

AS A BODY WITHOUT A SOUL: AN ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY OF A BAHÁ'Í INSPIRED
SCHOOL IN WESTERN INDIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted schools around the world. Educational institutions across the globe had to restructure the way in which they delivered education to comply with local policies. This study is an online ethnography of the experience of a Bahá'í inspired school in Western India – Mona School – and its experience with schooling during the global pandemic. Conducted over the course of more than a year of sustained inquiry into the experience of the school, it looks at the historical origins of the school, the overarching framework in which it educates, and how it was affected when it had to suddenly move all education online in the spring of 2020. Following the school through the end of 2021, it is based on interviews with students, teachers, and administrators about their experiences; analysis of the school's Facebook page and use of WhatsApp; observations in online Zoom classrooms; parent teacher association meeting minutes; and government policy documents. It also places the experience of the school within the larger nationwide policy context surrounding education in India. The study brings out an understanding that a school is more than just a sum of its parts, that countless simple things which are taken for granted in an everyday physical school environment become greatly missed when they are either not available, or severely limited in an online environment.

Keywords: COVID-19, Lockdown, online education, Iran, Bahá'í, Refugee, pandemic

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*This work is dedicated to Mona Mahmudnizhad, whose sacrifice continues to inspire individuals
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CHAPTER 1: Panacea or Patent Medicine

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that the number of cases of COVID-19 around the world had increased to the point where the outbreak could be considered a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Educational institutions around the world reacted in various ways in response to the newly declared pandemic. By April 20th, 2020, nearly 82% of students enrolled in schools around the world – some 1.3 billion people – had been affected by a school closure (UNESCO, 2020). This unprecedented move put educators around the world off-balance as various institutions rapidly had to respond to the needs of their students in the new reality of the pandemic. A wide variety of alternative methods were employed to continue and finish the school year. The United States, for example, saw 77% of public schools moving their classes online (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 3). While 81% of countries in the Middle East and Africa employed a *multichannel* response to the pandemic that included using a blend of online, radio and TV in their course delivery (Rodriguez, Cobo, Munoz-Najar, & Ciarrusta, 2020, p. 19).

In addition to the technical questions of how to continue educating students affected by school closures, questions arose around the effect of the new reality on mental health (Lee J. , 2020), the professional lives of teachers (Kaden, 2020), the academic development of students (Kuhfeld, et al., 2020), school leadership (Netolicky, 2020), and community participation in the education of children (Iyengar, 2021). It was clear that the pandemic was affecting schools in all possible ways and that future trajectories of the educational landscape would forever change.

Overview of Chapter

The following study is an in-depth look at one school's local experience within this global moment. In this opening chapter I will describe how the pandemic itself had a great influence on the location and content of my research. I also will engage minimally with literature surrounding the three main thematic areas which this study engages with: school identity, the origin of the school, and the utilization of technology. As a result of the diffused nature of the various themes that came out of my research, interaction with relevant literature is also diffused throughout the study, often with a review of relevant literature in the beginning of each chapter.

Shifting Research Focus

Included among the 1.3 billion learners whose education had been somehow affected by the pandemic were doctoral students, many who had their research plans upended by the pandemic; I was among that category. I watched the pandemic rapidly enfold the world. Speaking with our family in Iran, a country which saw the devastating effects of COVID-19 weeks before it reached the United States, gave my own family a preview of what was to come. I was in a space of uncertainty, the same space that those in the field of education found themselves the world over. Prior to the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, I was preparing to spend a year on the ground researching the City Montessori School (CMS) in Lucknow, India. I had prepared to embed myself within its campus and observe classrooms, identify people in the school community whom I could interview, and shadow students, teachers and administrators to learn more about how the school functioned; I was going to conduct a traditional ethnography. I wished to understand more about how the school – whose philosophy is based on notions of universality influenced by both the life of Mahatma Gandhi and the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith – was

operating within the broader national context of an increasingly virulent – and violent – form of religious nationalism that is warping the secular character of the Indian nation.

With the suspension of all non-essential traveler visas to India on March 13, 2020, and considering the many unknowns at the time regarding the nature of the coronavirus, the possibility of going to the field physically in India was essentially erased. This caused me to pause and re-evaluate my research plans. Initial attempts were made to explore the research questions I had originally considered via a distance approach; however, it became increasingly clear as I conducted a few interviews with individuals associated with CMS that I would need to refocus my questions in relation to schooling and the pandemic. The initial questions I had planned to ask were not suited to the online environment I found myself inhabiting. As I was reflecting on my experience during these few interviews, I became curious about how the school was transitioning to an online mode of delivering its education, what types of technology were being employed for distance learning, and how the students and teachers were reacting to the shift to online schooling. I was also curious as to what could be gleaned about the nature of a school by investigating what is missed by those who suddenly must attend, or teach, class from home.

At CMS I personally knew a few people who worked at the school but had not developed close personal relationships with any of the administrators. When the Indian government put physical schooling on hold due to the pandemic, I had not yet established contacts with school employees who could help me gain access to the virtual spaces the school was setting up to continue their education. My repeated messages requesting access went frequently unanswered, and it became clear to me that, considering the crisis which the pandemic had brought on the school – both

logistically, and in terms of the virus itself affecting members in the administration – I was not a high priority. I began to rethink my situation.

I came to the realization in late summer and early fall of 2020, that I needed to pivot to another institution. From my time of living and working in India I had developed a relationship with a school in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra located in Satara – about five hours southeast of Mumbai. I messaged the founder and principal of the school, Feriedon Taghavi, originally from Iran, to describe my project and to see if he would be interested in having a researcher learn about how the school adjusted to and functioned during the pandemic.

I first met Mr. Taghavi in 2012 when I was living in working in the village of Panchgani, located in the heights of the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. In May of 2012 I had the opportunity to visit the campus of Mr. Taghavi's school during a visit to Satara. As we are both members of the Bahá'í community, from time to time I would see him and his family at various Bahá'í gatherings in which we were both participating. In addition, it was discovered that through marriage with my wife, who is also from Iran, there was a distant familial connection; Mr. Taghavi is the maternal uncle of the wife of my wife's cousin. Therefore, when reflecting on options of where to pivot with my research, it seemed quite natural to reach out.

Mr. Taghavi was immediately energized by my proposed research project, welcomed me with enthusiasm and immediately granted me access to the teachers and their online spaces. Contact with Mr. Taghavi was initiated on October 10th, 2020, and observation and interviews began at that time. As I began undertaking my data collection, in part through interviews and observations, it became clear that there were three categories under which questions were arising: questions regarding technology; questions around the context in which the school worked; and questions regarding how the identity of the school had been impacted by the

transfer of the locus of educational activity away from a central building and placed rather in the households of the teachers and students. Table 1 outlines the questions that lie at the heart of the study. What follows is a concise explication of these research questions and a placement of them briefly within the larger discourse and literature they are related to. I also point out in which chapter of the study they are explored.

Research Questions

Table 1

Research Questions

Categories of Research Questions		
Questions of Technology	Questions of Origin	Questions of Identity
What was the school's experience with moving education online? (Chapter 4, 7)	How, why, and when did the school begin? (Chapter 3)	How was the school able to maintain its incorporation of moral education throughout the pandemic? (Diffused throughout, Chapter 8)
How did the school use social media? (Chapter 6)	Who is Mona? (Chapter 3)	What happens to the educational experience when it goes online? (Chapter 5)

Questions Regarding Identity of a School

During my interviews with students, teachers, and administrators it became quite clear to me that in addition to the difficulties the school faced in relation to moving school online – challenges including training of staff on new technologies, and the working out of new logistics, schedules,

responsibilities – the school was also dealing with issues of how to maintain aspects of moral education that constituted part of its core identity as an institution. Thus, while this study is concerned in part with the technical aspects of Mona School’s response to the pandemic, it is also concerned with a wider set of issues as well. What happened to the school when so many features of what the school experience had been composed of were suddenly removed, or significantly altered? Students suddenly found themselves studying in the same rooms where they slept, or ate, and were overnight separated from their friends. Many activities that the school engaged in which required communal participation were significantly altered or removed entirely from the students’ day. A previous nearly 8-hour school day was reduced to one that lasted anywhere from 1- 3 hours. Teachers and students alike were removed from the physical classroom where so many seemingly simple actions which had been taken for granted previously were now impossible or significantly impaired.

Of course, there are many components that make up a school. Its curriculum, extracurricular activities, and the various spaces in which interaction with the wider community is promoted are only a few of these elements. There has also been discussion for decades about the *hidden curriculum* that makes up a school (Apple, 1971; Anyon, 1980; Portelli, 1993; Hafferty, 1998; Alsubaie, 2015). This refers to the hidden assumptions that find themselves acted upon within and amongst all of those who act within the school; all the unexpressed, perhaps even unconscious decisions that in the aggregate also greatly influence student outlook, behavior, and future trajectory.

In addition to the hidden curriculum, there is also the theory of *social capital*, and how the school serves as one place where such capital is generated, and acted upon (Comer, 2015). Social capital refers to the “resources that flow through relationship ties” (Crosnoe, 2004) and posits

that individuals who are embedded within relationships based on trust and hope are better able to attain well-being, and also better tolerate periods of crisis (Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, 2014).

Recent studies that have looked at the relationship between COVID-19 and social capital suggest that communities that have developed high levels of social capital, i.e. *resources* that flow through their bonds of trust, have had significantly different experiences in relation to the pandemic (Borgnovi & Andrieu, 2020; Pitas & Ehmer, 2020), even one study claiming that high social capital results in fewer deaths and infections (Makridis & Wu, 2021).

I posit that the study below indicates that Mona School, prior to the pandemic, had developed significant social capital with the students and families which made up its community, which allowed the school to draw upon community resources as they responded to the crisis. The lens of social capital reminds one to see the contextual-societal-embeddedness of a school. A school is inherently connected in some way to its community, but in what way? Is a school an island separate from the larger community? Is it connected to a wider community? If so, in what way? Does it see itself with the responsibility to interact with the community in terms of service? These are larger questions that this study raises. The themes of identity and the school are diffused throughout the study, although a particularly cogent example of this is presented in Chapter 8.

A Helpful Metaphor

As my research evolved, I began to see the experience of Mona School through the use of a metaphor: high and low-resolution images. A low-resolution image gives you the overall general impression of a scene but is missing bits of information. Those missing bits of information allow an image to have a higher resolution. If one zooms in, or looks closer at a low-resolution image, the clarity of the image is quickly lost, and it becomes a blur. However, with a high-resolution

image, if one zooms in, the fidelity of the image is not lost, and detail can be seen that would not be clear when looking at the image in its completely zoomed out state. I found myself thinking of Mona School in this way, that the effect of the pandemic had turned the school into a lower-resolution form of itself. The general contours of the school remained, but many of the pieces (bits) which made up its detail had been removed, reducing the overall *resolution* of its educational activities. Many of the activities which the school had used to generate *social capital* were suddenly removed, decreasing the resolution of the school. These elements are discussed in Chapter 4 and 7 and are also threaded throughout the text in various places.

Questions Regarding Origin

It was also of great interest to me to outline the context in which the school began, and the basic outlines of the pedagogical philosophy under which it operates. At the heart of that line of inquiry lies the migration from Iran to India of the founder of the school, Mr. Taghavi, a migration which falls within a broad historical context which has seen deep and periodic movements of peoples from Iran to India including the Parsis (Marashi, 2020) and Iranian Elites during Mughal rule in the 16th-18th centuries, consisting of poets, artists and scholars, (Haneda, 1997; Zahirinejad, 2020). Iran and India have long had ties with one another and in more modern times India has become a popular destination for Iranian youth pursuing their higher education (Mookherjee & Goud, 2014, p. 219). The desire to study is one of the reasons Mr. Taghavi decided to come to India, leading to him ultimately found Mona School with his wife in the mid-1980s.

Another reason why Mr. Taghavi decided to come to India was his desire – deeply inspired by growing up in the Bahá’í community of Iran – to move to a place in the world where Bahá’ís were few, a move which is known to Bahá’ís as *pioneering*. Pioneering consists of a specific act

of leaving one's home to settle in another location and simultaneously (a) *teach* individuals who express interest in learning more about the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and (b) seek out opportunities to employ the principles of the Bahá'í Faith in service of the new community that the pioneer finds themselves in.¹ These twin motivations led Mr. Taghavi to India. When I learned of these motivations it became quite clear to me that the study would need to investigate both the history of how Mr. Taghavi came to be in India and how he came to start Mona School. As the school is expressly inspired by principles found within the Bahá'í Faith, I was also interested in exploring how those principles were embodied within the school itself. These themes are discussed in chapter 3.

Questions Regarding Technology – Panacea or Patent Medicine?

Technology was a core element of the response of Mona School to the pandemic, but one that was nuanced; simultaneously limiting and enabling. In the early days of the pandemic, there was an almost naïve portrayal of technology as coming to the rescue of schools worldwide. One word which quickly emerged in relation to technology, online learning, schools, and the COVID-19 pandemic was *panacea*. One such early article, published in June of 2020, stated that “the severe explosion of Corona Virus disease can make us add one more argument in terms of online learning, that is, online learning serves as a panacea in the time of crisis” (Dhawan, 2020). An even earlier article in *University World News* written in April of 2020 noted that “the shift towards online is long overdue considering the changing generations of traditional-aged college students” and claimed that recent technological developments made “better-than-classroom

¹ For a very interesting account which explores the spread of the Bahá'í Faith through *teaching*, one may consult the doctoral dissertation of Temily Tianmay Jaya Gopan titled *Tribal Cosmopolitans: Malaysia's Semai Tribe and the Bahá'í Faith*, in particular chapter 6. She explores how the Bahá'í Faith was introduced to, and spread among, the Semai, one of 18 indigenous tribes of the *Orang Asli* in Malaysia (Tianmay Jaya Gopan, 2019). Over six percent of the Semai tribal group, who number some 50,000, are Bahá'ís, making it “one of the highest concentration of Bahá'ís among any tribal or ethnic group in the world” (Tianmay Jaya Gopan, 2019, p. 29).

distance learning a present-day reality” (White & Lee, 2020). The beginning stages of the pandemic, at least in more developed areas of the world, seemed to attach a mixture of hope, expectation, and relief that technology would come to the rescue of the learners whose education had been interrupted by the pandemic (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020).

The use of the internet to deliver education at a distance is not a new phenomenon, it has been used for decades for such a purpose. As early as 1999 the word *panacea* was being introduced alongside discussions of the internet and its application within the field of education (Ausserhofer, 1999). However, the rapid technological developments of the two decades post 2000 seemed to somehow increase the tenability of the argument that technology was a solution that would provide *better-than-classroom* education to the problems of the pandemic (Sharma, 2021). The word *panacea* during the pandemic was invoked in relation to medical education (Shetty, Shilpa, Dey, & Kavya, 2022), the use of social media as an alternative to other modes of online delivery (Perguna, Apriyanti, & Kurniasih, 2021), in relation to teaching and learning challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa (Adu, Badaru, Duku, & Adu, 2022), and in relation to education policy amidst the pandemic in Nigeria (Bivese-Djebah, 2022) – to name just a few.

Traditionally there are two ways in which the word *panacea* is used. The first relates to a medicine that cures all diseases, what were referred to as *patent medicines* in nineteenth century United States (Estes, 1988). These were marketed by individuals who sometimes came to be referred to as *snake-oil salesmen* who peddled various remedies that claimed to cure all sorts of ailments. Patent medicines gradually grew to be distrusted and associated with *quackery* and were eventually made illegal in the United States. The second use of the word *panacea* is to describe a solution to a problem. Thus, when technology and the internet is described as *panacea*

it can either mean it is a *cure-all* or a *solution to the problem*. Alongside articles that invoke technology as panacea, we can see as far back as 1997 scholars asking if technology is a *panacea* or a *patent medicine* in the derogative sense (Garrett, 1997). It didn't take long for similar questions to arise in relation to technology and education during the pandemic, serving as a strong counterpoint to the tech-triumphalism of early speculation around educational responses to COVID-19 (Burns, 2020; Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Stevens, Bienz, Wali, Condie, & Schismenos, 2021), and many pointed to the inability of a large portion of students to access technology (Azubuike, Adegboye, & Quadri, 2021; Coleman, 2021; Correia, 2020; Al-Jarf, 2021; Sari & Nayir, 2020; Esteban Jr. & Cruz, 2021).

Much of the literature which analyses the use of technology during the pandemic avoids the *panacea* or *patent medicine* dichotomy. They instead moderately recognize that there were affordances given by the technology that allowed millions of students around the world to continue their education when they otherwise would not have been able to (Rodriguez, Cobo, Munoz-Najar, & Ciarrusta, 2020; Munoz-Najar, et al., 2021). They also noted that in many ways technology-enabled responses were inadequate, posed various challenges and could not truly provide a *better-than-classroom* experience (Toquero, Calago, & Pormento, 2021); some soberly labelled this use of technology as *necessary* due to the conditions of the time (Wahab, 2020).

