

A Peep inside an Online Pre-Primary Classroom during COVID-19 Times: Some Reflections

This article briefly discusses some examples from the pre-primary classroom of a private school which serve to highlight the many ways in which a system continues to carry forward the conventional ways of educating young minds as against learning from theory and research from across the globe.
Keywords: Online classes, home language, gender, early literacy, stories, COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 presented a new challenge to the educational institutions, the first and foremost being- the urgency to maintain some form of continuity in the education of children during the lockdown. Amidst the many debates, perspectives and strong opinions for and against the virtual mode of education, private schools adopted it as the desirable strategy to keep running the cycle of levying heavy fees for 'quality' education even when the world had come to a standstill. Another agenda for this was to keep their staff on the job to justify the salaries they received.

As a parent, I also went through the anxieties of selecting a good school for my child which would provide holistic education to him. After a lot of surfing, talking to neighbours, family members, teachers in our friends' circle, we zeroed in on a school based on a few criteria, such as approachability from our home, an integrated curriculum with equal emphasis on co-curricular activities, and a balanced student-teacher ratio. The global pandemic made things tough for young children as well as parents; we were compelled to attend online classes for 40 minutes every day, much against the directives from the government for a shorter slot for pre-primary classes.

School is the most important site of socialisation for children after their homes. It is endowed with the responsibility of providing meaningful education to children as per the guidelines and aims of education defined in our National Policy documents. While the role of education as a quality of life-enhancing medium is highly endorsed, the way this process unfolds in schools requires closer scrutiny.

Online education gave us a rare opportunity to examine these processes while sitting at home, co-teaching our children along with teachers. At the outset, it must be understood that for teachers, it was a Herculean task to adapt their ways of teaching and interacting according to the needs of the virtual mode of education. For them, it meant undergoing a lot of training to be able to use online platforms and to create e-content for interaction purposes. Needless to say, teachers have done a commendable job of creating a routine for children. However, it is in these 'routinised' practices that one can observe and question the gap between theory and praxis of education. And, to these routinised practices, then, I turn my critical eye to examine how the teaching-learning programme of the school unfolded in front of us.

Place of Experiential World of the Child in the Classroom

To begin with, to those who could afford the agenda of online education, in terms of time and resources, this arrangement could mean breaking the rigid wall between school and home, thus, making the transition from home to school an easy and a facilitative one. One of the best mediums for this could have been the 'home language' of the child and the numerous experiences, stories and feelings woven and textured through it that could very naturally be made into a resource to establish rapport with toddlers whom the teachers have not met in person. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 states connecting knowledge to life outside the school as one of its guiding principles. A preschooler is highly observant and forms his/her understanding of the world with the help of his/her mother tongue or first language. S/he is equally curious to share her/his representations of the world with the significant adults in their life, such as teachers and their caregivers. However, in the online classes, we found an unwelcoming attitude towards learners attempting to interact with teachers in their home language. The assumption was that learners need to focus on school discourse as distinct from the primary discourse at home and the tool for establishing this distinction was English. In the bid to make these classes interactive, students were called upon one by one to share what they had learned from the presentation given to them. Children started talking about their family members, their friends, the toys they play with, the experience of eating something nice a day before and other such things. But, how can such inconsequential talk be the topic of conversations in such classes? And so, swiftly, the focus would shift on interrogating them on what has been 'consumed' as concrete learning from these sessions. Quite naturally, the expected language of answering would be English. It is not uncommon to find that learners struggled to blurt out memorised sentences

in English on even an extremely easy and a familiar topic of conversation while displaying very complex communication strategies of persuading, manoeuvring and negotiating when given a chance to converse in their mother tongues.

Learners' talk in the classroom

A related concern to the above is the promotion of presentational talk as against the exploratory talk in the classroom. Barnes (2008) distinguishes between functions of presentational talk as the one adjusted according to the needs of the audience and exploratory talk—the spontaneous, broken, hesitant kind of a talk that children use to process their understanding and share it with others. While both kinds of talks have their respective merit, Barnes (2008) argues that during the initial stages of learning, exploratory talks enable children to interrelate new knowledge with the existing one and work on their understanding. Presentational talk, on the other hand, is directed towards producing 'right' answers according to pre-set expectations.

In our observations, students were mostly invited to indulge in presentational talk. The structure of the classroom largely remained fixed to the introduction of new information, sometimes in a contextualised manner, sometimes totally isolated response generation by teachers by calling learners one by one to reproduce what has just been introduced and subsequent evaluation of these responses then and thereby commenting on how well the learners remembered, how clearly they spoke and how many sentences could they weave together in English. The assumption behind this kind of routine is perhaps that learners think in a linear manner. How can we forget that any new idea or concept for children brings to the front an array of new questions and observations? Unless enough space and time is given to learners to process this disequilibrium between their existing schemas and the new information, learners may not yet be in a position to



express it coherently. Unfortunately, the idea of 'quality' education here does not endorse the idea of letting children learn at their own pace, giving them sufficient time to formulate their understanding. The school has also started organising speaking activity weekly, where learners are required to present 3–4 lines on a given topic. There have been many days where the learners have presented stories, poems, lines, slogans but not a session where they could indulge in talking to the teachers for interactional, personal or representational purposes. This gradually links up with how students would be judged and assessed by the institution. Through different ways, direct and subtle, the school has been successful in instilling a sense of competition among students.

