Online learning: reality in the hinterlands

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The disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic put India’s education sector in a tight spot. It had either to adopt the new system of online education or languish with the offline one. The choice of online education ended up being a heavy burden for many schools, especially those in the under-served hinterlands, the primary reason being the absence of critical infrastructure to make the change seamless. It made critics question the sudden advocacy for digital education on a pan-India scale. In Maharashtra, surveys like the Active Teachers’ Forum showed the discouraging reality of the ‘digital divide’. In a mitigatory effort, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) issued the Alternative Academic Calendar (AAC) for students which laid out guidelines for teachers, students and even parents to ready themselves for online education during the lockdown period. However, these guidelines presume a certain digital preparedness and resourcefulness in adopting online education.

Practical realities

Contrary to the AAC’s stated objective of providing ad hoc digital solutions, it presented unreasonable choices for teachers working with limited digital resources, as testified by those interviewed for this article. Since the lockdown started, rural regions in India have witnessed intense social churning, with migrant natives returning from cities due to loss of livelihoods. Even those tending small fields in villages have been feeling the pressure of the downturn in the economy. It was against this bleak backdrop that teachers were expected to engage children in online education on a day-to-day basis. Also, with the lockdown, teachers have had no recourse to in-person classroom sessions. Hence, maintaining regularity in formal education of many first-generation school-goers in the hinterlands has become a gridlock situation.

Specific concerns

Demographics

Discussions with teachers in a few zila parishad primary schools in the rural regions of Jawhar, Mokhada, and Wada blocks of the Palghar district in Maharashtra revealed some interesting details.

These regions are inhabited predominantly by Scheduled Tribes, mainly Varli, Koli Malhar, Thakur, Mahadev Koli and Katkari tribes. Of these, the Katkari is classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with a lower socioeconomic status than the others. However, due to the seasonal migration of families to cities as labour, some children from these regions drop out of school. This affects the children’s learning levels in the early grades and has an academic impact on their later schooling. Thus, teachers expect these children to attend school from mid-June till the end of September. After that, even if a child migrates with her parents, the thread of learning can be picked up somehow after he or she rejoins the next year.

Keeping in touch

Young children have socio-emotional needs which are often met by the interaction within the social space of the school. Discussions with the teachers showed that their main concern was keeping children connected to the process of schooling - an objective to achieve which online schooling is too impersonal. This realisation also stemmed from the Maharashtra government’s earlier (cosmetic) effort of converting state schools into digital schools under its Educationally Progressive Maharashtra drive in 2015. The reality, as field visits in the rural Palghar district showed, was that the digital school plan did not achieve much on the ground: it was just a flash in the pan.

The symbolic relevance of schools

The narrative of online education is tied up with the structurally distinct socioeconomic backdrop of the rural Palghar region. As the lockdown started, pictures of deserted city streets were splashed in the media. Rural areas received attention only when hordes of migrant workers from the cities started marching to their native places. In a similar migration, natives of the rural Palghar district, working in the brick kilns and industrial townships of Thane, Bhiwandi, Vasai, Pune and towns of neighbouring Gujarat, returned to their villages. As the panic of the coronavirus set in, villagers started barricading entry points to their villages. Local teachers were pressed into service to address the panic and social tensions created by the return of migrant natives. Further, as the schools were within the village zones, the teachers had no access to resources in the schools as well.

For a teacher in a rural school, access to the school is symbolically significant. A village school located in an isolated hamlet acts as a source of hope for the locals that the perennial cycle of poverty can be broken. Also, the schools in remote villages are never shut in the conventional sense. Children always have walk-in entries to the school’s premises. The school acts as a community space, epistemologically different from other structures nesting in villages. This facet is different than in urban areas, where schools can be just physical structures, empty after classroom hours and lifeless during long vacations.

One teacher said that keeping active the idea of formal schooling was of paramount concern during the lockdown. Anyone working in
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