This study adds strength to the view that the use of technology by schools is neither *panacea* nor *patent medicine*. Rather, the employment of technology by schools enabled these institutions to continue their education, and even in many cases offered a sense of empowerment to the teachers it employed as they gained capacities to use various software programs and platforms which they never would have considered in the past. However, there were tangible ways in which the technology fell short and could not replace the experience of the in-person classroom, and in

many cases placed real limits on the ability of schools to educate. These issues of technology will be explored by looking at the experience of Mona School in relation to selection, training and deployment of various technologies which aided them in reaching their students when their physical building had been shut down. Although this theme runs throughout the entirety of the following text, it finds its most concentrated expression in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Significance of the Study

Among the literature on schools and their experience with COVID-19, studies that follow a school for a year or more are few and far between. That is exactly what this study does, and in doing so fills a gap. However, as stated above, the study is not simply focused on the technical aspects of the new learning reality it found itself operating in, rather it also is concerned with how the shifting of the primary locus of educational activity away from a centralized location to the individual homes of the students impacts a school's identity, and its ability to deliver moral education to its population. Schools are inherently connected in many ways to the societies in which they operate, and it has long been recognized that positive interaction between students, families and schools are a necessary component of the promotion of well-being amongst the community (Resnick, et al., 1997; Crosnoe, 2004; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). This study helps deliver insight into connections between a school and the larger community it is embedded within.

Although literature which helps provide context to the themes under review is embedded throughout the entire study, it will be helpful to situate this study among the broader educational literature that has been generated about education in India since the beginning of COVID-19. This literature is obviously voluminous in nature, and an exhaustive treatment we feel is neither warranted, nor practical to accomplish in this study. Rather, we will survey the literature enough

to get a feel for the various types of studies that have been produced in relation to education and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is our hope that this will help the reader understand the ways in which this study is unique, and what it offers to the larger discourse on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected education in India, and around the world.

A survey of literature focusing on education during the pandemic in India shows relatively few include qualitative data (Iivari, Sharma, & Venta-Olkkonen, 2020, Mukhter & Chowdhary, 2020; Shenoy, Mahendra, & Vijay, 2020), while the vast majority contain quantitative data gleaned mostly through surveys (Debbarma & Durai, 2021; Dutta & Mondal, 2020; Grover et al., 2020; Kapasia, et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021; Majumdar, Biswas, & Sahu, 2020; Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Sangeeta & Tandon, 2020; Soundarya, 2020; Tyagi & Malik, 2020; Verma & Priyamvada, 2020; Younesi & Khan, 2020; Ray, Goswami, & Kumar, 2022).

Some of the literature considers systematic analyses of official communications from governmental agencies regarding policy on education in response to the pandemic (Gupta & Goplani, 2020; Juna, 2020; Jena, 2021; Sharma & Joshi, 2021). There is also at least one article that analyses unofficial communication in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on education in India (Joshi, Vinay, & Bhaskar, 2020). Other articles contain theoretical explorations of the impact of online technology on education (Dhawan, 2020), guides of how to re-open schools after the pandemic (Ghate, et al., 2020), and suggestions for how to conduct education during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Narmada & Somasundaram, 2020).

The following study is rare in content among current research about schools during the COVID-19 pandemic in India due to its ethnographic nature, the length which the activities of the school were followed, the observation of online classroom spaces and WhatsApp groups, and the incorporation of the use of the school's Facebook page. We therefore see this study as one that

significantly contributes to the impact of education on educational institutions within India during the COVID-19 pandemic due to its unique and – for the moment – singular nature. The pandemic which began in 2020 will certainly be followed by another, and there has sprung up a lively discourse around what should be done now to help weather the next pandemic when, not if, it occurs (Adamson, et al., 2021; Morganstein, 2022; Wenham, Kavanagh, Torres, & Yamey, 2021; Hotez, 2021; Frieden, Buissonniere, & McClelland, 2021; van Bergeijk, 2022). Schools have learned a lot from their own experience in responding to the pandemic and it is expected that they will also want to learn from the experiences of other schools. Thus, this study is offered with the hope that those interested in learning about experiences of other schools during the pandemic will find the following to be of interest. And as the study, as mentioned already, is concerned not only with technical aspects of the response, but also the wider identity of the school, it provides much nuance that will undoubtedly prove useful to those interested in the experience of other schools. Post COVID-19 educational trajectories are still being determined, and the technological compromises and innovations that have been introduced are here to stay in some capacity. To make future plans, both in preparation for another pandemic, and as a school reflecting on lessons learned, this study is humbly offered for reflection and consideration of the insights raised through the analysis contained within.

Organization of Chapters

Each of the following chapters is laid out with an initial section that illustrates the national context through a review of relevant literature. This context becomes the broader picture within which the local experience of Mona School is presented in the second part of each chapter. At times, during the exploration of the local experience of Mona School, national context will be given to highlight a particular point. Of course, while there are significant differences between

types of schools in India, each contributing their own response to the pandemic, I have placed Mona School's actions within the context of political pressure and governmental policy.

The chapters that follow can be considered a snapshot of a school during a global moment brought on by the pandemic. The next chapter explores the various methods I used during the study. Chapter 3 explores the historical context in which Mona School began. I offer an oral history of the life of the founder of Mona School, Feriedon Taghavi, and how he came to be in India and begin the school. An introduction to Mona Mahmudnizhad and how she inspired the name of the school, is also offered. Chapter 4 highlights the experience of Mona School directly following the lockdown by the Indian government at the beginning of the pandemic, what directions they took, and decisions they made of how to move forward. Chapter 5 looks at what was lost in the educational experience at Mona School because of the decisions to move to online, distance education. Chapter 6 looks at how the school used WhatsApp and Facebook to enhance the distance learning and blended schooling experience, and how they used these platforms to reintroduce some of the elements that were lost with the transition to online education. Chapter 7 explores the experience the school had with the return of students to the physical school, twice. Chapter 8 is a look at how the administration of the school handled one of its biggest challenges during the pandemic, the payment of fees. Finally, chapter 9 offers a conclusion to the study and some final thoughts on what can be learned.

CHAPTER 2: Methods: Researching Mona School from a Distance

The State of Ethnography in Relation to the Pandemic

Actions by governments around the world in response to the pandemic placed obstacles on traditional modes of ethnographic inquiry. Ethnography requires in-person contact, whether it be through participation or observation, conversations, or interviews with individuals. For ethnographers of education, the closure of schools meant loss of access to the spaces essential to their method. However, the closing of one space was the cause of the opening of another; as classes moved online, ethnographers did as well.

Online ethnography has a history that extends well before the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as 1998, reflection was occurring on how ethnographies could be conducted through virtual communities powered by the internet (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). However, these ethnographies largely focused on spaces of meaning which *from the beginning* existed solely online, such as MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role playing games) (Vesa, 2013; Golub, 2014; Nardi, 2010; Stam & Scialdone, 2008; Hollister, 2019), virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2015; Bardzell & Odom, 2008), online forums (Berning & Hardon, 2018; Lee, 2017), or social media (Crewe, 2017; Bosch, 2009; Chretien, Tuck, Simon, Singh, & Kind, 2015; Ricoy & Feliz, 2016).

As the COVID-19 pandemic caused previously available physical sites become inaccessible, ethnographers who previously may not have considered this type of research, began adopting online ethnographic methods out of necessity – it was the only way to access their communities of interest (Podjed, 2021). Thus, a method which largely had been used in the past to study populations which *could not* exist without virtual infrastructure was suddenly being adopted by researchers the world over – including those in the field of education. A major distinction with this wave of online ethnographic inquiry was that the populations being studied via virtual

methods were communities that previously *had* existed offline in physical spaces; they had moved online out of necessity. The ethnographers as well as those being studied were simultaneously gaining familiarity with a new mode of interaction. This is an important point, as it meant it was a time of experimentation for both the researcher and the researched.

Ethnographies conducted virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic begin to appear (Zuev & Hannam, 2020; Xiong & Li, 2021; Saint-Raymond, 2021; Dong, 2020; Winter & Lavis, 2021) and methods of online ethnography, which had previously been outlined in several volumes (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2016; Boellstorff, Nardi, & Taylor, 2012; Hine, 2015; Hine, 2000; Hjorth, Horst, Galloway, & Bell, 2017; Kozinets, 2010) were adopted by researchers widely across the world.

Ethnographies of educational institutions during the pandemic are few and far between. Multiple qualitative studies exist which contain rich interview data (Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021; Tzankova, et al., 2022, for example), however ethnography in its traditional form is a study conducted over the period of several months, or even years, in which detailed descriptions and patterns can be discerned regarding the social processes under study (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). Although there is increasing discussion on *rapid* or *short-term* ethnography and its place – and usefulness – within the wider field of research (Vindrola-Padros, 2021; Pink & Morgan, 2013), the general sentiment among ethnographers is that “if time in the field is truncated, a core feature of what it is to undertake ethnographic research is compromised” (Monrouxe & Ajjawi, 2020).

Ethnographic research based on educational institutions during the pandemic is practically nonexistent in the published literature at the time of writing, with a few exceptions. Boer and Asino (2022), undertake an ethnography of the “learning design experiences of six Namibian teachers” during the closing of their schools due to the COVID pandemic. They collected data

over the course of 14 months to understand the experience these teachers had in designing lessons during the difficulties posed by the pandemic. Elsewhere, Dai and Arnberg (2021) combine speculative fiction and online autoethnography to explore the social isolation experienced by Chinese students in the United States during the pandemic.

Outside of these two explorations of educative experiences utilizing ethnography, after a thorough review of multiple journals dedicated to education and ethnography, as well as other scholarly databases, it appears as if the study that follows is one of the first ethnographies of a school during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is due to at least two factors, the first being that, as stated above, ethnography is a process that necessitates sustained inquiry over time, and once the research is finished, publication times are notoriously slow. The fact that a thorough search has not revealed any other ethnographies of schools in the currently published literature does not mean they are not currently being undertaken, but rather they haven't yet been finished, and published. The second factor may be due to the problem of access to institutions. I dealt with this issue myself when the initial school I had been invited to study physically on the ground before the pandemic, became impervious to me via the online methods necessitated by the lockdown. I was lucky to have developed a relationship previously with another school that was willing to invite me fully into their online spaces. Other scholars may have had similar issues with gaining access to the online spaces where education was taking place during the pandemic. This issue of access may have even been more pronounced when it came to researchers trying to access schools in countries other than where they resided. Again, I was lucky to have had previous experience living and working in India and developing personal relationships with those individuals at Mona School, where the research in this study takes place.

Researching Mona School from a Distance

When conducting ethnographic research from a distance via the internet, trust becomes key when relying on others for access. As I had developed a personal relationship with the founders of Mona school when I was living in India, and had a distant family connection, I was welcomed with open arms and given seemingly unlimited access into the activities of the school.

Immediately after approaching Mr. Taghavi about the project, he created a group on WhatsApp which had as members myself and those teachers he had selected to interview and whose classes I could observe. At my request, more teachers were gradually added, until nearly all the teachers at the school were eventually included. It was on this group that the teachers would share the Zoom links for the classes I would join and observe. I was also added to three of the WhatsApp groups that had been created for each standard² at the school – 10th, 6th, and 1st standard.³ I was given login information to be able to get into the area on the school's website reserved for students. I was given access to all the *digital* spaces that had been created to facilitate the schools shift from primarily a physical locus to a digital one. This included being made a temporary administrator of their Facebook page so I could gain access to the analytics Facebook maintains for group pages.

Mr. Taghavi's daughter, Royia, herself a capable administrator at the school, became my link into the school – I literally could not have moved forward in this project without her able, constant, and thoughtful assistance; all coordinated through WhatsApp. Our conversations through the app number nearly 11,000 words, with an additional 2500 from conversations with

² I use the word *standard* throughout this study to describe the class sections in Mona School. Standard is equivalent to what Americans would call *grade*. So, tenth standard, is tenth grade, sixth standard is sixth grade etc.

³ For more on the use of WhatsApp, see chapter six.

Mr. Taghavi.⁴ I addressed questions as they arose to Royia, who would offer insightful, clarifying responses. Relationships were key, as from a distance there is no *chance* access. I was always completely dependent on another party providing me a link, a phone number, or an email address that would allow me to gain access to an individual or space. In an online ethnography, there is no random encounter in a hallway, no knocking on a door to see if someone is in their office, no ability to have repeated attempts at tracking someone down, no informal discussions over meals that complement more formal interview spaces. It largely is dependent on the person on the other end of the digital connection responding. It is much easier to ignore a few words on your mobile screen, than to ignore the person who is standing in front of you. Royia became the main person I relied upon to gain access into all the various facets of the school.

A Note on the Tone of the Study

A note should be made on the overall tone and the posture of analysis of the following research. This is not a critical ethnography with the purpose of instigating change. Nor is it a simple description of the experiences of the school. What is attempted throughout is a rational exploration of the reality of the school as was presented to me through data, augmented at times by my own analysis and interpretation of events. I found myself in an interesting position. As a co-religionist, and a distant relative, of the Taghavis, in some ways I was able to bypass barriers of unfamiliarity or coolness that otherwise may have existed. This allowed for a relationship of trust and openness, as mentioned above, that led to very frank sharing of the realities of the school; details and frustrations that otherwise may not have been shared with me. This closeness, as is described further below, also caused me to approach the research in a certain posture. At the same time, because I am not from India, do not speak Marathi or Hindi and was only generally,

⁴ These numbers are arrived at after having removed any data unrelated to actual conversation, such as the name of conversants as well as dates and times of the messages.

but not intimately, familiar with the Indian educational system before undertaking this research, I felt as if I was an outsider to an unknown process which I had to learn and discover. Thus, I felt simultaneously as if I were an outsider and insider, being capable of offering both emic, and etic perspectives depending on the situation I was experiencing.

Critique as a Mode of Inquiry

There has been much discussion as of late on the limits of critique as a mode of inquiry (Felski, 2015; Anker & Felski, 2017; Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017; Zembylas, 2020). Felski (2015) highlights a relationship between the *hermeneutics of suspicion* and a critical mode of inquiry. “Why is it that critics are so quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage?” Felski asks (2015 p. 5). “Why is critique so frequently feted as the most serious and scrupulous form of thought? What intellectual and imaginative alternatives does it overshadow, obscure, or overrule?” she again questions.

Felski (2015) is quite aware of what can be implied by asking such questions, one may be labeled reactionary or conservative, however she wonders what would happen if one were to interrogate the limits of critique? “What if critique were limited, not limitless?” she questions, “if it were finite and fallible; if we conceded that it does some things well and other things poorly or not at all?” (p. 8). She recognizes the uses of critique, but also is wary of critique becoming hegemonic and crowding out “alternative forms of intellectual life” (p. 10).

I follow in the spirit of Felski throughout this research. I understand and employ critique as one intellectual mode of inquiry, one that has its merits and uses, but one among many. Thus, while suspicion and the desire to expose or subvert at times fueled my motivations for aspects of my analysis, they were absent from others. While criticism is associated with the attitudes of

suspicion and the desire to unravel, demystify, or destabilize, Felski (2015) points out that alternative modes of interrogation can lead to a *hermeneutics of restoration* with the associated attitudes of wonder, reverence, exaltation, hope, epiphany, or joy (p. 32).

When approaching this research project, I didn't want to wantonly criticize an effort which the Taghavi's had spent most of their lives nurturing and growing. Rather I wanted to *understand* what the school had been going through. Understanding requires both the ability to critically analyze a situation, but also to empathize and share in the joy and difficulties of their experience. One of the motivations to take this approach was because Mona School is operated by individuals who are known to me, and who I am distantly related to. Another motivation is that I find it requires intellectual wisdom to know when to employ critique, and when to approach analysis with a different approach. I associate this wisdom with rigor, and by implication quality. To illustrate, two places in the text that follows where I take a posture of *critique* is when, in chapter six, I discuss the posting of photos on Mona School's Facebook page which have children holding weapons. Another example is when in the same chapter I point out how the school uses WhatsApp to bring direct attention to those students who have not turned in the homework vis-à-vis the decision to not do the same with students who had not paid fees. A place in the following study where I have employed a posture of *restoration* is in chapter eight during the description of how the school chose to preserve the dignity of the parents in relation to the payment of tuition fees. Therefore, throughout this study I found myself responding to the data with not only the attitudes associated with *critique*, but also with those of *restoration*. I invite the reader to do the same.

