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Lockdown: Online Classes - Let's plan, not ban

We don't know when schools can reopen and have to plan for an uncertain future. Digital tech to re-imagine learning beyond physical schooling is inevitable

Rohini Nilekani, JUN 12 2020, 23:15 IST | UPDATED: JUN 13 2020, 00:43 IST



Online education

The Karnataka government has done an exemplary job in managing the coronavirus pandemic. I hope it will get ahead of the curve in education as well.

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In its wisdom, the state has recently banned all online teaching for classes 1-5. The state comes with honourable intentions. The arguments being made are on the grounds of equity, public health and learning.

The equity argument is that online learning necessitates reliable access to digital devices, which not all children have. The health argument is about the ill-effects of screen time on young children's eyes, and more importantly on their minds and behaviours. The third argument is that young children do not learn well online. They need physical, hands-on learning opportunity in a social setting.

A fourth concern comes from parents, and teachers. Parents do not want to pay extra for poor imitations of physical classes. It is also hard to supervise children online, especially with more work at home. For teachers, it is tough in online classrooms to gauge the learning of distant and distracted children.

All these arguments have merit. In a perfect world, we would want universal access to the internet, and for young children to be protected from damage to their eyes or minds. We would want them to be in caring, engaging classroom settings and learning well, too.

Unfortunately, we were not in such a world before the pandemic and we are certainly not in such a world now.

Through the 20 years of my deep engagement with Pratham, Akshara Foundation, Pratham Books and EkStep, which have together worked with tens of millions of young children, there has never been a time when physical proximity itself was considered dangerous for children.

In the short term, we do not know when schools can reopen. In the long term, we do not know when the next pandemic or climate change related event would create the next disruption to the school system. Yet, data from around the world suggests that such events are more probable now than even 10 years ago.

Together, we now need to think ahead and plan for an uncertain future. We must build a flexible and resilient learning infrastructure. We must help teachers, parents and learners to acquire new skills to keep children learning, no matter what.

We need plans, not bans. For the state, bans are the easiest exercise of its authority. But it is a blunt, ineffective instrument. This ban will not prevent the elite from giving their children the best online resources the world can offer. It will not prevent any children from accessing too much screen entertainment.

For months now, young children have had to limit their social interactions, especially in urban areas. They cannot go to school; meet their teachers or their friends. They cannot go into parks and playgrounds. Now, the state government has banned them from resuming their social interaction online, which was better than no interaction at all.

Instead, the government could post guidelines on the size of the online class, the amount of screen time children should have, and the preferred methodologies for making the screen time engaging. Online classes need not count for academic grades; they could be voluntary, not mandatory. There are many possibilities for positive regulation.

We cannot level down in the name of equality. We must level up. Perfection will not happen overnight. But the goal must be a progressive realisation of universal access. Let's spread abundance, not scarcity.

Governments are already improving access through television and radio. As they continue to expand broadband access, online teaching can also be re-imaged. One private school has broken up its online training into smaller, cohesive groups at the parents' mutual convenience. States like Himachal Pradesh have tried to include those without connectivity by sending students weekly physical copies of online course material. In Jharkhand, government schoolteachers make house visits to demonstrate the use of digital links and content.

This crisis can be a genuine opportunity. It is inevitable that we will need digital technologies to re-imagine learning beyond physical schooling. Instead of clamping down completely on online classes for young children, can we allow the flourishing of experimentation and innovation? That will enable the system to learn rapidly and deploy that knowledge equally quickly.

Ironically, the Union government and many states, too, have embraced digital technology for education in a big way during the pandemic. Diksha, PM E-Vidya, Vidyaadaan and Swayam Prabha are all innovative platforms that scale up the convergence between the education system and the community. Adoption has grown exponentially.

With the heavy-handed ban, the Karnataka government may lose out on opportunities. There is a real danger of rapid and cumulative learning loss for young children after months of separation from their accustomed learning environment. With no proper plan to resume school routines, we must find other ways to keep children curious and learning. Online interactive sessions could be one element of this journey.

I pray that my state government will have a rethink on the total ban on online learning. I hope it will see digital classrooms as a gateway into the future; as an opportunity to innovate and experiment; to keep what works for children; to discard what does not, and to try again and again.

For the first time in my 20-year engagement with education, I truly believe that digital and other innovations allow us to finally equalise access to quality education for every single child.

Let's not close the window of opportunity to create a safe, creative online learning environment for young children in all schools, public or private. The future is digital, but the digital divide is deep, and we simply cannot let disadvantaged children fall further behind.

(The writer is Co-founder and Director of EkStep Foundation)

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