessment

Towards the ‘re-modelled school’

Now that you have got a solid start towards more

rooted and two-way relationships, how can you take this further? It might help to think in terms of the following stages.

Stage 1 – Use the reopening to begin a new journey

- Introduce textbooks and materials in an interesting way, for example, how about a quiz that encourages children to explore the textbook – which is the longest chapter, which word is more used ('force' or 'light', for instance), which is the longest question, and so on).
- Begin by making greater use of open-ended questions. (If you need, find out what these are, and how they apply to different subjects and classes).
- Ease step-by-step into a more 'social' teaching-learning process: start by encouraging more oral work to be done together, then move on to more reading-writing work done in groups and finally into using objects or equipment together. (For example, why this sequence? Take a guess!)
- Set goals with children – initiate 'learning recovery' process in partnership with them, working with groups at different levels as well as multilevel groups.
- Encourage children to set goals and ask for assessment to check themselves.
- Prepare children for self-learning – by enhancing creativity, reflection, analysis, decision-making, study skills and language for academic proficiency (you can look up activities for all these on the internetⁱⁱ)

Stage 2 – Towards autonomous but socially-connected learners

- Create self-help groups among students for reading textbooks together (yes, they can do this on their own), collecting information and content, helping each other understand and explore, so that they can put together all they can. You can then play the role of helping them go beyond what they can do on their own, for example, asking them the question: what do you think the value of this will be?)
- Think over which decisions, responsibilities and roles you can hand over to the children and then, discuss these with them and run a class/school in which students play a crucial part
- Discuss student performance with students themselves, parents and fellow teachers – identify what everyone (including you) needs to do for this performance to improve. Your goal is

to find the answer to: How can the learning of all become the responsibility of all?

- Involve the community as a knowledge partner – so many community members have experiences and areas of knowledge that can be shared in the classroom (a truck driver knows the geography of India better than anyone, an ironsmith can separate impurities from metals, a weaver has a high-level understanding of coordinates). You are surrounded by rich resources

Stage 3 – A new vision for your school

Now that you have taken all the initial steps, it makes sense to move forward with the participation of all. So, work towards involving parents, the School Management Committee (SMC), the community and students themselves to create a long-term vision for your school. Ask yourself questions, such as the following:

- What are the key problems in the school that are within your reach to handle? (For example, some children do not participate as much as they could, or do not learn as much as they could; some teachers are reluctant to take up new initiatives, some parents may not be as supportive and so on. What will be some of the biggest changes in your school if these are actually solved?)
- As a result, five years from now, what will be happening in your school that does not happen today? (For example, reports in the primary school will be replaced by conversations with parents.)
- What will you hear different people saying that they do not today?
- What qualities will your children have? How will they be different as a group?
- What skills and capabilities will teachers and the school head have? How will they be different as a group?
- What will change in the role of the community? What will tell us that it is a productive relationship?
- What barriers will you overcome? With whose help? How?
- What steps will you (your friends/colleagues/community) take? Who will do what and by when?

Convert all this into a plan – a long term one, a part of which you will implement in the next three months, and work towards this with everyone.

Conclusion

Teachers often say they are not allowed to make such changes. Do remember, if we are free to teach badly, we are also free to make improvements. Nothing stops us from smiling more, using local materials (did you know leaves grow in 1s, 2s, 3s, 5s and 7s, and are a terrific multiplication tool?), or reading half a story and leaving it at an interesting point so children want to read the rest on their own. Other ideas include: highlighting one child/group every week for having been the most helpful to others, setting highly creative challenges to be solved by working together (for

example, asking them how they would reorganise the furniture of the class if they were allowed to use only one hand), assessing children as a whole group rather than individually and so on. Nothing stops us from enjoying ourselves as teachers and finding fulfilment in the kind of relationships (and therefore, learning) we are able to generate in our class and school.

In any case, everything that is written above is also what the National Education Policy 2020 is aiming at too. As you move towards the remodelled and socially responsive school, the most likely outcome is that you will be held up as an example!

Endnotes

- i Subir Shukla. Why We Need Responsive Schools. Learning Curve. *Every Child Can Learn Part 2*. April 2020. Issue 7. Pp 92.
- ii For example: <https://chachi.app> and <https://mananbooks.in/downloads/> for material containing activities



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