Selection of Interviewees

Figure 1

Mona School



Mona School employs around 20 teachers and has around 750 students. Its administration is largely undertaken by Mr. Taghavi, his wife Mahin, his daughter Royia and his son Sana. Overall, I interviewed 13 teachers – six of them twice – 14 students, the principal Mr. Taghavi – three times – his wife Mrs. Taghavi, who oversees the moral education component at the school once, and his daughter Royia twice for a total of 39 interviews. Before the pandemic Royia was a math teacher at the school but transitioned to administration to help with the added complexities the lockdown caused for the school. For both the selection of the teachers and students to interview I was reliant on Royia’s assistance. Initially only a few teachers were selected, but at my request I was given access to others. In relation to the students selected for me to interview, I asked Royia why specific students were selected and she told me that “these are some of the very active students in the school, like they are involved with almost everything that happens in the

school, and they have an idea of everything.” When the analysis that follows concerns itself with the voice of the students then, it can most certainly be stated that this is not representative of the school. These students are, per the description of the school itself, some of the most active students. So, for example, when some say they were disappointed that the exams had been cancelled due to the lockdown, which several did, one must question whether this is the observation of a studious child who has prepared well for the exams, as opposed to representative of the experiences of all the children in the school in relation to the cancellation of the end of year exams.

There may have been other considerations as well that were made by the administration when choosing which students to be interviewed. These were students who obviously held extremely favorable views of the school and were undoubtedly going to say generally positive things about it. During the sole chance I did have to speak with a parent of one of the students interviewed, when I asked them why they had chosen to send their child to Mona School, they replied,

the principal sir, Taghavi, is one of our family members and family friends also. We were actually very friendly with them, and we know them. Before putting Saurabh in that school, we had attended some functions from the school, and we liked that very much.

At least in this one instance, the student who had been selected to be interviewed was from a family who were close to the Taghavi’s. This doesn’t mean that the comments made to me during our interview are of any less worth, but it does mean that what is being said is coming from someone who considers the Taghavi’s family and friends. Thus, I must consider the orientations that the students I interviewed have to the Taghavi’s and to Mona School. It is my assumption, and only an assumption, that all the students I interviewed had a generally positive impression of Mona School, its teachers, and its administrators. None of the students I

interviewed were overly critical of any aspect of the school and I purposely assured each student at the beginning of the interview that whatever they said would remain confidential and would not be associated with their identity as a way of indicating they could be free to say anything. The 14 students included in this sample, five males and nine females, were between the ages of 12 and 16. I interviewed them throughout the month of February 2021. This timing was significant for a few reasons. First, I had been observing the online classrooms for several months at this point and felt I had become familiar with how they worked allowing me to generate questions based on experience. Second, this was during the few short months when the relative calm state of the coronavirus in India had caused the government to allow students from 5th – 10th standard – provided there had been parental consent – to come back to physical classes.⁵ The re-closing of schools which took place in early March 2021 had not yet occurred. Therefore, the students were in an interesting time which, in hindsight, was an experience that was “in-between,” a brief respite for some from the prolonged closure of the school. Of the 14 students I spoke to, seven had gone back to physical school, while six remained online. The remaining student had originally gone back to school, but then took advantage of the fact that the school had continued its online sessions and had travelled, switching to online classes for the duration of the time away. A few of the younger students I interviewed were joined by their parents, while the older students were alone – at least on camera.

Royia created a WhatsApp group with all the chosen students in it so that communication could be held and a description of who I was and what my project’s aims were could be given to the parents. The response of the parents in the group gave the impression that the parents felt that the selection of their child for an interview was a prestigious opportunity. For example, one parent

⁵ A detailed description of this can be found in chapter seven.

congratulated the school on the “huge achievement,” the achievement being that Mona School was part of my study. Another expressing that “it’s a great privilege to be a part of this interview,” another noting thanks for being given “this wonderful opportunity.” These comments were unexpected and surprised me; they caused me to reflect on the nature of my research. First, the perception of the students and parents of who I was, and what I represented. I have viewed myself throughout this entire process as an individual in a position of learning and exploring, not an expert. I considered the “experts” the ones I was investigating. They were living through the experience I was researching. Therefore, the experience of the students and teachers was privileged in my mind. However, the comments of the parents made me reflect on how they viewed who I was; an individual with the backing of a western institution conducting doctoral research. This was perhaps most viscerally felt when I was interviewing one of the teachers and at the end of the interview, they asked me to explain my project. When I noted that I was conducting research for my doctorate, they vocalized a visibly shocked “Oh God!” which I interpreted as them realizing the magnitude of the project in their minds, and perhaps them reflecting on if what they said had been ok, which it had been absolutely. Every interview and experience I had was full of moments of learning for myself.

The second thing that this caused reflection on was my own understanding of the importance of what I was doing. If the parents and students saw the chance to talk with me as an amazing opportunity and a huge victory for the school, then I most definitely had to reflect on how I felt about the opportunity to speak with them, and what it meant to be able to have the chance to conduct this research in the first place. For example, during one of my interviews with the students, as I was wrapping up, I thanked the student for being so generous to come and give me their time, I also asked them to thank their parents. “My parents were so happy when they heard

that I was selected for the interview,” the student replied, “Like, I literally teared up, I was crying a lot, like tears of happiness that I got an opportunity to make my parents feel proud.” In the moment I was quite unsure how to respond to such a comment, but it certainly helped contribute to a shift in my own attitude towards my research experience. Although I don’t want to over-emphasize the moment, there was a definite shift in my own internal thinking and posture towards my own project pre and post receiving these comments from students and parents alike. Those whom I interviewed also shared surprisingly tender moments with me, ones that I had not expected. I again attribute this to the trust that had been developed between the students and the school, in particular Mr. Taghavi. And since Mr. Taghavi had encouraged these students to be interviewed by me, they in turn projected that same trust onto me. For example, I had asked Harpreet, a student in the ninth standard, about why she spent so much time and energy on education. She told me that her family knew the importance of education. “I come from a family where before, education was not taken very seriously,” she told me, “My father’s a businessman and I’ve seen a lot of financial problems in our family, even today we have a lot of problems.”

My parents want me and my sister to, you know, study and be independent, and not depend on anyone...because we are not stable financially, we are not even stable mentally, and I think that affects your family the most when you’re not financially stable. We are still being happy you know even [while] being so unstable, but then what comes in between is if you are not well educated, you can’t have all those things that you would dream of, or what you want in your life. Or even sometimes you can’t get what you are willing to. So, I think that’s why me and my family is very supportive, they want me and my sister to learn whatever we want, whatever we dream of.

Figure 2

Interviewing a student (left) and a teacher (right)



I assume the teachers who were initially selected for me to interview were chosen because of their relatively strong English. I speak literally only a few words of Hindi, and no Marathi – the two other main languages spoken by Mona school staff and instructors. This was a limitation on my end and all interviews were conducted in English. A few times in my interviews the conversant would express themselves in either in Hindi or Marathi, as they felt incapable of expressing their thoughts in English. Having learned a second language myself, I know well the feeling of wanting, but not being able, to express a thought in another language, or not being able to express it with the fluency and eloquence that would be possible in the dominant language. It is frustrating, and at times I could sense this frustration on the part of those whom I was speaking with, through either furrowed brows, sighs, or a thought left without completion as silence entered the previously filled space. This sense of frustration was exclusively sensed during the interviews with teachers. Although students at times asked me if they could express a thought in Hindi, their eagerness to interact with me seemed to override any frustrations which may have occurred due to their lack of capacity to express in English. However, these times of perceived frustration were few, and generally the conversations were filled with great joy, generosity, respect, curiosity, and eagerness.

As English was not the first language of most individuals I spoke with, the way in which they expressed their thoughts may not be the most intuitive to native speakers. Although I became familiar and comfortable with these modes of expression, I understand that they may obscure rather than clarify the points which were being made to the wider English-speaking audience. It is for this reason that throughout the study that follows, direct quotes from those whom I have interviewed have been edited lightly for style and clarity. An example of the type of editing can be seen here. The first quote is the unedited version, while the second is an example of the types of edits made throughout.

When they were just, you know, showing the way to them, or when we were discussing a problem on their part. They were not you know, a stubborn and they were ready to learn the new things. And they had the hope that they will do it very quickly, and they were not losing the hope. So, these two qualities which I feel that, you know, the teachers those who had it, they have excelled, and they have sustained and they have done their best.

When we were showing the way to them, or when we were discussing a problem on their part, they were not stubborn, and they were ready to learn the new things. And they had the hope that they will do it very quickly, and they were not losing the hope. So, these qualities, the teachers who had [them] they have excelled, and they have sustained, and they have done their best.

Most of the interviews were conducted on Zoom, which allowed me to turn on transcription and provided me with an initial transcript of the audio of the interview. I then took this transcription, which was full of errors, and corrected the mistakes through listening to the audio while reading the text. In those few cases where Zoom was not used, the interview was recorded on my smart phone, and a clever trick using Adobe Premiere Pro was employed to get a transcript. Although

Premiere Pro is a video editing software, it offers auto transcription of audio files. I imported my audio file into the software, ran the auto transcription service and was provided an accurate transcription, which was once again checked against the original audio to correct any errors. Once the transcriptions were free from error, I imported the texts into MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis program, and began a series of coding.⁶ I employed multiple levels of coding, the first level simply being a mapping onto the text the locations that generally fit with the questions that were on my semi-structured interview guides. Of course, items would come up that were not part of my initial guide, and I would then create a code for that. This first layer of codes was then organized under headings which had all the related codes underneath. After all my interviews were complete, and a first level of coding was applied, I had a better idea of what kind of ideas I could focus on for a more conceptual, or thematic, layer of coding. Thus, a second level of conceptual codes was added on top of the first.

Overall, 132 codes were generated through the analysis of 39 transcribed interviews. 39 of these codes were of a conceptual or thematic type, the rest were generally mapping the text to my interview guide. Of the remaining 93 codes that were not of the thematic type, one could roughly divide that number in two, as I had separated the teacher interviews from the student interviews in my coding system. These two coding *ecosystems* roughly mirrored one another, although not completely. There were specific questions and topics that came up in student interviews that were absent from teacher interviews, and vice versa. For example, I had a code in both the student and teacher coding systems called *Zoom – First Class*, because both students and teachers had often recalled their first class on the Zoom platform. However, the code *Decision to return or not?* which was applied to parts of interviews where students talked about their

⁶ For the complete outline of the coding system I used, as well as the frequency for each code used, please refer to Appendix B.

decision of whether to return to the school or not when it had reopened in early 2021, was not included in the teacher interview coding system, as the teachers did not have to make that decision. Whereas the code *correction of books*, which existed in the teacher coding system did not exist in that of the student interviews.

Having these two different *ecosystems* of codes mirroring one another became extremely useful during the process of data analysis. It allowed me to very quickly be able to see what students had said regarding a specific topic, and then very easily compare it with what teachers had said. This allowed for a richer understanding of certain moments in the school's experience. For example, when the students returned to physical classes in early 2021, I could easily review how the students had described to me that process, and how the teachers had experienced it. This was one way in which I could ensure a certain level of credibility in the writeup of the events that occurred at the school, as I had multiple student and teacher perspectives. At times they converged, such as when both teachers and students noted that the students adapted very quickly to using Zoom for online classes, or when both teachers and students used metaphors likening the relationship of the teacher and student like that between a parent and child. Other times, the different perspectives offered nuance for a particular topic, such as when discussing the limitations of an online classroom. Teachers described how they were limited in assessing the levels of engagement and understanding among the students on Zoom as compared to the classroom,⁷ whereas students described the inability to simply lean over and ask their fellow student if they caught something they had missed. At other times, there were conflicting interpretations of similar situations, such as when a few students described their reason for not coming back to physical classes due to not being able to arrange proper transportation which

⁷ This is described in more detail in chapter five

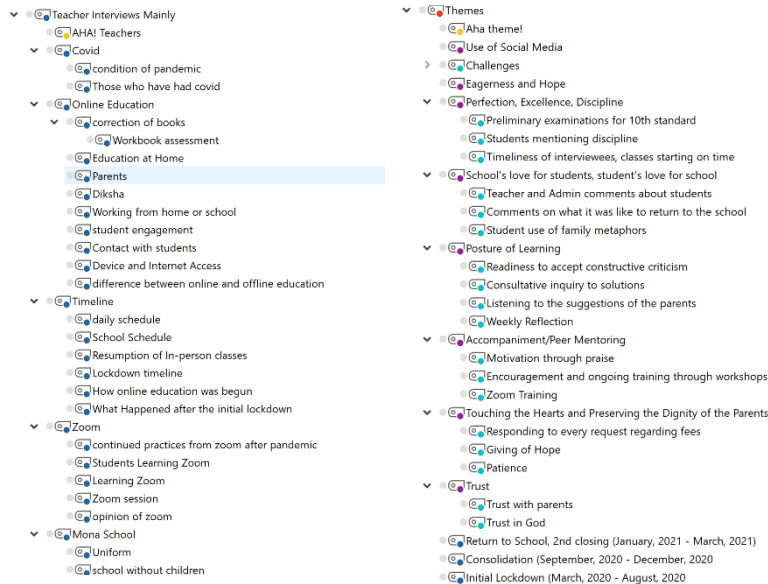
followed COVID-19 protocols as stipulated by the government. The school administration was skeptical of this position, noting that in prior moments of difficulty with transportation, parents had been able to arrange for their children to attend school.

In addition to utilizing the codes as a means by which to analyze the interview data, I also employed at multiple times during the writeup the use of a simple lexical search for terms that were related to the section I was writing up. These were often more obscure terms or words that I had not turned into a code due to their relative infrequency. Having all the transcriptions imported into one system that allowed for lexical search across them all simultaneously enabled an ease and depth of analysis that would have been extremely cumbersome, if not impossible, if having to search through each transcription individually.

A third level of coding was applied, although not nearly as complex or time consuming as the prior two: the AHA! Code. As I was reading through the transcripts multiple times applying codes, any part of the text which I felt was a particular insightful response that I wanted to make sure to include in the write-up of the research, I applied the AHA! label to it. I had three AHA! codes, one for teacher interviews, one for student interviews, and one for the thematic or conceptual codes.

Figure 3

Non-exhaustive example of the coding system used.



Note. Shown here is a selection of codes from the teacher interviews, as well as the thematic codes

use of the software allowed me to quickly pull up all the places in the 40 transcripts of data (39 interviews, plus a collection of minutes from the meetings of the Parent Teacher Association) a particular code had been placed, while also being able to view the surrounding context of the section coded, if needed.

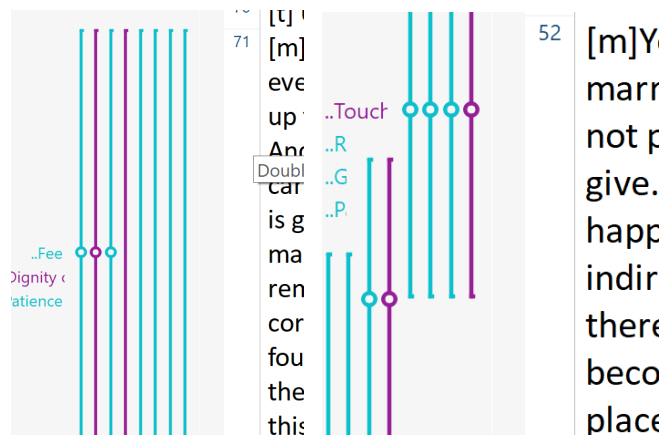
Other Sources of Data

Because in online research one is not allowed to access the plethora of data that comes from being within a physical space – the subtle glances that individuals give to one another, body language, smells, sights, panoramic views, and all the nuanced elements that may give insight into the phenomenon under review – I felt it important to gather data from as many places as

Overall, 1647 sections of text were coded, and as one may expect, this led to a rather rich way to sift through the hundreds of thousands of words which constituted the transcribed interviews. At times segments of texts would have multiple codes applied to it, allowing for an interesting way to interpret sections of data, and gave interesting consideration for where to place the text in the main body of the document. The

Figure 4

Example of the depth of coding



Note. Example highlighting the depth of coding the text would at times achieve by showing points in the text with eight different codes. Each vertical line represents a different code that the text had been assigned.

possible to, in a sense, make up for what was lost. Thus, while interviews comprise a major source of the data used in this study, they are not the only source. One result of this is that there are many images accompanying the written word throughout the study. This helps to give visual context to the written analysis and there are simply things that one can understand visually that do not come across in text alone

Facebook Insights

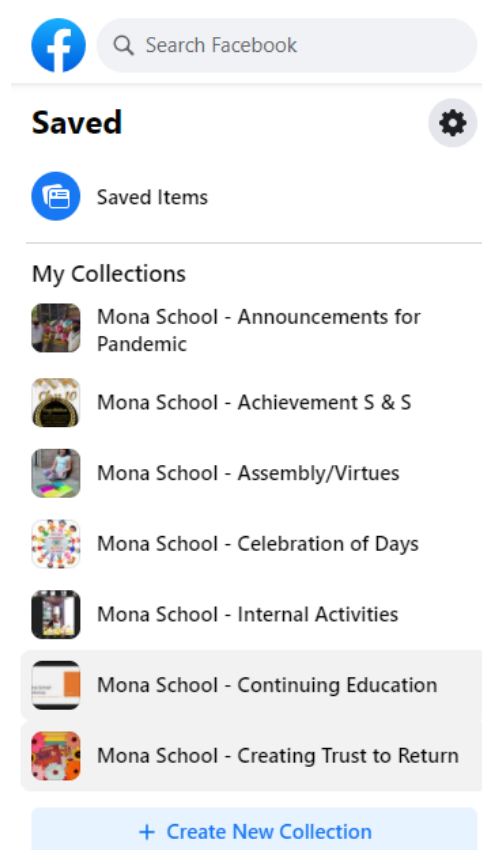
Mona School maintains a robust Facebook presence, and their activity greatly increased

over the course of the pandemic. For an in-depth treatment of how Facebook was used, please see chapter six, I am concerning myself here with how I went about analyzing their Facebook page. I had followed Mona School's Facebook page before I had even considered them for this project, although once I began engaging with the school for the purposes of research, I began paying greater attention to their Facebook posts. As it came time to do a serious analysis, I utilized Facebook's feature to *save* posts under specific categories. I began going through Mona School's posts one by one and reviewed tens of posts to get an idea of how best to categorize them. I settled on some initial categories and began saving the posts under the appropriate classification. I chose to categorize all the posts that Mona School had made from the first

announcement of the lockdown on March 15th, 2020, through the end of November 2021 which is when I was conducting the analysis. As I was going through each of the 199 posts made during that time, I would save them to their relevant category, and a few times created new categories as it was necessitated; I ended up with seven categories.

