ENSURING
WHOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT
OF LEARNERS IN THE CURRENT SCENARIO:
CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

WEDNESDAY, 29 JULY 2020

C O N T E N T S

Introduction

The fourth webinar hosted by Pallavan Learning Systems, 'Ensuring Wholistic Development of Learners: Challenges and Possibilities' was held on 29th July 2020. The panellists included educators, students, a parent and a counsellor, to cover all points of view on learning. They were from India, Bhutan, The United Kingdom and The Sultanate of Oman which provided a global perspective on the challenges and possibilities. The webinar comprised more than 60 active participants.

The Five Areas of Development is a wholistic approach to learning in Cerebral, Emotional, Physical, Social and Spiritual areas, without breaking it into silos - contrasting it with the practice of focusing purely on academic work. Through this process of development, we hope to inspire our learners to become persons of substance and equip them with the skills and processes that will help them navigate challenges that the future might present.

The current pause in the 'normal' educational practices offers an opportunity to pause and assess the effectiveness of the methods that are currently being used. Education has been looked at through the lens of mechanistic, reductionistic and materialistic paradigms that have dominated popular thinking and education systems. The result has been a fragmented and limited approach to human development and education with a focus on physical, behavioural and intellectual capacities for economic and material benefits, while ignoring or discounting social, emotional, psychological, moral, creative, aesthetic and spiritual natures and capacities. The current global health crisis has demonstrated the need for wholistic well-being that includes social-emotional and mental health. Therefore, the focus of education needs to encompass all Five Areas of Development. An organic connectedness is a crucial factor while we touch base with both internal and external reality. There is an ascending order in understanding the concept of 'wholistic development' from an individual, to family, to society, to a global level and finally at a cosmos level.

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Back to
Content Page

Current Challenges to Wholistic Learning

Wholistic education challenges the present approach to education and its obsessive focus on standards and testing. Wholistic educators see this approach as reflecting a materialist and consumerist culture that has reduced schooling to the training of individuals to compete and consume in the global marketplace. In fact, the present thrust can be seen as abandoning any attempt to educate the whole human being. It reduces schooling to training for the workplace that can be easily assessed through standardized tests.

Implementing the Five Areas of Development

It is essential to understand that we cannot have a single focused approach to education and need to expand our horizons, especially with the current disruption to the learning process that the pandemic has created. The concept of 'whole' is beyond just a person – applicable to the larger context, environment, society, planet and cosmos. Interconnectedness of experience and learning could be an approach for the times to come.

The webinar discussion emphasised the need of organic connectedness as part of wholistic learning, earth literacy for instance – it encompasses more than taking care of the environment and planting trees. This is the time when being connected will matter the most. Hence this form of learning could be called 'connected learning' instead of virtual learning since terminology is the first step in understanding a concept in-depth.

Actual learning is said to occur outside the classroom and pure online learning is a poor alternative. Experiential learning is the well acknowledged way forward, which sitting in front of a screen does not achieve. There is a lack of an environment which is as lively and interactive as physical interaction. This challenge is crucial for us to figure out how to make the virtual interaction as stimulating as possible.

A major challenge lies in the lack of access to technology and resources. Amidst the lockdown, schools and universities are depending on the online modes of learning in order to maintain continuity of education. Schools are launching apps, conducting classes over Google Meet or Zoom, and sending interactive worksheets and videos for learning. Even though internet-based teaching is the most appropriate stop-gap arrangement at present, it has highlighted the already

existing inequalities in the community and lack of equity and access in the education system. Due to the digital divide a majority of the student population is being left behind in the pursuit of basic education.

Is learning for students -- given that they are at the centre of learning -- the only learning trajectory that we should be concerned about? For real learning to happen for the students, teachers' learning trajectory must also be taken into account. And in the current situation, learning for parents and their growth has also become a necessity. This is most pronounced with the first generation learners. They have been receiving no support at home and self-reliance may not always lead to a wholesome understanding of education. Most importantly parents must be empowered, recognizing that they are the child's first, and full-time educators. This extraordinary global situation only highlights this fact and therefore the next few months will be critical as learners pass and progress to the next class.

