

A Responsibility Towards A Generation Heading Into A Crisis: Are We Making Them A Liability?

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When the world was hit with Covid-19, it was a challenge for the state to decide on measures to reach education to every child. In essence, the pandemic limited the socioeconomic opportunities available to children. On these lines, I will share my reflection from the panel discussion. This discussion offered the opportunity to examine the issue of responding to vulnerabilities, faced by children using different lenses.

Prof. Meenai pointed out that the pandemic exposed and aggravated existing systemic problems. His comments inspired me to look at crisis not as a one-time event. It pushes us to go beyond the usual rhetoric and revisit the notions like learning, care, poverty, and curriculum.

Poor's Quest for Survival

Pandemic clearly shows the dependence of the poor on the state. In the panel discussion, Mr. Anurag Kundu discussed that high and middle-income families may not be dependent on the state in many ways, however, the poor have to rely on the state for: health services, food, and learning activities – We often fail to recognize the rights of people living in poverty and provide services from a welfare perspective.

In an exercise to understand the effects of the pandemic on families, I studied five Indian families. Some of them were struggling for nutritious food for children. Malnutrition of children is a serious problem in our country, and became worse during the pandemic. The families became less capable to fulfil needs for children's growth and development. This is an alarming situation, especially for infants' growth and development. "Young Child Feeding point out that *malnutrition* among children occurs almost entirely during the first two years of life and is *virtually irreversible* after that. In short, child mortality is closely linked with *malnutrition* and inappropriate feeding" (Gupta 2006, p. 3667). If we fail to provide adequate nutrition and stimulation for learning then there's high probability that this will lead to unending poverty. "Some family researchers have theorized that families with limited SES resources may be well justified in believing that they have little control over their environment so very few will plan for any child's future, let alone the future of a child with or without exceptionality" (Turnbull et al, 2010, p. 16). This shows the impact of health on learning.

Lack of Outdoor Activities: Lack of Movement for Children

Prof. Rachana Johari pointed towards decrease in the play of students during pandemic. Parents were scared to send their children outside for play. Children should get access to public places and playgrounds as play is important for child development. However, “The deficiency in the design of children’s outdoor environment does not address children’s needs and preferences resulting in low engagement to the environment” (Agha, Tambiah, Chakravarty, 2019, p. 4). If they are not conducive in normal circumstances, how can the design of playgrounds become friendly in crisis for learning? The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right to play in Article 31. It mentions that “children need to undertake the freely-chosen, self-directed activity (play) because this supports healthy development in specific ways that complement other types of recreational activity” (IPA, 2010, p. 12). In the pandemic, limited movement posed a threat to children’s physical development as play is undervalued. “Right to play doesn’t receive attention in spite of its role in shaping human development” (IPA, 2010, p. 4)

Time to Rethink Structures

Prof. Meenai mentioned that the failure of various systems exposed our preparation to face the pandemic. This was evident in a preschool I am currently engaged in an online mode. When I was observing an online class in the preschool in class 1, I saw the teacher trying hard to conduct classes online amidst challenges. Under the chaos, the teacher was struggling to hear children’s responses, address and acknowledge them. Various early childhood associations stress on providing developmentally appropriate education to meet individual needs. In online mode, catering to individual needs seemed difficult. Are we approaching online and offline mode in a similar way? How prepared are we?

In the online platform, the focus remained on cognitive and language domain; other domains could hardly be addressed in the virtual classroom. The online mode has screen time limitations, zero movement and mute screens. The pedagogy in online mode differs considerably from physical classes. It gets essential to rethink pedagogy and resources, and design effective assessments. I observed that the preschool sourced YouTube videos from non-educational channel. Assessments were on mere rhetoric Q/A format. Any guidelines for online adaptation were unavailable for teachers for conducting classes from credible teaching-learning sources, including assessments to foster online engagement. Doesn’t a shift to online require rethinking pedagogies including resources? It becomes important to enquire ‘how is our early childhood

institutions' prepared to adapt in crisis situation. The nature of a crisis can keep changing in future; it is clear that our ability to predict such crisis is rather poor.

Perceptions of learning in our society

It hit hard to hear from Prof.Meenai about how the positive skill of building resilience is contributing to a greater magnitude of vulnerability.

The schools stopped but the learning too. It became evident during the pandemic that *education is confined to schools, and so is the learning*. This dependence brings long term impact on children learning but the community needs to be empowered to explore and create ways to work towards the larger meaning of learning. In the panel discussion, Mr. Anurag Kundu mentioned that children will be starting from 2018-19 in the context of their educational levels. Are educational levels just a sum of academics? Why students are not learning? Why can't we build communities to create various spaces for learning? The bureaucracy played a critical role in strategizing ways to reach out to communities with the help of NGOs but the onus of learning should be a collective community effort.

Conclusion

The pandemic revealed systemic problems like inaccessibility to food, learning and health. The crisis is unfinished. We need to take the learning of underprivileged children seriously as their quest to survival shouldn't affect education accessibility. We need to question existing systems and reimagine them, evaluate resources for crisis-friendly learning, and equip the community for learning.

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