Figure 5

List of Categories for Mona School Facebook posts



After categorizing the Facebook posts, I was interested in having some understanding about the number of photos posted, the number of videos posted, and some comparative data on how often Facebook had been used prior to the pandemic, and after. To get the number of photos, I began to count manually the photos posted on the Facebook page. I figured since it was a grid I just had to count down and then I could multiply at the end by the number of photos wide, cutting down the time to count. What I didn't account for was my computer running out of RAM as I loaded hundreds and hundreds of photos on the browser. The browser tab that was open eventually crashed with an error message stating I had run out of memory. I didn't want to start from the beginning, so I began to search for an easier way to get this data.

After some searching, it became clear that the best way to get the data that I wanted was through Facebook Insights, a tool that Facebook provides for anyone who has a public page. However, to get this data you must be an administrator of the web page. I messaged Royia via WhatsApp to see if either (a) she would be able to provide the data to me, or (b) temporarily make me an

administrator so I could go in and download the data myself. She was gracious enough to make me an administrator which allowed me to go into Facebook insights for Mona School's Facebook page and download the data which I required. After gathering the data, I messaged her again with a request to remove me as an administrator. Thus, I had administrator privileges for less than 24 hours.

Insights data is split into two categories, data about the actual Facebook page, and data on the posts made on the page. Although Mona School's Facebook page had been in existence since 2010, the data that Facebook made available for post insights only went back through 2016. Thus, 2016 became the baseline from which I would make comparisons on posts pre, and post pandemic. Page data only went back through 2018, so 2018 became the baseline from which I could compare how the page was utilized pre and post pandemic. Facebook allowed only roughly seven months of data to be exported at a time, so I exported the page data in nine different sets and post data in thirteen sets. Insights provides information on the location of users which have liked (Facebook calls them fans) and followed the page. This data was not exportable however, so I took screen shots of those sections to have for future reference. To give an idea of the amount of data which Facebook collects, the excel sheets ranged from 7 MB to 27 MB of page data per sheet: all text, no graphics.⁸ Almost any metric one could imagine was measured, however I concerned myself with very few categories of data, mostly looking for frequency of posts and the quantity of videos and photos. While I concerned myself mainly with the activity on the Facebook page generated by Mona School, if one wanted, they could comb through the data to gain greater insights into the type of engagement generated on the webpage by its users due to the pandemic. This is a type of analysis which I did not include in this study.

⁸ I would urge the reader to go and compare these sizes with excel sheets that they have on their current computer.

It should also be noted that photos presented throughout the text that I have taken from Mona School's Facebook page have not been altered in any way to protect identity, as they are posted on a public site and are available for anyone to access with or without a Facebook account.

Photos that are from my own data collection I *have* altered to protect identity. It should also be noted that all names of those who I interviewed, except for Mr. Taghavi, Mrs. Taghavi, Royia Taghavi, and Sana Taghavi have been changed to protect identity and offer privacy.

Classroom Observation

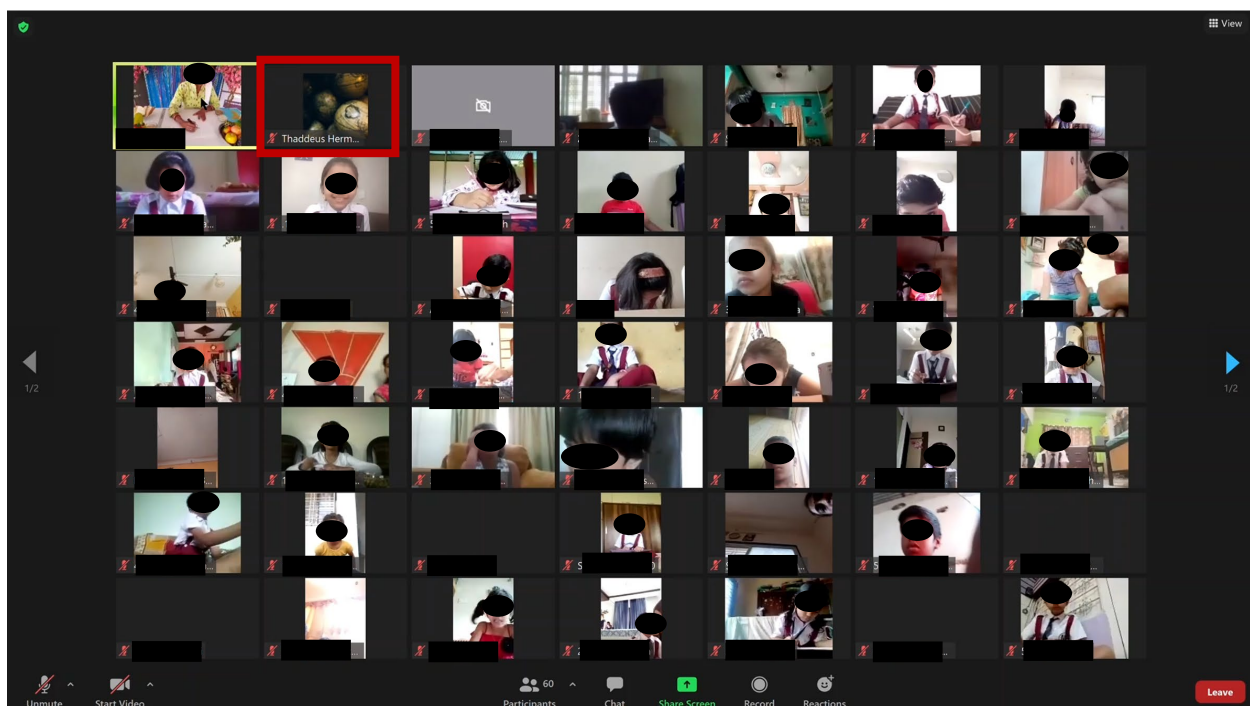
It was also of great interest for me to be able to observe classrooms. The group which Mr. Taghavi had arranged on WhatsApp where I interfaced with the teachers was used to arrange interviews, but also used to arrange which classes I would visit. I made it a point to visit classes with the pre-primary aged children, but also the higher standards. I ended up visiting a total of 13 classes between October 2020 and April 2021. I recorded these classes on my laptop so I could go back and refer to them in the future. These recordings provide a major source of data for the analysis and images found in chapter five.

I decided to leave my video off during my observations, and to limit my interaction as much as possible. This was mostly for practical purposes, as due to the time difference the classes I visited were at 11 p.m., 1 a.m., 2 a.m. etc....Lights were off in the room I was observing from, which would have made my face extremely distorted and dark. If I talked, I would have risked disturbing my sleeping wife and children. However, keeping my camera off also had a methodological purpose, mainly that I wanted to reduce my influence on the children as much as possible, I wanted to see them in their natural element. The teachers, however, were very aware I was there. It was their job to know who was in the class, and in most cases I had arranged with them beforehand to visit. As the teachers began to implement the waiting room feature on Zoom,

I had to be let in manually, making my presence even more pronounced. I'm not sure to what extent the students became aware of my presence as I was only verbally acknowledged a few times by teachers, to which I would respond with a thumbs up via Zoom reactions. I must assume that my presence in the class influenced how the teacher behaved; research suggests that teachers under observation modify behavior towards their understanding of the *ideal* (Samph, 1968; Samph, 1976; McIntyre, 1980). I wondered if my presence made teachers act stricter with the students or deliver the lesson with more enthusiasm. This assumption is made only stronger by the fact that it was noted both by teachers and administrators that teacher behavior with students had been modified in the Zoom classrooms due to the possibility that at any moment a parents or family member may be watching their lesson from off screen.

Figure 6

Example of a classroom observation of a “food we eat” workshop. My icon is outlined in red.



During the Zoom classes I wrote field notes on what I saw, my impressions of what I was experiencing. I also found myself watching how the students were interacting with the teacher

and the lesson. As I knew that I was recording these videos for future analysis, I would pin the video of various children so that it would become larger on the screen. I did this because I knew that the quality of their video would be better if I ever wanted to abstract a particular image for future display, and it would allow me to better analyze in the future as the video would be of higher quality. I would scan the videos of the children in class, and if I saw something of interest, or something I had a question about, I would pin their video to look more closely at the behavior. I do have to admit that I felt quite strange at first, observing a class of students who may have had no idea I was there. If I had been in the physical classroom, even sitting in an obscure corner, my presence would have been more easily detected than in the Zoom room. Even though my icon was sitting there with my name, and any student would have been able to detect that someone else was in the room, there was a distinctly different dynamic to the situation. This was coupled with the almost literal *window* which each student's camera gave into their own world. I was witness to private spaces, spaces that outside of this most exceptional circumstance I would have never had access too. This feeling admittedly lessened the more I observed, but never quite went away. In addition, my observations were accompanied with a strong feeling of nostalgia and longing for India, as common sights and sounds stimulated my senses, bringing a rush of memories of my own time spent living and working in the sub-continent.

PTA Meeting Minutes

During my interviews with Mr. Taghavi, he spoke of the meetings which the parent teacher association (PTA) of Mona School had held at various times. In June of 2021 I messaged Royia and asked if I would be able to gain access to the minutes of these meetings if they existed. She quickly messaged me that she would send them as soon as she could. The following day she forwarded a document whose name indicated they were the minutes. However, it became quite

clear upon opening the file that they were not minutes, but rather a heartbreaking letter to the school. The letter was written by an uncle of one of the students in the school whose father had recently passed due to COVID-19. He was requesting a letter of recommendation for the student to receive a scholarship which had been set up for students who had lost parents due to COVID-19. I messaged Royia to let her know of the mix-up, and to offer my condolences to the student who had lost their father. I asked if this was the only case of students losing parents, to which she replied there had been another death of a father who had left behind three daughters who were students in the school. It was through this mistaken document that I came into touch with the most heartbreaking element of the pandemic, the death of loved ones. With so much focus on the workings of the school, it was easy to lose sight of the impact that the coronavirus was having on individuals associated with the school, this served as a poignant reminder of the real pain and difficulty which, like a cloud, hung over the entire research experience.

Royia then forwarded to me the correct document containing the minutes of the five meetings which the PTA had held over the academic year. These became a very important source for me as they represented a perspective which was yet lacking in my study – the voice of the parents. I had not interviewed parents and these, admittedly brief minutes at nine pages, were my chance to hear their voices over the course of the first school year of the pandemic. It was of great interest reading how the PTA had deliberated about various elements of the functioning of the school at moments in time when understanding about COVID-19 was not mature, and behavior and policy of the government was still unfolding.

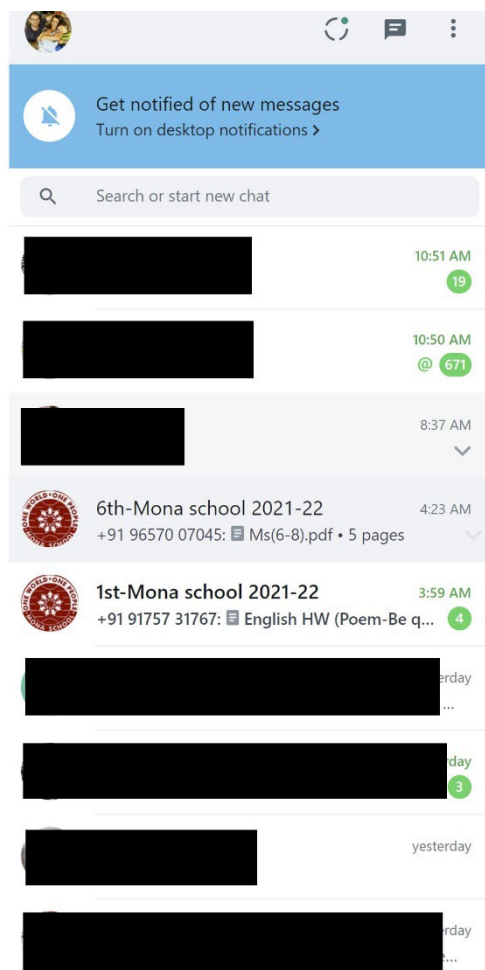
The PTA was in regular touch with the school administration and was consulted regularly regarding challenges the school was going through. The input from parents was regularly considered when the school took decisions. “We are having around 40 members, at least two

parents are there from nursery until tenth standard,” Mrs. Taghavi explained to me, “whenever there is something which is really sensitive, immediately the same day, the next day [Mr. Taghavi] is sending messages that I would like to meet.” Mrs. Taghavi described another function of the PTA being the dissemination of information regarding the school to other parents and interested parties. “We know that these [40 or so] people they go and tell at least 200 people, and those 200 people to another 200. So, the [news] gets spread.”

WhatsApp

Figure 7:

Picture of two Mona School channels in my WhatsApp message feed



The main use of WhatsApp was as a tool of communication. I used it to arrange time and dates of interviews, and to work out which classes I would go to observe. However, it was also a source of data. One way in which WhatsApp was extremely useful was helping me get into the rhythm of the school life. The teachers followed a systematic routine of communication to students via WhatsApp, and since I was a member of the groups of three different standards, I also became conscious of the rhythm of messaging. Every morning, my night due to the time difference, the teachers would send out the links and announcements for that day’s class. Homework assignments, reminders to students that attendance and the use of cameras as mandatory, announcements for upcoming virtual events or observances of particularly notable days were all sent out

over these groups on WhatsApp. If I didn't check the groups regularly, I easily could find myself with over a hundred new messages to look through; these groups were extremely active.

WhatsApp was also useful for follow-up with those who I interviewed. It was common for something to be mentioned in the interview which I would be interested in having, and I would follow up via WhatsApp to have these artifacts sent to me. They included art made by the students, daily schedules of the teachers, links to YouTube channels, videos which teachers had made, or simple clarifications of the places in the interview where I had lingering questions.

Government Documents

To flesh out an understanding of the policy environment in which Mona School was having to act, I found myself relying on official government policy documents produced both by the Indian national government, as well as the state government of Maharashtra. The national policy documents were available in English, however the Maharashtrian documents, while able to be found via methods that employed English, were almost exclusively written in Marathi. I don't read or speak Marathi, so I relied on English language news outlets which had covered the contents of the document, as well as the ability of Google Translate to translate documents and websites from Marathi to English.

At times the translation of entire documents would produce places where the rendering was unintelligible in English. I would then copy the sentences in Marathi that I had interest in into Google Translate. This generally produced a much clearer translation of meaning. This method was most often used in relation to the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), policies the Maharashtrian government's department of education would issue stating how schools should behave during various stages of the pandemic. I feel that this method allowed me to gain a relatively decent understanding of the government policy, even though it was originally written

in Marathi. These documents were important to understand as they guided schools in behavior throughout the pandemic. At times schools were ahead of the guidance issued in the SOP, and at other times they were not in compliance with the recommendations. Mona School did its best to abide by the SOPs, and they came up in conversation from time to time with Mr. Taghavi. These documents became extremely helpful in understanding why Mona School took certain approaches towards education. For example, the initial omission of the youngest students from synchronous Zoom sessions was due to an SOP from the government that stated those ages should not be allowed to use a screen for online education. When a new SOP was released which reversed that decision, Mona School immediately moved these students online.

