

# NURTURING OUR LEARNERS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

A Report  
on  
PLS Webinar  
24<sup>th</sup> April 2020



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On 24th April 2020, Pallavan Learning Systems organised its first webinar on Nurturing Our Learners in the Time of Covid-19. At PLS, we are concerned about how the online education is conducted so that it meets the needs of our learners. What should we be doing to nurture our learners so that we continue to support their wholistic growth and not simply focus on transaction of academic content?

The webinar participants were from Doon School, Dehradun; Pallavan School, Jhalawar, Rajasthan; Pallavanjali Institute for Actualisation of Individual Potential, Gurgaon; Paradise Valley Private School, Muscat, Oman; The Royal Academy, Paro, Bhutan; and The Scindia School, Gwalior. There was one panelist from each of the participating schools. It was a closed webinar and in total we had about fifty participants.

The objective of the webinar was to discuss online learning that has become the focal point during this unusual situation created by Covid-19 pandemic and to share experiences of participating schools in order to learn from each other. PLS Webinar Series hopes to create a Learning Community of educators that will generate new ideas in education through sharing and discussions.

For the first part, panelists spoke about important takeaways from the HundrED webinar, the video of which had been shared with everyone. Conducted by HundrED and OECD on April 10, this was a good discussion on Quality Education for All in this Time of Crisis and we thought this would be a good starting point.

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## What the panelists shared as some takeaways from the HundrED webinar:

- **Real change often comes out of deep crisis:** Schools world over have shifted to online learning and have marked a steep learning curve of adopting technology with the aim of effectively delivering learning within home.
- **Collaboration and curation of resources:** Sharing and learning from each other the use of existing online resources are essential. But curation of such resources is a challenge and needs to be carefully navigated due to the possibility of content overload. HundrED has done a good job of curation but it still can be expanded. There is also need and scope for innovations.
- **We cannot have one size fits all approach** as far as learning is concerned. This is because of various intrinsic factors, which are at a micro level and extrinsic factors at the macro level. Hence, the actual choice of what learning resources are to be used should be left to the educators so that they can factor in local contextualisation for their learners.
- **Access:** We recognise that not all children have equal access to online learning and we need to think locally of what our requirements are as teachers and then look for innovative ideas catering to our needs. Needs are context specific and as rightly pointed out teaching is not a transactional phenomenon but a relational one.
- **Motivation:** But more than lack of access to technology, it is the motivation (or lack of) in students which is a bigger challenge in the current situation. Students who have always been spoonfed bit by bit are suddenly asked to take ownership of their learning. A question for us to mull over as educators is how to build the intrinsic motivation that lets the students take charge of their own learning.
- **The Transactional versus the Relational Phenomena of education:** Technology may be able to take care of the transactional part of teaching but education is also about building relationships between teachers and students. Teachers are heavily invested in the social-emotional and spiritual growth of the students. It is not just about curriculum and exams but there is a need for wholistic education ensuring the Five Areas of Development. (Cerebral, Social, Emotional, Physical and Spiritual Development).

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In the era of industrialisation we trained and produced people who were good robots, who worked repetitively and efficiently. In today's technologically-driven learning we need to focus on how to produce good human beings.

But we have to think deeply about how teachers, students and parents can maintain relationships via an online platform with limited time and access.

- **Crisis as an opportunity:** Technology is a major disruptor and the sudden onset of online learning forced teachers to learn so much in the past weeks. We need to see this crisis as an opportunity rather than see it as just a stop gap arrangement.

Educationists have collaborated so much online and offline in the last month or so, to understand the situation and to share resources online. This collaboration between educators must continue even after this pandemic.

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The panelists then shared how their schools were dealing with the challenges of online learning:

- **Schools have been focusing on wholistic education looking at different areas of development.** Therefore from delivering academic content to ensuring pastoral care, encouraging sports and physical activities - even within the confines of home - have been the prime concerns of schools.

On the academic front, an online distance learning programme has been put in place, which is a work in progress because every day it evolves a bit more. Many are sending regular assignments and creating learning experiences and on-line classroom interactions are taking place. Depending on access to the internet and to the devices the online learning has taken different forms.

For pastoral care, weekly tutorial meetings are taking place which give students an avenue to talk about their worries and anxieties. In another school the mentor teachers are in contact with the students as often as needed. There are psychological and socio-emotional aspects which are extremely important to be attended to. For young students being in contact with their teachers, seeing and interacting with them online, gives them human contact and an assurance of continuity and stability. One school has begun with life skill classes and career counselling workshops with their senior students.