We must not be constrained by silos. It will take partnership between K-12 and higher education, governmental and non-governmental actors, and state and local leadership to help students navigate the maze from high school to higher education.

Hurdles for the Learner

The discussion highlighted that while students have the highest stakes in the decisions taken in regard to education and learning, they have the least say in the matter. This approach may be revisited and platforms created as the way forward where voices of students are also heard in the decision-making process. Building a relationship based on trust and understanding between all three stakeholders - parents, teachers and students - in this regard becomes an important step.

Our education system currently is teaching children to compete and not to find their place in the cosmos. There is a serious need to change this mindset and begin a conscience-driven effort to help students become better human beings and global citizens. Competition can be a double-edged sword for students, on the one hand promoting positive values under the right conditions but on the other hand creating negative environments that are demotivating. Competition can be healthy when it provides feedback to students about their performance and encourages improvement, when winning is not the sole or primary objective, and when students get to learn about themselves under challenging situations. Under these circumstances, competition can teach invaluable lessons

our learners do not typically learn in the classroom. We must be cautious to promote the right kind of outlook in the students so that competition does not become an obsession.

The process of examinations is not conducive to effective education. The evaluation process is purely one-dimensional based on information intake, rote-learning and memory, rather than merit and skill. It excludes the majority of students who are talented, but are not able to prove their worth in the conventional ways of assessment. Since evaluation is directed simply by memorizing theory, most students often forget what they had learnt within a month of the exams. Wholistic learning is more than grades. It implies lifelong learning and its effective application towards growth and development.

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Supporting the Learner in Five Areas of Development

Cerebral

Cerebral development emphasises communication, comprehension, critical thinking and curiosity to enhance learning. Allowing learners to reflect and focus on their learning is highly essential. It is through reflection that the brain is able to process the information and connect it to your unique context. The way of doing this can be very different depending on the age of the learner. Learners must be given a platform or space for critical thinking. They should also be given the opportunity to share work on the ground under guidance.

Physical

Physical development focuses on health, fitness and sports. Beyond the initiatives taken by the school, parents should ensure that physical activity is a part of the routine for children and families during the lockdown. Given that the lockdown has restricted physical activities for most, it is important for teachers and students to find innovative ways to ensure that the development of this aspect does not remain incomplete. For example, a number of schools have incorporated yoga and dance classes online to keep students engaged for physical growth. One of the crucial impacts of this is on the student's mental well being. The overall health is what should be given priority. The student's capacity to learn from home needs to be understood. It is not possible to create the same environment of a classroom at home. Online classes can be stressful, if stretched over a long period of time. The key is to allow the students to voice their opinion on such challenges. It may also be useful to allow them to choose between classes to keep their interest intact. This will allow the student to take responsibility for their own actions.

Social

Social development supports students to get involved in their communities, work collaboratively towards common goals and understand themselves and others. With learning from home during the pandemic, learners are getting the chance to experience their society from a closer range. This could also be their opportunity to contribute towards their communities. Efforts of this kind must be encouraged by parents at home, while teachers take charge through assignments. The student must be helped in skilling themselves and they must be facilitated to ask questions in this regard.

Working together, bringing people from different backgrounds together, and catering to their various learning needs is the need of the hour.

Spiritual

Spiritual development is focused on core values, awareness and practice, rather than on any particular religion. The pandemic has created a visible need for the feelings of hope and positivity across the world. Learners could be taught to use these positive energies to stay calm during adversarial circumstances and work towards being a good human being. This could be incorporated through value-education classes - a subject not given much importance in our education system but essential for a wholistic growth.