At times throughout the interviews, I found myself being confronted by words, concepts, and information that I was unaware of. These often became the foundations of the first parts of many chapters where the larger Indian context in which Mona School was operating is explored. I began to follow Indian media regarding the coronavirus and education, as well as checking the twitter of Varsha Gaikwad, who was the minister of education for Maharashtra for the duration of this study. Because of the quick moving nature of the coronavirus pandemic, and the relatively slow pace of scholarly research, I found myself relying in some places heavily on periodicals for timelines, corroborating evidence, and assistance in understanding certain concepts or events.

One example of how periodicals were used in this way was in relation to the visit of members of the Shiv Sena political party to Mona School to pressure them via fees. I was curious to see if there were other reports of this type, and I found that this type of behavior had been reported, in English, at least two other times in recent years.

Table 2*Sources of Data*

Sources of Data	
Interviews – Conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp	• Two rounds of Teacher Interviews ○ 13 in the first round, October 2020 ○ 6 in the second round, January, and March of 2021 • Student Interviews ○ 14 interviews in February of 2021 • Administrative Interviews ○ Mr. Taghavi in October of 2020, May of 2021, and November of 2021 ○ Mrs. Taghavi in October of 2020 ○ Royia Taghavi in October of 2020 and February of 2021 • Total Numbers ○ 284,386 words ○ 39 transcripts

Table 2 (cont.)

Facebook page	• Analysis of 199 Facebook posts from March 15th, 2020, through the end of November 2021 • Use of Insights data to compare the frequency of posting pre and post pandemic
WhatsApp	• Class Groups for Standards 1, 6 and 10 ○ Receiving daily messages from the teachers in these three groups, just as the students were. • Individual conversations with students, teachers, and administrators • Artwork sent by students • Photos, documents, videos, and timetables sent by teachers and students • Nearly 11,000 words of regular communication with Royia • Nearly 2500 words of regular communication with Mr. Taghavi
Zoom Class Observations	• Observing 13 classes held on Zoom between October 2020 and April 2021 • Roughly 516 minutes of recorded classroom footage was collected and analyzed

Table 2 (cont.)

Parent Teacher Association Meeting Minutes	• Minutes of the five meetings the Parent Teacher Association of Mona School held over the 2020 – 2021 academic school year.
Government Policy Documents	• Policy Documents outlining various standard operating procedures (SOPs) for both the national Indian government and the state government of Maharashtra.

Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research

Baxter and Eyles (1997) note four different criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research, especially as it relates to interviews and their analysis. These criteria are (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. They discuss strategies to ensure that each of these criteria are met by the researcher. What is clear is that the question of validity as it related to a study of the type undertaken here is a complex topic that gets to the heart of the branch of philosophy that explore our relationship to the world and how we come to understand it, what is known as *epistemology*. We easily could engage in a lengthy discussion on the nature of knowledge and how we come to understand, however we will leave that discussion for a different day. Suffice it to say that the philosophical understanding I have of knowledge is one that posits a reality does exist outside of our mind, but as humans we are limited in our ability to comprehend it. These limitations cause us to seek methods over time that allow us to overcome these limits to a certain extent and allow us to gain useful insight into the nature of the phenomenon we are exploring. We may never gain a complete understanding or accurate

description of what we are investigating, but neither can we say that all observations are of equal value. Certain ways of approaching the generation of knowledge yield more accurate insights that are beneficial to the well-being of human populations, while others offer more distorted depictions that potentially cause harm. Our ability to generate and depict our findings is tied to our use of language, intersubjective agreement, elements of power, and theories that we hold about reality. Thus, as humans, our condition is that of never being able to achieve omniscient or perfect understanding of a phenomenon, but rather over time coming to greater and greater understanding (Lample, 2009 p. 173).

The implications of the above statement for this study, especially as it relates to the four criteria mentioned above for the evaluation of the quality of qualitative research, is that I offer a particular perspective on a particular situation filtered through my own lens of world experience and assumptions. The observations, conclusions, and interpretations I come to throughout the following study are limited, and necessarily incomplete. However, this does not mean that they are not of use, of worth, or of interest. A different researcher coming into the same spaces I inhabited may have come away with a different set of insights, or ways of structuring the findings. I find satisfying philosophical justification that this is a feature, not a bug, of this type of research. This is not to say that all views are equal, but rather that differing views have the potential to be complementary. The reality of a phenomenon is large enough to be able to accommodate more than one legitimate perspective (Smith & Karlberg, 2009), and large enough to ensure that not all of our observations will be accurate (Hatcher, 2004 p. 28).

CHAPTER 3: The History of Mona School

The School's Founder

Mr. Feriedon Taghavi was born in Tehran, Iran and later in his childhood moved to Karaj, a city about 30 miles away. He was deeply influenced by the Bahá'í culture and community of Iran and had wanted to move to a location in the world where Bahá'ís were few. His hope was to bring the teachings of the Bahá'í faith, and influence the social, spiritual, and economic development of an area. Bahá'ís refer to this inclination to leave one's home to spread principles of the Faith as *pioneering*, not to be confused with proselytizing. Although one meaning of the word proselytize is to advocate or promote (Languages, 2022), the more common societal interpretation of the meaning of word, as it is associated with religion, is “expressive conduct undertaken with the purpose of trying to change the religious beliefs, affiliation, or identity of another” (Stahnke, as quoted in Fletcher, 2014). Generally, the word proselytize is thought of in a negative sense or used in a pejorative manner. It conjures notions of one intentionally engaging in conversation with another with the express purpose of them changing their religious views (Schrimpf, 2017). This type of behavior is expressly forbidden in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

It is, however, expressly stated within the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith that there is a duty to share the teachings, what Bahá'ís often refer to as *teaching*. There is a marked difference between *teaching* and *proselytizing*. “Proselytizing implies bringing undue pressure to bear upon someone to change his Faith,” the Bahá'í writings state, “it is also usually understood to imply the making of threats or the offering of material benefits as an inducement to conversion” (Justice, 1982). The Bahá'í writing instead offer a vision of engagement that begins primarily with the willingness of the other individual to listen. “The wise are they that speak not unless

they obtain a hearing,” Baha’u’llah – the founder of the Bahá’í Faith – states, “beware lest ye contend with any one...if your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God’s sacred Court” (Baha’u’llah, as quoted in Justice, 1982).

Once a hearing is obtained, the attitude governing the approach of those engaged in conversation should be that of investigation, “in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant saying ‘you know not, but I know’, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá – the son of Baha’u’llah and his appointed successor – states, “Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying ‘here are these things before us. Let us investigate...’” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 2010 p. 46).

Further, it is categorically stated in the writings of the Bahá’í Faith that if two individuals engage in an argument about any issue related to religion, both are incorrect. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that contention and dispute should never arise between two souls, but rather that they should speak with “infinite amity and love.” If an argument arises, it is preferable for both parties to discontinue their discussion until a time in which they can continue without contention (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, 1918). This does not mean that difficult subjects, argument, or criticism are avoided, but rather that individuals should engage with such discussions in a calm manner which has at its heart the intent of collective investigation.

Although at times some Bahá’ís, due to enthusiasm or unwisdom, overstep the boundaries of teaching into the realm of proselytizing, there are clear principles in the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith governing the conduct by which one is to engage in dialogue with another in matters relating to religion (Justice, 1982). In addition to the willingness of an individual to listen, and the posture of investigation, another of these principles is the counsel to “take care not to

overstep certain bounds with their colleagues and associates. They are not to regard any joint undertaking,” the Bahá’í teachings state, “as an occasion to impose religious convictions.” Thus, when Bahá’ís, such as Mr. Taghavi, leave their homes with the intent of *teaching* the principles of the Faith – what is referred to in Bahá’í parlance as *pioneering* – there are principles governing their interactions with others. These principles have led to striking differences between how the Bahá’í Faith has been propagated when compared to how other religions have historically spread.⁹

“I always wanted to be a pioneer,” Mr. Taghavi told me. Mr. Taghavi’s childhood coincided with a moment in Iranian Bahá’í history which saw many Iranians moving to India for the dual purpose of higher education, and “pioneering” (Muhajir, 1992); Mr. Taghavi from a young age had been inspired to do the same. “Pioneering and studying, and my education was my goal,” he told me. Mr. Taghavi left Iran for India after the completion of eleventh grade, with one year remaining of his high school career. This was done strategically, for if he had finished the twelfth grade in Iran, he would be subject to compulsory military service before being able to leave the country. “Prior to that [twelfth grade] I left for India so that [military service] should not be an obstacle for me to leave Iran.”

Mr. Taghavi left Iran in 1977, at the age of sixteen, for India. He went to the city of Ahmednagar in Maharashtra where his sister, uncle and a cousin were already living. He finished twelfth grade in Ahmednagar and had dreams of completing higher education in the field of aeronautical engineering because, as he says, “this [was] very unique at that time, and it was something very

⁹ As mentioned in the introduction, for a very interesting account which explores the spread of the Bahá’í Faith through *teaching*, one may consult the doctoral dissertation of Temily Tianmay Jaya Gopan titled *Tribal Cosmopolitans: Malaysia’s Semai Tribe and the Bahá’í Faith*, in particular chapter 6. She explores how the Bahá’í Faith was introduced to, and spread among, the Semai, one of 18 indigenous tribes of the *Orang Asli* in Malaysia (Tianmay Jaya Gopan, 2019). Over six percent of the Semai tribal group, who number some 50,000, are Bahá’ís, making it “one of the highest concentration of Bahá’ís among any tribal or ethnic group in the world” (Tianmay Jaya Gopan, 2019, p. 29).

fascinating.” As he was seeking admission into this program, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 had begun in Iran. The revolution prevented his parents from being able to send the necessary funds for him to pay for his higher education, and admission into an aeronautical engineering program was expensive. “Because the revolution had started,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “The money was stopped by our parents. You know, they couldn’t send the money to us, and things were in a very bad shape in a very extreme way.” After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Bahá’ís, a minority in Iran, suffered multiple forms of discrimination. They were systematically fired from their jobs, denied pensions, and barred from working in any public sector (Community, 2016a). Large amounts of property, land and businesses were confiscated by the Iranian authorities, some 640 properties of which were documented by the United Nations Rapporteur on Adequate Housing in 2006 (Kothari, 2006 p. 19). The Bahá’í International Community, the NGO which represents the Bahá’ís to the United Nations, in 2016 described the economic pressures which Bahá’ís in Iran have been undergoing since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 as follows:

Various methods, such as pressuring companies to dismiss their Bahá’í employees, forcing banks to block their Bahá’í clients’ accounts...were used to severely limit the economic activities of the Bahá’ís in this sector. Under the irrational and offensive pretext of their being religiously ‘unclean’, Bahá’ís were forbidden to engage in a wide range of trades and professions. Issuing or extending business licenses for Bahá’ís in other trades [were] often impeded through numerous obstacles and deliberate delays (Community, 2016a p. 2).

Without the ability of his parents to send money to support him in his dream of studying aeronautical engineering, Mr. Taghavi instead switched his focus to a less costly field of study,

microbiology. He earned his bachelor's and master's and completed some doctoral work, all in this field.

Figure 8

Mr. Taghavi with his hostel mates during his college days in Ahmednagar



Note. Mr. Taghavi is the second from the right

At the same time he was studying, a difficulty arose due to the revolution in Iran - passports were not being renewed; Iranian embassies around the world had been instructed by their government to not renew the passports of Bahá'ís (Stockman, 2013 p. 180) and Iranian Bahá'ís still residing in Iran were unable to obtain passports or exit permits to leave the country (Committee on the Judiciary, 1991 p. 229). “Our passport had not been renewed,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “[our] visa was being denied, and every time we were receiving this threat from the Indian government that you have to leave India.” Mr. Taghavi, and his wife – whom he had married during his studies in Ahmednagar – were receiving messages regularly from the local police that they had to leave India, first in one month, then in seven days. “We had Iranian passports and the passport was the

reason we were not getting a visa, because the passport was not being renewed,” Mr. Taghavi explained. “Every time we went to the consulate or embassy, they were troubling us, and they were denying all of our rights. They knew that we were Bahá’ís, so our passports were not renewed.” They made a firm decision: as it was clear that they were not going to receive any help from the Indian government, they would leave India altogether.

As the revolution continued and the plight of the Iranian Bahá’ís, through the efforts of Bahá’ís around the world, became known to governments and the agencies of the United Nations the United Nations in 1980 began annually producing statements drawing attention to, and urging the cessation of, the Iranian government’s treatment of Bahá’í citizens (Ghanea-Hercock, 2002). The first government to officially recognize the plight of the Bahá’ís, and which helped to place it on the agenda at the United Nations, was that of Canada. The Canadian government, in cooperation with the Bahá’í International Community, helped resettle thousands of Bahá’ís in Canada, and were also instrumental in informally introducing the case of the Bahá’ís to governments around the world, many of whom were not countries who had traditionally accepted refugees. Bahá’í refugees were among some of the first refugees resettled in Ireland, for example (Cameron, 2018 pp. 266-267).

The Islamic Revolution in Iran caused the resettlement of thousands of Iranian Bahá’ís, both those who left Iran due to increased persecution, or those who were outside of Iran and found themselves unable, or unwilling, to return to the country. By 1988 The Bahá’í community’s own efforts to coordinate the resettlement of Bahá’ís who had fled Iran had resettled nearly 6,000 Bahá’ís in 21 countries (Cameron, 2018), and ultimately more than 10,000 refugees were resettled around the world through cooperation between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, various government agencies and Bahá’í National Assemblies (Community, 1995).

Countless others, such as the Taghavi's, were essentially left stateless as their country had blocked access to official travel credentials. Many Bahá'ís, having their official means of exit blocked, fled to Turkey and Pakistan – countries bordering Iran on the west and east – over land borders. While I have not discovered firm numbers of how many Iranian Bahá'ís found themselves in India after the revolution – either because of fleeing Iran, or by being stranded, Mr. Taghavi himself notes that at an annual conference where Bahá'ís gathered in 1979 and 1980, there were around 700 – 750 attendees. He estimates that 99% of those in attendance were Iranian origin Bahá'ís who were pioneering in India, the majority of whom would be resettled as refugees in other countries.

The Bahá'í International Community worked in concert with the Canadian government to help raise awareness of the plight of the Bahá'ís at its embassy in Pakistan, even sending a Bahá'í representative who had been trained in Canadian refugee policy to work with the Canadian field officers on the ground (Cameron, 2018, pp. 260-261). In neighboring India, many Bahá'ís were also applying with the Canadian embassy as refugees to be resettled in Canada, including the Taghavi's. “We applied to Canada, and the Canadian High Commission,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “They called us, and very quickly the visa, and even the tickets and everything [were] being made available to us.” The year was 1985. Due to coordination between the Canadian Government, the Bahá'í International Community, and the field officers at Canadian Embassies on the ground, waiting times for resettlement interviews from time of application had been reduced from one year to only two weeks (Cameron, 2018, p. 261). The Taghavi's were ready to finish their Indian chapter, had scheduled their flight, and began to say their goodbyes. “We went to the friends in India to say bye to them,” Mr. Taghavi said. One of their closest friends, Mr. Afshin, who lived in Panchgani, served in a position known in the Bahá'í

community as a *counselor* and was tasked in part with the education and encouragement of the Bahá'ís throughout all of India. “On many occasions we consulted with him about many aspects,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “We met him, we told him we are going... We didn’t come to consult, we came to say goodbye to him and to thank him for whatever he had done for us in this land.” Mr. Afshin welcomed his friends, and upon hearing their plans to go to Canada, replied “The place you are going in Canada is not a place which is suiting you, you should stay in India.” Mr. Afshin guided them out of his home office, perched on the edge of the mountainside and which overlooked the Krishna River valley.

Figure 9

View of the Krishna River Valley from Panchgani

(Wikimedia Commons)



“He [Mr. Afshin] came out of his office, it was only a valley, and then in front were a few mountains.

He pointed out, ‘I suggest to you, there is a place by the name of Satara, a city, a town which needs a pioneer... Before you take a decision to leave, go and see this place.’ So we went, just to keep the respect of his word.”

Mr. Taghavi and his wife had planned to go back to Ahmednagar

from Panchgani, pack their things and make the final preparations to leave for Canada. “I had the motorbike, and we both sat... Instead of taking the turn left [to Ahmednagar], we took the right turn, the right turn was going to Satara, about 40 kilometers away.” As soon as Mr. Taghavi and

his wife entered the city of Satara, it reminded him strongly of where he had lived in Iran, Mehrshahr and Gohardasht in Karaj. “[Satara] is a mountainous region, and when we saw it, both of us, we were, we got attracted to this place.” The Taghavi’s began to seriously reconsider their decision to leave India for Canada. “We decided to see what we could do in Satara,” Mr. Taghavi said. “We had about ten days’ time to give the reply to the Canadian High Commission.” They immediately returned to Panchgani to consult with Mr. Afshin about what they could do in Satara to support themselves financially. Mr. Taghavi had training in microbiology and had thoughts of setting up a lab within the city but was unsure if it would be successful or not. Mr. Afshin had another suggestion.

