

## ROADMAP SERIES: WORKING IN EDUCATION: IN AND AFTER LOCKDOWN

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Sriram started the session by explaining how technology is playing out for the marginalized community, particularly the children. In his experience, he has seen that illiterate parents, income-earning women and students enjoy the benefits of technology. For example, smartphones are extremely useful for the illiterate population because of ease of use. They can associate a picture with a number, without having to read the name. In case of women, there are examples of groups of women using technology to earn income and become more financially independent. For example, they can market and sell products through smartphones. This enables them to earn independently. With regard to high school students, during this lockdown, teachers send them lessons and question papers and ask them to correct the answers themselves. Teachers are thus implicitly trusting them, as they have control over the correction. This also has an effect of increasing student confidence.

Sriram and his team are also working on a new free-access platform named 'Chachi.app,' also known as quarantine school. Anyone who has a smartphone can access this platform. This generates a number of activities beyond academic curriculum across subjects including home science, geography, critical thinking, mathematics and creative storytelling. These activities also cater to an audience across all age groups and are available in several Indian languages.

Even though the lowest common denominator for technology seems to be the smartphone in Tamil Nadu, in states like Bihar where some do not even have a phone, this is not the case. The question of which medium to use to reach the public thus becomes important in such circumstances. Examples include people taking lessons through radio, working on the knowledge that every village will have access to at least one radio thus making it the medium of choice for remote villages. Another option is the community radio, an option for any NGO which is at least three years old and will broadcast content for at least two hours a day. However, this is limited by a geographical radius of 15

kilometres. Additionally, the community radio has a cost attached to procuring the license. People in places like Madurai and Nagapattinam have successfully used the medium of a community radio in the space of education. Another example of successfully using these channels is Kodaikkanal FM. As Kodaikkanal is at a higher altitude, the radio channel is able to service the whole valley.

One of the main challenges of this lockdown is the accessibility of technology for rural students. Most schools servicing these students are not equipped with the technology to reach students during the lockdown. Further, a majority of the children do not have the access to technology or the internet. Most get pulled into working with their parents, especially on the farms. Technology-based interventions are thus dependent on shared resources, with a common radio or one smartphone being used by multiple children.

There are many NGOs that are running one-to-many interventions, where one person from an urban environment uses smartphones to interact with 10-15 students in another geography. However, we are yet to find a mechanism to reach the lowest strata of society where there is no sort of technology available.

### **Question & Answer session**

1. What are the differences in technological innovations and interventions in urban versus rural environments?

Speaking broadly, in urban contexts, what is taken for granted is that there is an increase in bandwidth and accessibility of the internet. In the rural context, what we trying to do is to figure out what technology we can access in the lowest bandwidth available. The connectivity in rural areas is not always where we would like it to be. A lot of people also approach technology-based learning as the end product. The end product is instead the learning outcome. The key question should be can technology make a student a self-learner?

2. If we are to take into account using technology as a means and not the end, how would this reflect in curriculum creation?

We all believe that curriculum is something that is made and given to children. Instead, it depends on what children take from whatever you offer. The subjects that children are interested in become a curriculum, not what is created by experts in a big framework that may be or may not be liked by children. For example, there are a number of topics that are related to the lockdown situation that can be discussed in groups.

3. Are there any specific experiments on successful models of teaching children via Whatsapp?

Sriram was not sure if there were any successful models of teaching. He is, however, dealing with government-aided schools where they have the advantage of better paid teachers who often have access to smartphones. Sriram and his team are thus encouraging teachers to form Whatsapp groups where they share and discuss activities with other teachers. They are then encouraged to figure out how to engage the children in these activities. Often, teachers in government-aided schools have very good relationships with children as well as parents.

4. How are teachers affected in this scenario? What should they do during the lockdown and after the lockdown is lifted?

This is the opportunity for teachers to think about activities that are beyond the curriculum. It is important for teachers to figure out how they can interestingly communicate an academic concept. It is fair to assume that no child is missing textbooks in this lockdown. It is important for teachers to make lessons in textbooks more interesting by using technology. There are enough resources available for free. For example, there are video channels of educational organisations like Tamil Nadu SCERT channel etc.

5. What may learning look like when work spaces open up and parents have to resume working while children are at home possibly without access to technology (their parent's phone)?

This is a very tough situation and a structural issue. In the lower strata of society, they leave their children with their grandparents, neighbours, tuition teachers, etc. and go to work. Children can manage households really well if only their parents trust them. Parents need to trust their children more.

6. How can we ensure productivity among children during this lockdown?

Productivity is dependent on age. If they are teenagers, they will take care of their own productivity and we can't do anything about it. If children are younger, rather than pushing them to participate in certain activities, parents need to understand what they are interested in. These interests do not need to be limited to academics but can include music, fieldwork, farming etc. Every child is gifted and we do not know where that gift lies. We try to figure that out within the very narrow scope of the school syllabus. This need not be the case. Within a framework for safety, let children explore different avenues.