To maintain steady channels of communication several in-house publications are already on e-circulation. There are regular emails, video and audio messages that keep the community well informed and together.

On the sports front physical education departments have introduced indoor fitness programmes and a few videos and links have been shared. One school is also involving siblings for making participation more fun. This is further being reinforced with some physical education or physical therapy lessons.

One school has come up with the idea of posing one question to all students every week which has been arrived at by cross-pollination of ideas from different domains and covering different areas of development. The answers would greatly vary depending on

the physical location of the learner, her cognitive level and her grasp of the core skills, processes and watermarks. This question would be cutting across domains and therefore would deal with knowledge as an integrated whole as opposed to fragmented into topics and disciplines, helping us to get away from the Silo Mentality.

One panelist also talked about some adult trainees now involved in preparing food for the poor and hungry in the capital city of Delhi providing a very essential service to the community.

- **A variety of online platforms and apps:** Zoom, G Suite, Webex, Facebook live are being used for live classrooms as well as recorded videos are being posted on school sites. Videos and instructions on Class Dojo, emails, WhatsApp, SMS, to simple phone calls and printed material have become the educational resources. New lessons and activities are posted every morning, which are very well received and responded to.
- **Access:** For students coming from economically marginalised families and in the rural areas, there are problems with connectivity, and access to devices. If in some places the teachers have had to convince the parents to let their children use their smartphones, in some cases they are using apps that consume low data. Teachers are constantly trying to innovate and see how they can reach out to each and every student.
- **Unique learning needs of special needs students:** The students with individualised learning plans are finding group sessions are probably just as popular as individual sessions. Usually participation of their parents/caregivers is important for the success of the sessions.
- **Assessment:** Teachers are actively looking at ways assessment can be conducted at a time when the students are in different physical spaces. They are looking at individualised assessment and seeking active collaboration with each other to figure out how to create an individualised progress report covering all domains and all areas of development.

One school is using online engagements with individual students to complete assessment based on a rubric.

- **Student empowerment:** There is also a re-energised focus on empowering our students by making them take ownership of their learning. The major question is also thinking of how to empower the students.
- **Teacher empowerment:** The teachers had to train themselves first before the lessons could be delivered online. Most teachers were not used to the online teaching and the platforms but they had to learn almost on the go. Teachers are unsung heroes at this time - who have had a steep learning curve, putting in double effort, working till midnight. Every day they have to innovate and think about how they can engage the students.

There has to be a focus on staff welfare as well. Having expatriate teachers living in isolation away from family, schools have had to ensure that everyone feels some sort of connection, not just with the students and their parents, but also as a community.

- **Parental involvement:** Ensuring online attendance and handling other issues in a rural environment involves taking parents onboard and regularly communicating with them and providing them updates is vital. The aim has been to make them partners in this teaching and learning process, convincing them about using the smartphone as well as dealing with their insecurities to help their children at home. For early years programmes the schools are very reliant on parental involvement. Sometimes session timings have to be adjusted to the work schedule of working parents for young students and those with special needs. Sometimes the parents call to report progress, they send videos, photographs and messages. Working closely together has changed the relationship between teachers and parents.
- **Administrative challenges:** It has been a challenge to make timetables keeping it as close to the existing daily schedule as possible. Some schools also had to think of different time zones and parental availability, their approach has been evolving. Some started with a four week block with the initial thought that perhaps this was just stopgap education. But as it started to stretch schools have had to come up with more innovative ways of approaching their learners.

## Views expressed by panelists as well as the members in the audience

The webinar and the sharing of ideas gave some answers to the questions that were raised. It also raised many more questions that we need to ponder upon. The following section was collated from their written feedback.

**Participants were asked to share some more ways in which they are ensuring the growth of learners in all areas of development through their online contact with them. The responses are given below:**

- **Human Connect:** Our priority is to foster relationships among the whole school community as we understand that communication is what fuels our collaborative work and moves our school forward. We have been working on building stronger relationships with our learners by firstly demonstrating that we care. We are letting them know that we are willing to change our online pedagogies as per their needs. We also hold the learners accountable for their learning to help them take ownership.
- **Online Resources:** We have planned for one-to-one Zoom sessions and videos for our learners that are conducted by homeroom, language and subject teachers. Assignments are shared via apps, such as WhatsApp, and checked on a regular basis with detailed feedback.
- **Special Needs:** Occupational Therapy, hands-on work and human connection are very important for our special needs learners. For them, we encourage teachers to design activities that could include parents, caregivers and family members to ensure greater participation, connection and effectiveness.
- **Parental Support:** We are actively seeking parental help to support the learners. We have regular parents meetings and have also decided to send them monthly reports, which will include their input and suggestions. Parents have begun to understand how we work with their children since they attend our online sessions. They are learning first-hand what works and what doesn't work for their child and are working on modifying their approach with their child.
- **Wholesome Perspective:** As educators, we are not only focusing on academic learning and completion of syllabi. There is also a sociological, psychological, financial and

environmental fallout of this situation that we are addressing. We are actively involved in helping learners make sense of what is and will be.