In addition to the Taghavi’s, there were several other Iranian Bahá’ís who had a strong desire to remain in India. Like the Taghavi’s, they were also in a situation of looking for ways in which they could support themselves and their families. Because of Mr. Afshin’s responsibility in his role as a counselor, he was familiar with the realities of the Bahá’ís throughout India and suggested to many of them to begin schools as a means by which to both support themselves and be of service to their local communities. Mr. Afshin told the Taghavi’s that they should begin a school in Satara. He noted that Satara was especially in need of an English medium school. Mr. Taghavi noted how he had no experience with the establishment of a school, to which Mr. Afshin replied that he was arranging a session at the Bahá’í Academy¹⁰ in Panchgani for all the Iranian pioneers who were in a similar position; he was encouraging them to begin schools as well. The Taghavi’s were encouraged by this support they would receive and decided to return to Satara to see if they could find a building which would be suitable for a school. They decided that if they

¹⁰ The Bahá’í Academy is a Bahá’í inspired non-governmental organization established in Panchgani in the 1980s.

had not found a proper accommodation for a school within ten days, then it wasn't meant to be, and they would continue with their plan to relocate to Canada.

“We came back to Satara, and we started searching for a place,” Mr. Taghavi explained, “I kept on visiting many places, some Bahá'í friends were also there...so with their help we saw some places.” All the properties being shown to the Taghavi's were not suitable for a school, either they were too run-down, too small, or the area of the city was extremely congested, noisy, or unsafe. In the meantime, they were staying in the Bahá'í center, and the days were passing by quickly. Mr. Taghavi decided to place an advertisement in a local newspaper stating that he was looking for a suitable building for a school. He noted he was looking for a property that had two rooms with separate entrances – one in which he and his wife would live, and one in which he would hold classes. He also specified the need for a small yard in which the children could play, and a good area of the city. He met with the editor of a newspaper. “I went and met the person who was the editor, still he is a very close friend, and I told [what] I want,” Mr. Taghavi described. The editor informed Mr. Taghavi that the newspaper was in the local language of Marathi. Mr. Taghavi replied, “But I want that [ad] to come in English, so that I can read it and know the advertisement has come,” to which the editor smiled and replied, “Look, for you we will make it [in English] but be assured that nobody will read it.” The editor agreed to place the ad in English. Mr. Taghavi gave his contact address as the Bahá'í center in Satara, where he and his wife were staying.

The advertisement was placed in the paper the next day, in English as requested, and was in the middle of the page. It just so happened that a certain army officer had gone to get his hair cut at a local barber. As he was waiting for his turn, he picked up that day's newspaper and began to read. “Army officers are distinguished...they speak English. He took the paper and started

making himself busy until his turn came,” Mr. Taghavi told me. “His eyes got attracted to the English. He read it and he asked the barber where is [the Bahá’í center]? It is written in front of the municipal shopping center, so where is this place?” The barber proceeded to tell the army officer where the Bahá’í center was and without receiving his haircut the officer proceeded directly to see Mr. Taghavi. “So, he comes,” Mr. Taghavi said. “We had decided on that very day that if no one comes, then it is understood that we have tried, and we need not be here and we have to leave.”

So that man came, and he asked, ‘is it you that gave the advertisement’? I said ‘yes’. He said that ‘I have a house; you come and see’. I started asking him questions: ‘Does your house have two doors?’ and all this. He said, ‘When I have taken the trouble to come all the way to see you, you can take the trouble to come and see the place...I’m going for a haircut and when I come back, we’ll go.’

Mr. Taghavi waited for the army officer to return, which he eventually did. He took Mr. Taghavi to see his property. “Many houses I’d seen,” Mr. Taghavi recalled, “and among the houses which I had seen, it was totally different.”

We wanted two doors, it had seven doors. We wanted two rooms, it had seven rooms. We wanted it in a good place, it was in one of the best societies of Satara...we wanted, you know, a bit of yard for the children to play [in], it had the biggest area in that colony, and it was the biggest plot. It was around 12,000 square feet and it had a huge building.

The army officer told Mr. Taghavi that it was the last day of his leave, and that he had to report back to his duty. He then proceeded to hand the key to the property to Mr. Taghavi. “This is the key,” the officer said, “take it in your hand and talk to my mother.” Mr. Taghavi asked the army officer about the amount needed to rent. “He said, ‘talk to my mother.’ I said, ‘what about the

other terms?’ He said, ‘talk to my mother, I’m going.’” The officer left, and the Taghavis proceeded to go and talk with the officer’s mother. When they reached, she asked them “when are you shifting?”¹¹ The Taghavi’s were still hesitant, not having fixed any specific terms of rent, and stated as such. She replied

My son has selected you; my son has seen you, and he knows to whom he should trust.

And he has given the key in your hand. This means he has accepted everything. So don’t worry about the rent, you come and when he comes it will be decided. You only go and shift and bring your luggage and your things here.

“Immediately the next day we packed up the things and we wrote to the Canadian High Commission,” Mr. Taghavi explained. “We said that we wished to stay back in India and please forgive us for the trouble given, we are not interested. So, this story ended there, going to Canada, and the chapter of Satara started.” The Indian government had earlier recognized the refugee status of the Bahá’ís and through an annual registration allowed Iranian Bahá’ís who were registered as refugees with the United Nations, such as the Taghavi’s, to remain in India. Soon after they made their decision to stay in India they applied for citizenship as they intended to make India their permanent home.

Mr. Taghavi and his wife attended the training courses held at the Bahá’í Academy for the Iranian pioneers who were beginning schools throughout India. “We were both there,” Mr. Taghavi told me. “It was about a one-month course. We learned all the aspects of schooling and then we came to Satara, and we started this school.” When it came to naming the school, there was never any question. During Mr. Taghavi’s time in Ahmednagar, which had a relatively large amount of Persian Bahá’ís in its community, news would regularly be sent by the National

¹¹ A term used in India that is equivalent to *moving* in US English. As in, *when are you moving your things here?*

Spiritual Assembly¹² of the Bahá'ís of India regarding the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran. It was not uncommon for these communications to contain the names of those Iranian Bahá'ís who had been executed by the Iranian government, whom the Bahá'ís called martyrs. This news was sent in English, and Mr. Taghavi helped to translate it into Persian for the Iranian Bahá'ís. “My English was very broken,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “But I was among those who was translating from English to Persian to read it for the friends.” One of these communications contained news which was of such significance that it would influence greatly the life of the Taghavis.

“Among all the friends who had been, you know, martyred, Mona was one of those which really had occupied our mind and touched our heart,” Mr. Taghavi related to me. Mr. Taghavi and his wife decided that if they had a daughter, they would name her Mona. Just a few years later, when the Taghavi's began their school, they had yet to have a daughter. Mrs. Taghavi was pregnant – with their son – so they decided to name their school Mona. “We always say that Mona School is our first child,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “And then came Sana [their son] and then Mona [their first daughter].” The influence of Mona's execution at the hands of the Iranian authorities would extend not only to Ahmednagar in India, but to countless other locations around the globe. She would ultimately become recognized worldwide as an example of the brutality faced by the Iranian Bahá'í community after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Mona Mahmudnizhad

Mona Mahmudnizhad was a 16-year-old youth, and a member of the Bahá'í community in Shiraz, Iran when she was arrested in October of 1982. At the age of fifteen, she had requested to be placed on the education committee of the Bahá'ís of Shiraz. She was assigned the specific task of teaching classes to children on all the religions of the world, the development of spiritual

¹² A National Spiritual Assembly is an elected body that overlooks the affairs of a national Bahá'í community.

qualities, the encouragement of the children to engage in service to their fellow human beings and helping them learn and appreciate the oneness and diversity of all of humanity (Canada, 1985).

Mona, according to her sister, was an “eloquent writer,” and had in fact written shortly before her arrest in 1982 an essay in her writing class in school titled *Islam is a tree and its fruit is liberty*. This essay was strongly frowned upon by her teachers, as any expression of belief outside of Islamic Revolutionary conception of Shi’i Islam was not tolerated. Part of the essay reads as follows:

Why in my country are those who are members of my religion abducted from their homes at night and taken to mosques in their nightgowns, and subjected to whipping? As we have recently witnessed in our own city, Shiraz, their homes are looted and set on fire. Hundreds of people leave their homes in fear. Why? Because of the gift of liberty that Islam has brought? Why am I not free to express my ideas in this society? Why do I not have freedom of speech so that I can write in the newspapers, and express my ideas on radio and television? (Tavaana, 2014).

In October of 1982 there were a series of arrests of Bahá’ís in Shiraz which resulted in 16 individuals being executed by hanging between June 16th – June 18th. On June 18th, 10 women including Mona were hung after having been imprisoned for eight months. Of these ten women, Mona rose to prominence, due in part to her young age – she was only 17 years old at the time of her execution. She was executed a few months after her father. Their death sentence drew international criticism, including an official plea by President of the United States Ronald Reagan in which he stated:

I strongly urge other world leaders to join me in an appeal to the Ayatollah Khomeini and the rest of Iran's leadership not to implement the sentences that have been pronounced on these innocent people...these individuals are not guilty of any political offence or crime, they have not plotted the overthrow of the regime and they are not responsible for the deaths of anyone (Weinraub, 1983).

These appeals did nothing to stay the hand of Iranian revolutionary "justice" and the Bahá'ís

Figure 10

*Mona Mahmudnizhad and
her father Yadu'llah.*



Note. Both were executed by
the Iranian Authorities in
1983

sentenced to death, including Mona, were executed shortly after.

In fact, in an article shortly after the appeal by President Reagan, Ayatollah Khomeini rebutted his plea in the Kayhan newspaper:

"I wonder if you heard the U.S. President's speech broadcasted from certain radio stations, did you notice that he was pleading to the whole world about the Bahá'ís in Iran; [saying that] these Bahá'ís who are in Iran are innocent and not spies; that they do nothing but perform religious ceremonies, [he is complaining] that Iran has sentenced 22 of them to death for performing their religious ceremonies...if we had not evidence to prove they were U.S. spies, the mere concern expressed about them by Reagan suffices as evidence" (Center, 2007).

Mona and the other women who became her cellmates and companions in execution suffered this fate solely due to their religious belief in the Bahá'í Faith. On visitation cards assigned to each prisoner, it listed their first and last name and the crime for which they were being detained. On the cards of the Bahá'í men who had been arrested it was

written as their crime “wayward sect of Bahá’ism” and on the cards of the Bahá’í women, a simple “B” had been written, easily inferred to stand for Bahá’í (Center, 2007, p. 43). In addition to this, one of the women also arrested and executed with Mona, Simin Sabiri, only twenty-four years old at the time of her execution, was told she had been charged with sixteen separate crimes when she went in front of her judge in the revolutionary court. These charges included Being Bahá’í, Active membership in Bahá’í Administration, membership in the Bahá’í Education Committee of Shiraz, donating to the Bahá’í fund, and refusing to recant (Center, 2007 pp. 33-34).

Figure 11

The ten Bahá’í women, including Mona outlined in red, who were hung by the Islamic Republic of Iran in June of 1983.



Note. Left to right starting with the top column: Akhtar Sabit, 24 years; ‘Izzat Janami Ishraqi, 50 years old; Mahshid Nirumand, 28 years old; Mona Mahmudnizhad, 17 years old; Nusrat Yalda’I, 54 years old; Roya Ishraqi, 23 years old and daughter of ‘Izzat; Shirin Dalvand, 25 years old; Simin Saberi, 24 years old; Tahirih Siyavushi, 32 years old; and Zarrin Muqimi, 28 years old (Community, 2016b).

Mona and her companions had been told that they had been sentenced to death, but that they could have this sentence reversed if they chose to recant their Bahá'í Faith and convert to Islam.¹³ One by one these women were given the customary four chances to recant their faith, and one by one they refused to do so, knowing that by doing so they were coming closer towards execution (Center, 2007 pp. 37-38). Ultimately after visiting their families for the last time at 5 p.m. on the afternoon of June 18, 1983, they were separated from the other prisoners who had also had family visits, and either on the evening of June 18, or the early morning of June 19 the women were loaded onto a minibus and driven from the prison to Chogan square, where they were executed by hanging. The driver of the vehicle that transported the women to the square later came forward to offer an eyewitness account of the last moments of the women, stating that they were executed one by one. Mona, the youngest of them all, was the last one who was hung (Center, 2007 p. 39).

Mona's mother was arrested after Mona, and for a time they were together in prison. She herself recalls a conversation with her daughter in prison, not long before she was executed. Mona told her mother that they were going to execute her. Her mother told her that she would be freed, to which Mona replied

I swear to God that I do not wish this for myself, and you shouldn't wish it for me. I know that they are going to kill me and I want to tell you what I am going to do when that happens...you know mother at the place where they're going to take us for our execution, we will have to go up and stand on something high where they will put a rope around our necks...Then I'm going to kiss the noose and say a prayer...I'll say that

¹³ It should be noted that Bahá'ís recognize Mohammad as a Messenger of God and see the Quran as a divinely inspired text.

prayer for the happiness and prosperity of all mankind and bid farewell to this mortal world and go to God (Canada, 1985).

Early on the morning of June 19, the bodies of the women were brought to a medical examiner's morgue and the mother of Mona, Farkhundeh, herself only recently having been released from prison, was one of the first to arrive. After gaining access, she identified the bodies of the ten women who had been killed, including that of her own daughter. As she was returning to the body of her daughter after having wandered around, the guard of the morgue approached her. Mona's mother recalled:

I thought he was going to scold me for not staying in one place and roaming around. He said, 'which one is your child?' I showed him Mona. He started crying and said, 'please forgive us. We are appointed and have no authority. We are always faced with such scenes, but none were as moving as this one. Please forgive me. Please.' My tongue was tied so I hugged him and kissed his cheeks. He had a long beard. He calmed down like a child. So, I told him again, 'if you knew why our kids have fallen like this, you would worship the dust under their feet.' He said nothing (Center, 2007).

Shortly after Mrs. Mahmudnizhad's visit to the morgue, the bodies of the women were placed into an ambulance and driven to the Bahá'í cemetery of Shiraz, known as the *Gulistan-i Javid*. This became known to the Bahá'ís of Shiraz due to a local youth who had waited outside of the morgue, saw that the bodies were being loaded into the ambulance, and followed it on his motorcycle. From the roof of a nearby building he watched the authorities dig shallow graves for each of the ten women, and then proceed to cover their bodies with dirt via the use of a bulldozer (Center, 2007). The cemetery later that same year, 1983, was confiscated by the Iranian authorities, its grave markers destroyed, and its buildings demolished (Community, 2014).

In May of 2014 it was reported that the Iranian revolution guards had begun to further demolish the Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz (Dehgan, 2014). They had begun excavation work to lay the foundation of what was advertised on site as a future site of cultural and sporting activities (Community, 2014). Bahá'is around the world in various media outlets spoke out against this destruction, the UK Minister for the Middle East, Hugh Robertson, called upon the government of Iran to allow the Bahá'is to practice their religion freely, noting his deep concern about the destruction of the cemetery in Shiraz (Robertson, 2014). The Construction was temporarily halted, only to be resumed in August of that year. It was reported that “the [Islamic Revolutionary] Guard has now removed human remains from some 30 to 50 of the 950 graves of Bahá'is in the cemetery, placing them in an open canal to make way for the construction...” (Service, 2014). In September of 2014 three United Nations experts on human rights, freedom of religion, and minority issues released a statement requesting the “Government of Iran to stop the destruction of a Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz by Revolutionary Guards” (Bielefeldt, Shaheed, & Izsak, 2014). It has not been reported whether the remains of Mona are among those that were disinterred.

Figure 12

Photos of the excavation work advancing at the confiscated cemetery of the Bahá'is of Shiraz, where nearly 1000 Bahá'is are buried (Service, 2014).



Mona knew that she was going to be executed, and wrote a letter addressed to her mother and sister, which came to be seen as her will and testament; her father had been executed just three months prior. The text reads:

Oh God, Thy will is my hope.

My mother and kind sister, who are more dear to me than my own life: what can I say?

What can I write? God's grace is abundant and surrounds all his servants under all conditions, even a feeble servant such as I who am not worthy to serve at His threshold.

Dear ones, pray for us with heart and soul to be submissive to God's will under any condition, be satisfied with our fate, and fix your gaze upon no one but the Friend so that we may be found worthy of His blessings to the extent possible.

I love you with all my life, do not forget that He doeth whatsoever He willeth: what can we do? Therefore, we must bow our heads in submission to the kind Lord. Do not let grief and sorrow overcome you; pray for us – we are in need of prayers.

