



COVID-19: the need for teacher development in critical thinking pedagogy

THE PANDEMIC HAS INTENSIFIED THE LEARNING CRISIS AND HIGHLIGHTED SEVERAL EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES. MAYA MENON DESCRIBES WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO INVEST IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SO THAT TEACHERS ARE EMPOWERED TO DELIVER THE SKILLS REQUIRED BY NEP 2020.

The year 2020 will be seen as a watershed year for education across the world in general, and in India particularly, for two main reasons. Firstly, as the pandemic ravaged the entire world affecting some countries more than others, India, unlike many other countries, shut schools for more than nine months. UNICEF reported that the education of 247 million school-going children and 28 million children in *Anganwadi* centres in the country had been impacted by school closures. Children have been mainly indoors, and teachers — usually from private schools — have had to ‘jump in at the deep-end’ and teach their students from home, using a range of online platforms. In most cases however, teachers were inadequately supported even as they attempted teaching remotely students they could not see nor always hear, for genuine as well as feigned problems with cyberspace connectivity. Often, they attempted some well-meaning, but ineffective *jugaad*. Expectedly, a majority of teachers have continued to stick to familiar and traditional modes of teaching despite the new modes of interaction. Teachers were teaching virtually during this time, but learning was not always purposeful or visible.

Secondly in 2020, after 34 years, the new National Education Policy 2020 was announced by the Union Government. One recurring need the policy proposes is the development of critical thinking. The term is mentioned at least eight times in the 64-page document. This article attempts to explore the intersection of COVID-19 and critical thinking. What are the implications of the pandemic for learning the right pedagogy that fosters critical thinking?

Let us begin with what the virus has literally brought home to all school leaders, educationists, and even parents — endemic limitations to how we teach our children, even in the best of our schools. As reported in many leading newspapers, this has resulted in parents and many state governments questioning the need for private schools to

charge full fees during the pandemic. The scapegoats have invariably been teachers, who have in many cases, been denied full salaries on the ground. Wage cuts were supported with the justification that teachers worked fewer hours and that too from the comfort of their homes. On the other hand, government school teachers, as CNN recently reported, have been performing COVID-19 frontline duties as their second job.

The pandemic has once again highlighted the crisis of education in India. However, instead of blaming teachers, everyone needs to take collective responsibility to improve learning among students — governments, parents, and school leadership. All of them have, in some way or other, condoned mediocre and often poor teaching in schools. For decades teachers have been allowed, even expected, to teach in a very exam-focussed, marks-oriented manner, catering mainly to the academically inclined segment of students who are in any case self-driven. Other students, especially those with special needs, tend to get neglected and left out of participating in personally fulfilling learning experiences.

Our teachers are not skilled and re-skilled on an ongoing and deliberate basis in the majority of our schools. Occasional exposure to some ideas of good teaching-learning practices does not necessarily mean that one has been skilled in using those fluently in a class — physical or virtual. Building one’s competencies requires the meticulous persistence that we often see in sportspersons and athletes. The latter constantly craft their techniques and hone their skills. Teachers need to do that too, not for winning games but for gifting their students with skills and a value system to chart a lifetime of learning with enjoyment and understanding.

The pandemic exposed the fact that many of us as teachers have never really delved deeply into the true nature of

learning and how learning with meaning can be enabled. It has also magnified the persisting flaws...and these flaws run deep, for example, excessive and often ineffectual teacher talk and rote-based questioning. COVID-19 managed to jolt teachers out of instructional inertia in a way many well-intentioned policies, curricular frameworks, or educationists have failed.

All forms of learning, whether physical or virtual, are an alchemy of people, processes, and principles of good pedagogy. They are about learner engagement, discussion and dialogue, reflection, and an occasional dash of the dramatic! Technology merely offers us exciting tools to make all of this possible in virtual mode.

We do not know how schools will function in the approaching months of 2021. We are still caught in the crisis! But as Rahm Emanuel wisely said, ‘You never let a serious crisis go to waste...it’s an opportunity to do things you thought you could not do before.’ Thus, the pandemic could be a great opportunity for catalysing learning for all teachers, regardless of the kind of schools in which they teach. In addition, teachers have become understandably concerned about the absence of learner engagement, because they have now begun to recognise that they may not have the tools to check for learning and understanding.

Shifting from teaching in COVID-19 times to NEP’s call for fostering critical thinking feels like a natural transition. The deficiencies made evident in our teaching can certainly be addressed with a greater focus on critical thinking. However, the NEP document does not explain what is critical thinking and how it should be manifested in our teaching-learning processes. As the *Foundation for Critical Thinking* explains, critical thinking is the objective analysis of facts to arrive at a judgement or decision. It calls for the demonstrable use of five skills — analysis, interpretation,

interpretation, inference, explanation, self-regulation, open-mindedness, and problem-solving. Developing these skills is a heuristic process and needs to begin early for all learners so that by the time they leave school and are ready for higher or vocational education, they have acquired reasonably sophisticated ease with them. These are skills for being able to engage with an ever complex, interconnected, and challenging world. They are also a part of the key skill set necessary for sustaining humanity on our planet.

So the obvious question that comes up is — are our teachers ready to teach these skills? Without being pessimistic, the short and simple answer is NO! They are not ready, because they have never been called upon to use these skills through their own schooling, college, and teacher education. Therefore, they will require deliberate and consistent practise of using these skills at study, work, or in their personal life to gather a certain level of ease. For example, if a teacher wants to encourage students to be more vocally participative in an online class, there are a number of ways she could do this – pose a probing question and call upon three to four students to come up with a plausible answer either verbally or using the chat option; use digital tools like Whiteboard.fi or Mentimeter to instantly record all student responses; or conduct an online poll using Google Forms, Kahoot, etc. Another concern for teachers could be the challenge of relating to students emotionally, which is in fact a vital prerequisite to developing their cognitive skills. This could be addressed by setting up simple routines for students that help them share their feelings privately and confidentially. However, these and many other strategies, remain just good ideas, unless teachers are exposed to them and are provided with the opportunity to hone their skills for using them with a high degree of fluency. Departments of Education, school examination boards, and private school managements need to recognise the

urgency of equipping our teachers with the required skills to lead India's children into a more promising future.

To quote the American philosopher Will Durant, 'We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit.' The same holds true for critical thinking. Indeed, it also applies to sustaining the lessons from online teaching-learning during the pandemic. **T**

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