Emotional

Emotional development encourages learners to pay attention to their emotions in order to identify, understand and express them positively and productively. Robotic teaching will neither help the teacher nor the student. Emotional instability also rises from the pressure to score high marks and comparisons with peers Under the current circumstances, parents and teachers together can work towards the emotional growth of the child. The social distance and the unusual lifestyle will be a challenge to ensure this but one has to convert this into an opportunity to collaborate and work together. A diverse learning module must be formulated in this regard.

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New Opportunities

As Winston Churchill famously said, 'Never waste a good crisis,' difficult times also provide possibilities. The current situation provides a great opportunity for parents and teachers to collaborate in the process of wholistic development of the student. However, as pointed out by the student panellists, the students should also be responsible and take ownership of their learning. Whoslistic education is the way forward for which a teacher must be compassionate and give choices to students.

All knowledge is interdependent and must be seen in that way as opposed to the silos of domains that we currently focus on. If we can break away from this practice and see all knowledge as a 'whole' it would reduce the pressures on teachers and students providing opportunities to focus on bigger possibilities.

The role of technology in education is an evolving area of research that continues to grow in importance. While access to technology can provide valuable learning opportunities to students, it does not always guarantee successful outcomes. While designing successful practices for students the use of technology is but one piece of the puzzle in the continued effort to elevate the educational experiences of all students. Schools, teachers, communities, and families play a critical role in successfully integrating technology into teaching, learning, and assessment. The task of finding new ways to package material can spur intense professional growth. The effectiveness of online learning, however, varies amongst age groups. The general consensus on children, especially younger ones, is that a structured environment is required, because students are easily distracted and not too much screen time. To get the full benefit of online learning and use of technology, there needs to be a concerted effort to provide this structure by the community and to go beyond replicating a physical class/lecture through video capabilities. Instead, a range of collaboration tools and engagement methods need to be employed that promote inclusion and personalization.

While there are generic frameworks suggested for new opportunities as part of wholistic education, a compassion-filled, value-based education should be emphasised. A safe learning environment is essential where the students' voices can be heard and their contributions are impactful. The stress of competition can be negated if they learn to compete against oneself, instead of others, to become the best version of themselves. In order to implement this, both parents and teachers must be actively involved.

A Synthesis by Pallavan Learning Systems

The Learning Curve

Learning curve is the relationship between proficiency and experience. The challenges of implementing wholistic learning are high and the current situation has made it even tougher. Extensive collaboration between home and school can make it possible. The importance of social, emotional and mental well-being is truly understood by all stakeholders during this pandemic and there is a need to keep it in focus for future as well. In light of this, the Five Areas of Development assumes great significance and the learning for all stakeholders has been enormous.

For learners, the education community must look out for appropriate pedagogy and create or facilitate opportunities to ensure wholistic learning. After all, wholistic learning is a move away from focus in one area while building an all-rounded perspective. While it is upon the students as to how they will intake and utilise their skills, the community must come together to provide platforms for learners to showcase their learning. Giving the students the ownership of their learning is an important step going forward. Their opinion from their experiences must be taken into account, or else best practices only remain in theory.

Establishing a routine becomes crucial for students, especially while staying indoors the entire day, something they are not used to. A routine will keep the child engaged and the discipline to follow that routine has to come from parents. The online interaction with school will facilitate the same. Not only can many of the students now attend the online classes arranged from school, but they can also maintain a routine. However, the focus should be on all Five Areas of Development and the interactions between teachers, students and parents as stimulating as possible.

Every student has a different learning style and the level of engagement usually goes unaddressed in regular in-person classes where many students hesitate in interacting with the teacher due to peer competition or domineering students in the class. The online classes offer flexibility and allow students to drive their learning to an extent. The major focus is on skills, knowledge and behaviour, tied with strategic objectives. It also creates curiosity amongst the learners and gives them space to enquire.

Wholeness holds that everything is interconnected to everything else. Everything that exists is related in a context of interconnectedness and meaning, and any change or event affects everything else. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, which implies that the whole is composed of relational patterns that are not contained in the parts. Wholistic learning, therefore ensures the overall growth of the learner in the path of actualisation of her potential..

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