~ Mona Mahmudnizhad (Tavaana, 2014)

Mona's Influence

Mona's life, and her ultimate sacrifice of it because of remaining steadfast in a cause she believed in, had, and continues to have, great reach and influence the world over. In 1983, the news of her execution reached the ears of a 17-year-old refugee who had left Iran for Canada several years prior. The experience of learning about the execution of Mona, someone who was his same age, served as the motivation for dedicating a life towards justice and the defense of human life. This 17-year-old was Payam Akhavan, who would later become a UN prosecutor at the Hague and serve with the UN in various zones of conflict the world over as well as serving as legal counsel in "leading cases before the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, the

European Court of Human Rights, and the Supreme Courts of Canada and the United States” (Akhavan, 2017).

Mona also served as an inspiration for the establishment in 1999 of the Mona Foundation, an organization that helps support “grassroots initiatives around the world that educate all children, empower women and girls, and emphasize service to the community.” It helps fund schools in poor locations around the world (Foundation, 2022). Mona Foundation’s fonder, Mahnaz Aflatooni Javid, directly cites the story of Mona Mahmudnizhad as the inspiration behind the creation of the foundation. “You know, Malala lived and is now a very powerful voice advocating for education of women,” says Mahnaz. “Well, Mona did not, and I felt that we now could be her voice and do our work on her behalf and in her stead” (Javid, 2020).

Mona’s story has also resulted in artistic, dramatic expressions. For example, a play written by Mark Perry, a professor of play analysis, playwriting and drama at the University of North Carolina, *A New Dress for Mona*, has been produced in at least six locations around the world. The drama draws inspiration from a dream that Mona had months before she was arrested and taken to prison. “In the dream, Mona was offered her choice of three garments,” reads the description of the play,

one was red, and it symbolized martyrdom; one was black, it meant a life of sadness and suffering; the third was blue, Mona’s favorite color – it stood for a life devoted to serving humanity. In her dream, Mona chose the blue. In her life, Mona eventually chose to wear each of them (Perry, 2022).

Figure 13

The cast of "A New Dress for Mona," a production by the Bangkok University Theatre Co



Canadian musician Doug Cameron wrote the song *Mona with the Children* and produced a music video in 1985. The video was a five-minute reproduction of the experience of Mona being arrested, interrogated in prison, and executed. The song itself found itself at number fourteen on the Canadian pop music charts for the week of October 19th, 1985 (Charts, 1985) and on the strength of the song Cameron was nominated for a Juno award in 1986 for the category of most promising male vocalist of the year (Winners, 1986). On the set of the music video was Payam Akhavan, and prominent musicians Buffy Sainte-Marie, Dan Seals and Dash Crofts. Of being on the set of the film production, Akhavan writes:

We had all volunteered to tell the world the story of Mona Mahmudnizhad, my sixteen-year-old contemporary from the persecuted Bahá'í minority, a high school student hanged by Iran's fanatical rulers for daring to speak out in defense of human rights...Her heroic example had shattered my complacent world of trivial illusions, forcing me to rethink the

purpose of my life. As we recreated that scene of her final moments in a film studio north of Toronto, there was a stunned silence. No words could suffice (Akhavan, 2017).

Figure 14

Scene from Doug Cameron's 1985 music video "Mona with the Children" depicting the moment of Mona's execution



There is at least one other school in the world named after Mona Mahmudnizhad, located in Sapele, Nigeria. Began in 2000, it mixes Montessori education

with an educational philosophy that encourages students to “become owners of their learning” (School, 2022).

Finally, Mona’s story has also greatly inspired me in my life. I first learned of Mona through the watching of a video cassette of Doug Cameron’s song when I was seventeen years old. As a Bahá’í youth, I had grown up with hearing stories about the Bahá’ís who had been executed in Iran because of their Faith, both shortly after the founding of the Bahá’í Faith in the mid-1800s in Iran, as well as after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Learning at 17 that a girl in Iran who was my same age had willingly given up her life to remain steadfast in what she believed gave me strength in my own life to pursue what I believed in. In May of 2012, while in India, I married my wife, herself

an Iranian Bahá'í whose life had also been touched by Mona; her mother and Mona had shared a prison cell. My mother-in-law was one of the few Bahá'í women in prison during that time in Shiraz that were not executed. Hearing personal recollections of Mona, some of which she recalled for me during my time with Mona School, have been some of the most precious moments of my life. Thank you Mitra.

The Beginning of Mona School

When the Taghavi's received the news of Mona's martyrdom, as stated previously it had a deep profound impact on them, as it had on many around the world. The Taghavi's saw Mona as an inspiration, someone who placed importance on the education of children, and who had served in that way. "When we started the school," Mr. Taghavi told me, "Always we were wishing that what Mona has done, or what Mona was doing in Iran...going to orphanages, [teaching] the moral classes for the children, doing so much, we [would also do] in the name of Mona." After securing the building, receiving training on the running of a school, and furnishing the building with the requirements of a school, the Taghavi's opened their school under the name of *Mona Nursery School* in December of 1986 with nine students. The next year they had 35 students, and each year their number increased. "Every year...we had to increase as a natural growth because we had given the admission to the students for the nursery. They had to go to lower kindergarten, [then] they had to go to upper kindergarten," Mr. Taghavi told me.

The school quickly outgrew the initial building which the army officer had rented to Mr. Taghavi, and the school rented buildings that were adjacent to the officer's property so they would have the room to accommodate the growing student population. Eventually the work of the school drew the attraction of a more established Bahá'í friend who had a charitable trust. This friend offered to register the school in the name of the trust for it to be on firmer financial

grounds and purchase a piece of land so the school could build a permanent building of its own, no longer having to rent. At this time, the response of the Indian government to the Taghavi's application for Indian citizenship arrived – they had been approved. The Taghavi's felt confirmed in their decision to stay in India and dedicate their time and energy to the creation of a school.

As of today, Mona School has grown to around 750 students from nursery through what would be the equivalent of tenth grade in the United States, what is called tenth *standard* in India. The school keeps class size at around 50 students and has resisted calls to increase the number of students admitted. In addition to the request to increase the class size, there have also been calls from parents to expand the sections to include the eleventh and twelfth standard as well.

However, the school has decided to keep the school at its current size. This allows for a personal touch with the students that would be lost if the size of the school were to significantly increase; one aspect of the school the parents really appreciate. "They [the parents] really love the personal attention that dad [Mr. Taghavi] gives [to] each and every kid," Royia, Mr. Taghavi's daughter, told me, "He knows about everyone. Just take a name of a student, and he will tell you in which class that student is [in], everything. [He's] like an encyclopedia."

Figure 15

Image of Mona can be seen in the background



Figure 16

*School monogram, highlighting Mona
School's focus on the concept of one
world, one people*



Mona's influence on the school comes through in many ways. The school engages in various service projects meant to better the condition of those in their community¹⁴, inspired by Mona's own service to educating children. Her image is also found in many places throughout the school, along with quotes attributed to her.

The monogram which Mona School has adopted is also a central tenet of the Bahá'í Faith, and thus one of Mona's central beliefs, that the world is one country and that all of humanity are its citizens. This

comes across in the text of the monogram "One World, One People."

One of the proudest moments in the history of Mona School, as related to me by Mr. Taghavi, was the visit of Mona's mother, Farkhundeh, to the school in 2004. This visit was the culmination of events which occurred over the course of nearly 15 years. This sequence of events was told to me by Mr. Taghavi after I had asked a specific question, a question which had been on my mind because of a particular orientation of the Taghavi's I had noticed over the course of my time being involved with the school. Interspersed throughout our conversations, Mr. and Mrs. Taghavi had used language that indicated somehow the spirit of Mona Mahmudnizhad was aiding the school, they used the word *trust* often to express this connection. Mr. Taghavi also told me he had observed several miraculous occurrences which to him were proof that this

¹⁴ More about this is explored in chapter four

indeed was the case. I asked Mr. Taghavi why he felt this way, what he had experienced that led him and his wife to have this firm trust in Mona. What follows is the account he shared with me, prefaced with an orientation towards how *miracles* can be conceptualized in relation to the Bahá'í teachings.

Miracles

While miracles are mentioned in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, two things should be mentioned about them in relation to Mr. Taghavi's experience with Mona School about how they are conceptualized. The first is that the Bahá'í Writings conceptualize miracles as occurrences which cannot break the physical laws governing nature. Perhaps one traditional way of thinking about miracles is that they are a pause from the normal functioning of the laws of reality, an intervention of sorts which puts on pause the normal functioning of our world – a breaking of the law – by some outside force, power, or entity. Such is how David Hume conceptualizes them, stating “nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature” (Hume, 1793). This notion of a miracle is challenged by at least two conceptions in the Bahá'í writings. The first is that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “nature is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order, and to a consummate design, from which it *never* departs” [emphasis my own] (‘Abdu’l-Baha, 2014). The second concept is a statement by Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, where he equivocates the laws of nature *with* the will of God. “Nature *is* God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world” [emphasis mine], Baha'u'llah states, “nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator” (Nuri, 1978). If one were to conceptualize miracles as the intervention of a force – perhaps God – temporarily breaking the laws of nature, according to the Bahá'í conception this would be God breaking the laws of God.

The second point to be made in relation to miracles is that they are given no importance in the Bahá'í writings other than on what they mean to the individual who experiences them. "A miracle may be a proof for the eyewitness," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "but even then, he might not be sure whether what he beheld was a true miracle or mere sorcery."¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to say, "miracles cannot be a conclusive proof, for even if they are valid proofs for those who were present, they fail to convince those who were not" ('Abdu'l-Baha, 2014).

Therefore, the conception of miracles within a Bahá'í understanding does not negate that amazing things can happen that seem to defy expectation, explanation or go against all assumptions of a certain course of action, but rather notes that these occurrences must take place within the laws that govern our reality. At the same time, seemingly miraculous occurrences only hold currency with those who were witness to or experienced them. One cannot expect another individual to be convinced of the miraculous event having taken place, or that the event itself is proof of anything. In fact, it would not be appropriate to relate one's seemingly miraculous event with the intent of doing either of these things. It may also be the case that from one angle, an occurrence can be described in terms of something *miraculous* in the sense that it appears unexplainable, coincidental, unexpected, or great in its effect, while also being able to be described through more rational modes of explanation; they need not necessarily negate one another. It is with this understanding that the following account described to me by Mr. Taghavi must be considered.

Mona's Mother Visits

When asked about the connection between trust in Mona and the work of the school, Mr. Taghavi told me about the events culminating in the visit of Mona's mother to the school in

¹⁵ Magic, as in an illusion that tricks the senses

2004. It's a story that contains many elements which to Mr. Taghavi were signs that Mona was confirming and aiding their efforts to promote the school. What follows is the recollection of a sequence of events which occurred over the span of fourteen years.

In the late 1980s, after Mona School had been registered in the name of a trust belonging to a local Bahá'í, putting the school on firmer financial footing, a piece of land was purchased by that same local Bahá'í, and given to Mona School with the understanding that the cost of the land would be paid back over time. Mona School, in need of funds, sold the land to an individual who had children in Mona School, with the understanding that it would be sold back to the school at a time in the future when the school would need it, as it was adjacent to the property on which the school sat.

Acquisition of the Land

The time came in the 1990s when Mr. Taghavi wished to expand the school and requested the land back from the individual he had sold it to. "It came to my mind, that we have to start [developing] this land to show the progress of the school to the parents and society, [that] the school is not stagnant," Mr. Taghavi told me. During the time this man held the land, he had planned to build a series of residential buildings in the hope that he himself would move there, in part to be closer to the school. He had hired an architect and contractor to make the plan and had proceeded with construction. Mr. Taghavi let him know his wish to buy back the land but was told that the man did not wish to sell the land back. "I was asking the gentleman," Mr. Taghavi recalled, "Will you please give that land back to us? Now the school is expanding, we need that piece of land." The man replied, "No, I want to come and stay next to you because my children are in the school." "I couldn't say anything then," Mr. Taghavi told me. At some point during the construction on the land, the architect and contractor met with an accident. "After that incident,"

Mr. Taghavi said, “he came to me. After almost fourteen years I was repeatedly asking him, and he was denying it.” Mr. Taghavi continued:

He came to me. I had a small office, a very small office. He stood and he looked at me.

He said, ‘you want a piece of land’? I said ‘yes, who doesn’t want’. He said, ‘go and do the legal official work and I will come and sign it’. I thought he was making fun, he was just joking with me because it had become on the tip of my tongue that every time [I saw him] I asked him [to purchase the land], so I didn’t pay attention. Exactly after a month, he came, and he asked me how far the work is completed.

Mr. Taghavi was extremely surprised; he hadn’t taken the man’s offer seriously and had not begun the necessary paperwork to initiate the purchase of the land. The man asked Mr. Taghavi once again if he wanted the land to be able to expand the school. “I said yes, it is my desire, but how much do you want to sell [it for]? He said, ‘I don’t want money’. Mr. Taghavi was taken aback at this statement and asked the man to clarify what he really meant by not wanting any money. The man again insisted that he didn’t want any money for the land, instead explaining that whatever amount Mr. Taghavi wanted to pay for the land, he should instead pay the costs for his daughter’s wedding.¹⁶ This man had three children enrolled in Mona School, two sons and a daughter. The daughter was the same age and in the same class as Mr. Taghavi’s son Sana and the family had grown close to one another. “I said, ‘why should I spend for your daughter?’” Mr. Taghavi continued, “You’re their strong father, you spend! Tell me how much I have to pay!” The man insisted, told Mr. Taghavi to do the paperwork for the transfer of the land and to call him back when it was ready.

¹⁶ Traditionally in India, large dowry costs are born by the bride at time of marriage.

After Mr. Taghavi had collected the appropriate documents, he set a date with the proper government registrar who by law had to see the individuals sign the documents which made the transfer of land official. Mr. Taghavi had the land appraised for its value, made sure he had the money in the account, and drew a check for the amount the land was worth. He met the man at the registrar's office and before the signing of the documents took place, Mr. Taghavi attempted to give the man the check.

He took the check and threw the check there in front of the registrar [who] was very shocked and had thought the man had changed his mind! The registrar asked him what had happened. He told the registrar 'You do your work; I have to sign, and I should tell you that the land belongs to them. It is done'. He signed it, he denied the check and he went. The land became ours from that moment.

Mr. Taghavi collected the check from where it had fallen on the ground and rushed out of the registrar's office in pursuit of his friend, who had already gotten in his car and had begun to drive away. "I said 'you, this check I cannot do anything with that, you have to take it.'" The man refused, when Mr. Taghavi placed the check in the car through the open window, the man promptly threw it back out and drove away. "After that, he said whatever is the price of the land at the time when my daughter wants to get married, pay that to my daughter." Mr. Taghavi acquiesced to the man's request. Six months after the transaction of the land, Mr. Taghavi's friend died.

Many months after the death of this man, his wife approached Mr. Taghavi with a request. Her husband had been a very wealthy man, and very generous with his money, having given loans to many. However, at the time of his death many people did not come to offer their condolences, as was typically the custom. His wife concluded that this was because many of them feared that

they would be requested to pay back the money which this man had loaned to them. “Nobody had come to inquire because they were afraid that they may be called for the return of the loans and the money and all,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “And since he had a very good relation with us, his wife thought that I know with whom he has given the money.” Mr. Taghavi did not know to whom this man had given loans, and apologetically told his wife as such.

The man’s wife continued to explain why she had come to Mr. Taghavi requesting information on who her husband had lent money to. “She told me that in our ritual, and in our custom when the daughter’s father expires, within the year the girl should get married,” Mr. Taghavi explained. “Now for me, the best opportunity is now [to] give my daughter’s hand to someone who is from [a] very good family, they are well established, but they have a demand.” When Mr. Taghavi inquired about the nature of the demand, his wife told him that the groom’s family had requested an amount for the dowry, an amount that she did not have.¹⁷ “I [asked] ‘how much is the requirement’? she said ‘₹nine lakh, Mr. Taghavi told me. “Now again, here you see the confirmation, again you see the plan of God,” Mr. Taghavi expressed with muted wonder, “exactly the amount of the land at that time, market rate, was ₹nine lakhs, and I told her that [amount] is with me.”

She said, ‘no, I don’t want from you’, I said ‘this land, your husband has given [to] me...are you aware? He didn’t share with you’? She said, ‘no, what has happened’? I said, ‘this is the story’...she said ‘no, you’re lying’. I said ‘no, believe me, he told me that I have to spend this amount for his daughter’s marriage, and now how much [do] you want’? She said ₹nine lakhs, and the price of [the] land was also ₹nine lakh. In [a] period

¹⁷ The daughter had graduated from Mona School two years prior.

of one week, we gathered all the money. Me and Sana we went, and we handed it over to them. So, see here, how the things are taking place?

For Mr. Taghavi, that the worth of the land was the same as the cost of the daughter's dowry, and that he could be of assistance to this family during this difficult time was yet another confirmation that his work with the school – especially in relation to the building of the new wing – was on the right path.

