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A PARADIGM SHIFT

Bridging the digital divide...

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only disrupted economies, healthcare systems and human lives but also access to education. It has created a paradigm shift in academia leaving educational institutions, the government, students, teachers and parents deeply in the lurch.

MY COUSIN, STEEPED well into his 10th grade syllabus in just two months of online classes – a feat that would have taken close to two terms in regular school. He plugs into the device available at hand and is online almost the entire day – how much he registers is something yet to be tested. Teaching and learning are traditionally considered a two way street, but India has been thrown into online education owing to Covid-19. Often called e-learning, the learning is not only for students but also for educational institutions, admin, teachers, parents and the government! While urban India has managed to shift online, rural and peri-urban areas still have a long way to go in bridging the digital divide, making 'education for all' a distant reality.

Indian school education systems, in peri-urban and rural areas, are equipped with only basic infrastructure. The only technology available is the stray smart classroom (just a computer enabled classroom with a projector instead of a blackboard)! While these institutions may have aspirations to offer the best to the students, lack of funds – (fees commensurate to parents' economic background) and lack of access to reliable, consistent network connectivity, remain reasons that stop them.

THE CONSTRAINTS…
With almost three months of no person in school, educational institutions have had to cope with resources available. Appropriate platforms (Zoom, Google Classrooms, Webex…)

A TYPICAL RURAL SMART CLASSROOM

have been identified and teachers are trained. The role of parents is as significant as students, providing them with a spare phone, laptop or tablet. Having more than one child at home, or with working parents, it becomes difficult to prioritise devices and they too need to be scheduled. To overcome these challenges, schools think of recording lessons, sending out worksheets *via* messaging apps or even breaking down class strength to smaller chunks to teach students over WhatsApp!

In rural areas lack of access to devices, time from parents, continuous power supply and connectivity come in the way of earnest efforts of educational institutions. Toddlers require physical environments with objects to touch, learn and play with – something the online world cannot compensate for.

SOPs FOR ONLINE CLASSES
One of the major roadblocks in e-learning in India is the lack of a proper vision, infrastructure, framework and guidelines from the government. There should be standard operating procedures for online classes with an earmarked budget for each school.

The issues presented above are restricted to the traditional sciences, maths, social studies – the so called text book subjects. Online curricula must be robust to include physical education, value education, art and craft and free periods to get students to interact as they once would in a classroom. Although difficult to reconstruct, these would build a semblance of normalcy in the child's mind while providing a more holistic learning environment.

OPPORTUNITIES UNFOLDING…
Despite present challenges, the Covid-19 situation has reiterated the need to shift to online education as a tool to ensure that no child is left behind. It is estimated that 85 per cent of India will have access to smartphones and mobile data by 2024 – translating to an opportunity that even in the remotest of places modules can be pushed to students through smartphones. There is an opportunity for more interactive learning methodologies. A two way platform needs to be developed where the students can raise questions and teachers can dynamically test if the learning has really taken place.

Partnerships at a macro level by government education departments with online e-learning platforms could be one way of bridging the digital divide at scale. The Covid-19 situation presents e-learning solutions and chances of having smaller classroom strengths with individual attention to students once schools reopen – creating a more active learning environment.

For young learners, digital learning could be a way of life in future. The role of a parent in children's education has become more apparent than ever. Whatever the approach taken, virtual classrooms can never replace classroom teaching and peer to peer learning. Hopefully, India will witness a new inclusive digital ecosystem built not only around technology but also around learning, compassion and value education in the years to come. ■