Initiation into Reading

The school follows *Jolly Phonics* as the instructional programme to teach early literacy skills to children. On the website of this programme, it is mentioned that "it uses the synthetic phonics method for teaching the letter sounds in a way that is fun and multi-sensory." The programme may have its own merit as it tries to introduce sounds in a contextualised manner, with an action associated with each sound and a visual clue for the letter formation. However, the way it is explored in the classroom needs attention. The programme has been developed in some other country by educators situated in a very different sociocultural milieu. Quite naturally, the programme uses such contexts for stories which are familiar to the western world such as families visiting a castle in Spain and dancers clicking castanets. However, the same fixed story got recounted to children to introduce the sound 'ck', that is /k/ without any adaptation to the context or the vocabulary of the story whatsoever. One feels the anxiety of the school in making learners recognise as many sounds as possible in the shortest time possible as if to make up for the lost time due to COVID-19.

Theory and research in early literacy suggest a holistic approach towards the

development of literacy skills during the pre-primary and primary grades. In addition to a sustained emphasis on graphophonic instruction, there has been equal stress on building a sense of functional aspects of print. The thrust of the research has been in suggesting the inter-related manner in which the notions about literacy development among young children. Phonological awareness and scriptwriting emerge over a period of time as a result of continuous engagement with meaningful print, such as interesting children's literature with the help of various activities, social interactions and some instructions in letter-sound correspondence. The underlying principle of such suggestions is the understanding that learning to read is a social and cognitive activity and not just a mechanical one. Hence, it can be argued that introducing words which are absolutely outside the domain of comprehension for a nursery kid and over-reliance on a phonic approach to teach reading in an isolated manner without focusing on functions of literacy make the programme unworthy for Indian kids. An associated concern is about making the curriculum somewhat alien to the experiences of children. Once while giving a presentation on 'dogs', seemingly to lead towards a craft activity of making a dog, the teacher shared some facts about dogs and names and pictures of some breeds. My child's question during the class was, "Where are the dogs that we find in our neighbourhood?" because he could not recognise any of the foreign breed of dogs that were shown in the presentation and there were none from his local context.

The World of Stories

Every parent would vouch for the magical effect that stories have on toddlers. Stories where animals are talking, stories of a tussle between a strong and a small animal, stories of adventures in faraway lands, unusual situations, elements of fantasy, magic and enchantment together make listening to stories the most favourite activity for children. The power of stories lies in the

vivid narration of events with gestures and sound modulation, their ability to play on the imagination of children, the parallels that children can draw from the lives of characters with their own lives and the sense of everything getting resolved at the end. Stories have a very special place in the kindergarten curriculum. It is one of the best mediums to promote active listening skills, to introduce new vocabulary in context, to develop anticipation skills in children and to broaden the horizon of thinking (Kumar, 2011). However, in a country like ours, which abounds in a great variety of stories, schools can conceive of just one purpose for using stories in classrooms, and that is, for teaching morals. The flourishing market of authentic children's literature also has failed in convincing schools about the power of exploring stories and literature for developing an organic interest in reading and listening to stories. The stories so far read aloud from children's books or narrated in my child's classes were explicitly chosen to emphasise the moral values such as cleanliness, giving respect to elders, always following commands of parents, not being playful with others, and a friend in need is a friend indeed. The teachers usually use a digital version of the story, and instead of letting children comprehend the stories at their own level, focus on the morals directly. After the story gets over, there begins the routine of asking comprehension questions from the story, the most popular being, so, what did you learn from this story. This misplaced emphasis on stories for moral lessons discourages children from seeing stories primarily as narratives of adventure, fun and entertainment. To me, this is killing the joy of listening to a story for its own sake!

Presentation of Gender Roles

Yet another concern I felt during these classes was about the way gender roles were presented to young impressionable minds. We have tried our best to raise our child in a gender-responsive way. Sharing responsibilities, doing chores together,

encouraging our child to pick up different gender roles in a role play, getting all kinds of toys without labelling them as being meant for 'girls' or 'boys', and above all, not emphasising the gender our child should identify with. However, in classes, we found many instances of gendered identities getting highlighted for children. Compliments for girls for their dresses, headgears, and their sweet nature came often. Comments such as all boys' favourite toys are guns and cars were made. The choice of curricular material, such as the use of the rhyme "Mummy ki Roti Gol-Gol, Papa Ka Paisa Gol Gol" to be recited in class, somewhere hinted at the role of mothers in the kitchen and that of the fathers in the market space. Through the use of a rhetorical question "Who cooks yummy and tasty food for you at home?" asked during a class on the topic My Family, followed by the routine answer, "Mumma, Na?", the teacher reinforced the gendered roles for all women, forgetting that her own identity goes much beyond just being a mother who cooks food for her children and that she is also a professional much like many other parents. This stereotyping continued in further discussions in a life skill class, where another teacher, while, giving a lecture on table manners, reiterated to the children the need to thank their mother for preparing yummy food for them.

Additionally, it has been observed that a similar lack of critical thinking is applied while selecting 'texts' to be read aloud to children in the class. The favourite texts for this purpose have been *Bruno Early Reader Series* and *Pepper Series*. Unfortunately, all the stories shared so far from these books have tended to represent women's role as that of primary caregivers and the one responsible for teaching "good manners" to children. Women are shown to be indulging either in shopping, cleaning the house or taking care of the children. Fathers are conspicuously absent from such books. Further, a video was shared on "healthy food" to be shown to children and have a discussion at home. This video also fixes a woman's identity as that



of a mother, concerned about her children's unhealthy food choices. The father comes into the picture only when there is a need to meet the principal of the school in which their children study. All such instances undermine the role of education as a tool to question and engage with the existing gender disparity.

To conclude, it is important to look closely at the experiences provided to children by schools especially during their early literacy phase. Along with the overall learner

achievement, one needs to examine the day-to-day processes that a child goes through in a school which constructs his sense of self and the world. Building a child's positive relation to his language, development of aesthetic sensibility towards literature, activating active listening skills, creating ability to communicate spontaneously without inhibition and instilling a sense of equality with children of other castes, classes and genders are crucial objectives that cannot be pursued without criticality.

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