- **Access:** Most of our learners do not have access to fast internet and a few of them do not even have access to a network. We are constantly finding ways to cater to those learners with limited connectivity and resources. In the meantime, it would be useful to create an app that can afford learners to work offline.
- **Long-term Approach:** Since virtual learning may continue until the end of the academic year 2020, if not later, we are looking at how we can devise our strategies and methods as a long-term approach rather than simply looking at this period as a 'stop-gap'.
- **Project Work:** We are looking at project based learning as an effective and timely tool to employ during these times. We would like to encourage our learners to be immersed in their locality and understand their community in terms of history, geography, folklore, agriculture, values and culture. In this regard, better collaboration among teachers would be crucial to guide students through diverse fields of their project work.
- **Roadmaps:** We are working to ensure the continuous development of learners with regard to all Five Areas of Development. We are devising strategies to support learners to analyse, revise and adhere to their roadmaps. We are also looking for innovative ways to support the learners in their endeavour to monitor and assess their growth in all the areas of development.

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*The schools are working to ensure the continuous development of learners with regard to all Five Areas of Development and devising strategies to support learners to analyse, revise and adhere to their roadmaps.*

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The participants were asked for their main takeaway from the webinar. The salient points are listed below:

- **Change:** The pandemic has changed the way education and schooling are conducted. It has made us question not only the various processes involved but also the fundamental purpose and role of education in society. The learnings of the current situations will dictate how education and its systems and processes will evolve in the future.
- **Technology:** Tremendous efforts have been made by educators across the different geographies to continue the learning process for students during this pandemic. At the moment, everyone is looking for educational online systems to boost distance learning and empower both teachers and students to maintain the learning curve and develop their technological skills effectively.
- **Collaboration:** The challenges to educators and learners are similar the world over, and our collective inputs will certainly lead to the best way forward. This is a great opportunity to discuss concerns and collaborate to share effective strategies and information. It would be great if the willingness of each panelist/school to share their practices and resources can be sustained beyond the current situation.
- **Access:** Equity in learning opportunities and access to technology are important issues that have come to the forefront. We need to find ways to cater to learners who do not have access or have limited resources in terms of technology.
- **Teacher Development:** In addition to learner growth and development, there is a need to focus on sharing practices for teacher well-being and professional growth.
- **Relationship:** Learning is a continuum that takes place through the multi-layered relationship of the learner with the environment. This pandemic has shown that wholesome learning cannot take place in isolation and it is dependent on the learners' relationship with teachers, peers, and the environment. The importance of building and maintaining teacher-student and peer-peer connections cannot be emphasised enough; these connections, formed especially through face-to-face interactions, cannot be replaced by machine learning. The notion of transactional v/s relational approach to teaching learning methods has become more important than ever.

- **Support at Home:** At this time, there is a need to meaningfully engage and support the people who are currently surrounding our learners - the parents, siblings, grandparents, caregivers, extended family - because they are in the position to facilitate learning. It is important to attend to the quality of these relationships and think about how they can bring about effective learning. This is the "hidden curriculum" of these times.
- **Motivation:** We need to think about learner motivation because we are now relying more than ever on students' intrinsic drive to propel their learning. The pandemic is asking us to reflect upon what we need to thrive, what makes communities function, what nurtures our humanity, and this can become our curriculum. This is a good time to think about what students want to learn and provide them with the opportunity to learn new skills, including essential life skills. For example, learners getting involved in the distribution of food to those in need would inculcate a sense of community and empathy.
- **Assessment:** Assessment has become difficult and the usual methods and techniques do not produce adequate information. While appropriate strategies are being formulated, there is also a need to question the fundamentals of assessment and use it as a tool for further growth and development.

We, at Pallavan Learning Systems, enjoyed conducting our First Webinar. We hope to continue this platform for sharing and learning as an active Learning Community of Educators committed to the wholistic growth of our learners in Five Areas of Development.

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