The Borewell

Mr. Taghavi had, years before acquiring the land, began drawing up plans for the expansion of the school and once it was acquired, he began the preparation of the land for the construction of a new school building. One of the requirements of the new building would be water and Mr. Taghavi had arranged for the drilling of a borewell on the newly acquired property. Satara district, where Mona School is located, has long suffered from shortages of water (Jagannath, 2014) and large amounts of its populations often live under drought conditions and, at times, rely solely on water tankers bringing in water from outside to survive (Rahman, 2012; Umbrajkar, 2013). Groundwater being a precious resource in the region, scarce and prized, the event of drilling a borewell was both cause for celebration, but also concern, as there was no guarantee that one would find water. It was also an expensive operation, and not something that could easily be repeated in multiple places searching for water out of fear for rising costs. Mona School didn't have the funds to be able to afford multiple drilling sites.

Mona School had hired a government surveyor aided with technology to indicate the best location of water, where the drill would be placed. As the drill was being moved into the proper location, a man approached Mr. Taghavi and asked him what he was doing. Mr. Taghavi replied that they had hired a drill to create a borewell. The man asked if he could come to see the place

where they had placed the drill. “Why?” Mr. Taghavi asked. “He said, ‘I can help you and suggest to you where is the water.’” Mr. Taghavi expressed his disbelief, noting that anyone could tell him to put the drill anywhere, but it doesn’t mean they would find water. The man again insisted that he be allowed to see where they were placing the drill. Mr. Taghavi found himself unexpectedly allowing the man to come to the drill location. “He said, ‘you will not get a drop of water here, there [pointing to another location], the mother of all underground springs is in your land, but that is not here [pointing to where the drill was positioned].’” Mr. Taghavi was astounded, to which the man replied, “Take it from me and put it there, change the position, and if you don’t get this, I will pay for your borewell.”

Mr. Taghavi emphasized to me the difficulty they had taken to arrange the bringing of the equipment, the amount of money they had paid, and the long distance from which the operators of the equipment had travelled to arrive at the property. “This man came, and you know he said, ‘don’t go here, go over there,’” Mr. Taghavi told me, “[The] government surveyor is somebody who is [aided] with technology, and this man, he took one coconut in his hand, with the help of a coconut he said, ‘you will have [water] here.’” Again, the man reiterated that if they drilled and did not find water at that place, he would pay for the entire operation. Mr. Taghavi agreed to the new location and directed the drill operators to move the drill there.

In preparation for the drilling of the borewell, Mr. Taghavi and the staff of the school had gone to the neighbors around the school informing them that they would be drilling, and as it would create a lot of dust, they should shut their doors and windows for the day. “We went and told them that a borewell is going to take place, please close your windows it will be dusty for some time, please forgive us,” Mr. Taghavi told me. It was then time to commence the drilling. The students and teachers at the school had congregated on the property in anticipation of the drilling

and had begun to say various prayers from the Bahá'í writings. As is custom in Indian tradition, Mr. Taghavi took the coconut from the hand of the man who had suggested the new spot and gave it to the most senior teacher on the staff who proceeded to break the coconut over the spot where the drilling was to commence. "When she went to that point to break it, she cleaned the place, she went and bowed down, she prayed there and then broke it," Mr. Taghavi related. The teacher then told Mr. Taghavi that the previous night, she had dreamed of the school "I dreamt that all the people they were celebrating here," the teacher related to Mr. Taghavi, "you had not got water, the happiness of this land had given you the field of oil. And I believe that here will be water," she concluded. As she said this, the man who had suggested to change the location was smiling off to the side.

They began to drill. "You won't believe dear Thaddeus," Mr. Taghavi told me,

they started the machine; everybody closed the door. Till evening it was supposed to be dusty. In half an hour, thirty feet it went down, and water came out. It went to the third floor of the neighbor's [building] and it splashed muddy water up. That man [the operator] immediately he went and switched off the machine. He [asked] 'what is underground? We have punctured a very big pipe'. I said, 'there is no pipe, this is our private land'. He said 'No. Here there is a big, heavy pipe. A very big water pipe which we have punctured'. I said, 'this is not possible'.

The drill operators collected samples of the mud and water that had been expelled from the ground. They examined these samples for traces of iron pipe, but only found natural stone. In the meantime, the water continued to burst through. They capped the well, having found the future school building's important source of water. This experience, to Mr. Taghavi, was another example of the aid of Mona and confirmation of his decision to build an extension of the school

on this land; the fact that they had put their trust in the suggestion of a man who just happened to be walking by the construction site, which led to the discovery of a good source of groundwater.

Construction and Dedication

Before the purchase of the land Mr. Taghavi had an architect draw up plans for a new school building on the land. This architect was known to Mr. Taghavi as he had previously built the Bahá'í center in Satara as well as the initial Mona School building. He had drawn up a very ambitious but beautiful plan which included an air bridge between the original building and the new one, a spiral staircase connecting the various floors of the building, large classrooms, and marble flooring. "It was costing ₹45 lakh"¹⁸, Mr. Taghavi told me, "₹45 lakh was a big amount...I said, wonderful, all this you do it, but we may take it in a ten-year plan." Mr. Taghavi envisioned only the stilt floor of the building being completed while he secured loans from banks to fund the project, at any rate Mr. Taghavi was envisioning a ten-year period in which the project would be completed, being funded little by little.

Mr. Taghavi approached a bank he had previously been in a financial relationship with and let them know that he required ₹5 lakhs to be able to complete the first floor. To Mr. Taghavi's astonishment, they immediately approved his request, bypassing many of the bureaucratic formalities which were customary. In addition, other financial institutions heard that Mona School was seeking loans, and three other banks approached him requesting him to bring their business to the bank, one bank telling him "Why don't you come to us? You are a reputed institution." Once the initial loan was secured, the construction process of the first floor was begun.

¹⁸ About \$40,000 in 2003 US Dollars

“I made an appeal to the parents,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “If they wish to pay the fees in advance of one year, or two years, come forward.” He let parents and supporters of the school know the amount it would cost for each brick, pillar, window, or floor tile. “Everything was taking place in such a manner that I was not knowing how it happened, and from where money came,” Mr. Taghavi described to me, “Fees, admissions poured [in], parents came to help...and two banks they gave me loans.” The work was often continued until as late as 1:00am in the morning. “I was going on the site and telling the neighbors ‘Please forgive us for the noise we make, it is a school, we have to complete it, please bear with us.’”

For whom we were working, we were not knowing, why we are completing [project milestones] so [quickly] one after the other I was not knowing...The thing which we wanted to do it in plan of ten years, we did it in eleven months...[a] four story building with the bridge...which was the highlight of the structure. And so beautiful it had come, and everywhere state of art at that time, marble stones and all.

Mr. Taghavi was absolutely astonished at how quickly the project had come together, he was at a loss to say why or how it had happened that way. Then, just as the interior tiling of the structure had been completed, the news arrived of the visit of Mona Mahmudnizhad’s mother to India with a party of 72 Bahá’ís from Iran who were visiting the Bahá’í House of Worship in New Delhi.

“When we started the school,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “Always, we were wishing...it was our desire that every time, what the school does, it should reach to the ears of Mona’s mother.” The Taghavi’s hearts leapt with the opportunity to invite Mrs. Mahmudnizhad to visit Mona School. They called the Bahá’í National Center in Delhi to see if there was a way they could be put in touch with Mona’s mother. The person who picked up the phone on the other end was Mr. Afshin, the same individual who had originally encouraged the Taghavi’s to stay in India and

start the school. Mr. Afshin had just arrived at the national center and had put his bags down when he heard the phone ringing. As there was nobody there looking after the phone, he decided to answer. “As soon as he picked up the phone, I recognized his voice,” Mr. Taghavi said. Mr. Taghavi told Mr. Afshin that he had heard Mona’s mother was visiting India. “He said ‘yes, I’m with them, and unfortunately seventy of them are asked to leave India because they have problem with the visa, and only two are left.’” The two who were allowed to remain in India were Mrs. Mahmudnizhad and another who was her travelling companion – her daughter Taraneh.

Mr. Taghavi expressed to Mr. Afshin his desire to have Mona’s mother visit the school, to which – much to Mr. Taghavi’s elation – Mr. Afshin replied, “tomorrow I’m coming to Pune, I’ll bring her along.” “The next day in the evening,” Mr. Taghavi said, “we received Mrs. Mahmudnizhad from Pune airport. Mr. Afshin went to Panchgani, and we brought Mrs. Mahmudnizhad to Satara. The Taghavi’s had always hoped that one day Mrs. Mahmudnizhad would visit Satara so that she “would know that in Satara, there is a school which is in the name of her daughter, and [that] what her daughter was doing in Iran the same pattern we are following here.” They also had always thought about what they would give Mrs. Mahmudnizhad as a gift if she did come to visit. It struck Mr. Taghavi like a bolt of inspiration when he realized that this is why the building of the new wing of the school had advanced so quickly. “When she came to Satara, we had something to give her,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “And that was the new wing of Mona School, in the best state and most fashionable.”

Figure 17

Mr. Taghavi (left), Mrs. Mahmudnizhad (center), Mrs. Taghavi (right) in Satara



Mrs. Mahmudnizhad had the initial plan to stay in Satara for two days but ended up staying for eight. “We took her to the orphanages, to all those places which we were going and [had been] the trend of Mona,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “She shared with us so many stories of Mona...[and] many parents in the school received the blessing of her.” As he was showing Mr.

Mahmudnizhad around Satara, he told her of the school’s beginning, and how the first class consisted of nine students. Two days after she arrived in Satara, Mona School decided to inaugurate the new building, even though it was not 100% complete. Parents of the children in the school were invited and the Taghavi’s also invited the Bahá’ís from surrounding towns, villages, and cities; including Pune, Panchgani, and Kolhapur. During the meeting for the inauguration, Mrs. Mahmudnizhad leaned over to Mr. Taghavi, who was sitting next to her, and asked him if the nine students who were in the first ever class would be in attendance, she said that she wanted to see them. “I said [to myself] ‘Oh my God!’” Mr. Taghavi told me about that moment of embarrassment, “I have not, [I have] forgotten, it didn’t come to my mind, I have to call them. I didn’t. I was...I was so regretful why I didn’t do that.” As Mr. Taghavi was in the middle of a race of thoughts containing both regret and a search for how he could bring those students to the school to meet Mona’s mother, something caught the attention of all those who were in attendance. “The speaker stopped, then all the heads went [to] that side,” Mr. Taghavi

described, “they saw these nine children together with a big bouquet of flowers, they were coming up front.” Mr. Taghavi had not yet finished his conversation with Mrs. Mahmudnizhad regarding whether these original students would be in attendance when these former students arrived to present a bouquet of flowers to Mona’s mother. “Nobody called them,” Mr. Taghavi told me, not knowing how they learned about the inauguration and arranged to attend, “I had not [yet] answered her whether I had called [the former students to come] or not, [when] they came, they reached...she asked me ‘are they your first batch of students’? Tear was coming [motions a tear falling from his eye] I said ‘yes.’”

This experience for Mr. Taghavi

Figure 18

was a very powerful one. For him

it was a significant confirmation

of his efforts in establishing a

school in Mona’s name. It also

was a confirmation of his strong

belief that Mona was somehow

assisting the school’s

development. “See,” Mr. Taghavi

told me, “The mother of a martyr

Mrs. Mahmudnizhad cutting the ribbon for the dedication of the new wing of Mona School



desires something, the martyr makes it available...you are [asking] why we have the belief in

Mona? Because it was the desire of the mother and it happened. It was our desire and Mona

made it for us.”

Many such miracles in the school I have seen which I very strongly believe that we are an instrument, and it is run all by Him. Many ups and downs, not being a son of the soil, you

will be under pressure so much, you will be under trials so much not knowing the language.¹⁹ And wherever I speak, also in Marathi, even my children also have been told that ‘you are a foreigner’, though they are born and brought up in India. This is something that, you know, it was a great challenge. All these things took place in a manner that the school can very smoothly run. What can it be other than the force of Almighty? The guidance of Almighty? To whomsoever I [tell], it is just like a story, which is really something that [they] can’t believe has happened.

Decision-Making Matrix

As stated above, these experiences that Mr. Taghavi shared with me, that for him were obvious signs – miraculous events – confirmed for him that he was being assisted on a path. Whether or not they have the same impact on someone else who hears them is not really a matter of concern. These experiences

Figure 19

Mrs. Taghavi (left), Mrs. Mahmudnizhad (center), and Taraneh Mahmudnizhad (right) next to a plaque memorializing the occasion



have bolstered the Taghavi's in challenging times, and the trust they have that they are being assisted has been central to their decision making at crucial times in the school's development.

¹⁹ For an anecdote which describes how the school has found an unexpected ally of the school in the descendant of Shivaji Maharaj, the prominent Maratha King, please see Appendix A.

This trust has served as a rope on which they could hold onto during the strong winds of uncertainty that would whip them from time to time. For example, this trust was at the heart of the school's posture during the pandemic year in relation to its relationship to the parents, especially in relation to the payment of fees. Parents at times in the school's history, had come to its aid – such as during the construction of the new wing in 2003-2004, and now they school could come to the aid of many of the parents who were suffering because of the COVID-19 pandemic by allowing parents to not pay fees if they could not afford to, despite the hardships this would bring to the school.²⁰

Of course, one of the most prominent ways in which Mona School is influenced by Mona Mahmudnizhad is the importance placed on the moral, or spiritual, education of the children in the school. Moral education stands at the heart of Mona School's efforts to educate its children, and the conceptual framework from which Mona School draws its inspiration for its moral education is directly inspired by the writings of the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'í Inspired Nature of the School

Mona School is directly inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and all who enroll in the school understand that their children will be receiving an education that includes moral education inspired by the teachings found in the Bahá'í Writings. An explanation is given to all parents who wish to enroll their students in the school which makes it clear to them that the school is inspired directly by the principles of the Bahá'í Faith. Mr. Taghavi explained to me the nature of the conversations that he has with parents who are interested in enrolling their children in Mona School. Before Mr. Taghavi invites the parents into his office, he first lets them see a photo of Mona Mahmudnizhad and read short description about who Mona was and how she inspires the

²⁰ This is discussed in more detail in chapter eight.

school. “They get acquainted with the word Bahá’í, as it is mentioned that Mona is a young Bahá’í martyr,” Mr. Taghavi told me about the parents who come to the school. “They become anxious to know what is Bahá’í, who is Mona.” He then will invite the parents into his office and describe to them the procedures for admission, and the logistical nature of education at the school. He has photographs of both Mona and the Lotus Temple, the latter which he often uses to introduce the Bahá’í Faith.

Figure 20

Bahá’í House of Worship in New Delhi, commonly referred to as the Lotus Temple. Copyright ©

Bahá’í International Community



The Lotus Temple is a widely recognized building throughout India, and the world. Holding the world record for the world’s tallest building shaped like a lotus (Records, 1986), it is comparable with the Taj Mahal in terms of the numbers of people visiting annually (Sugden, 2012), and is listed by UNESCO as holding “outstanding universal value” (UNESCO, Bahá’í House of

Worship at New Delhi, 2014). A rather ludicrous example of the ubiquity of the Lotus Temple is its role in the inspiration in 2019 of the creation of a ring made up of 7,777 diamonds (figure 21), holding the world record for the most diamonds ever set in one ring (Records, 2019). In 2011 the Indian government launched a global tourist campaign with the tag line of *Incredible India* (figure 21) which used, among other well-known tourist locations, photos of the Lotus Temple (Service B. W. 2011). As a personal anecdote, when I was living in India, I can recall walking into a stationary shop to buy a notebook and finding amongst a wall of notebooks with all conceivable photos on their covers, several which had a photo of the Lotus Temple on the front.

Figure 21

Examples of Lotus Temple in social consciousness



Note. Left: Photo of the Lotus Temple being used as part of India's "Incredible India" campaign on the side of a bus in Ottawa, Canada (Bahá'í World News Service, 2011). Right: Photo of Guinness world record holder for most diamonds set in a ring (Records, 2019).

Mr. Taghavi's use of the photo of the Lotus Temple often draws recognition among the parents who are seeking admission, even among those who have never heard of the Bahá'í Faith; many have even visited the temple. Mr. Taghavi uses this familiar structure to explain the Bahá'í

principle of the unity of all religions, and how that is upheld within the education the school offers its students. He then proceeds to explain the Bahá'í concept of the unity of humanity, how we all belong to one family. He makes a point of mentioning that no matter from which background the student comes from, whether it be race, caste, or religion, that all are treated equally, and the students are encouraged to treat all equally. “[Then] I keep on talking to them about the importance given to moral education,” Mr. Taghavi explained, “and we believe that if the morality of the children is upright, right from the tender age...they become as an asset for the betterment of the people.”

Mr. Taghavi also mentioned that often parents wish to know more about the Bahá'í Faith, and if so, he continues to share with them Bahá'í conception of the station of Baha'u'llah – the founder of the Bahá'í Faith – as the promised one of all ages, for Hindus the Kalki Avatar, for Buddhists the second coming of Buddha and for Muslims the one that they have been waiting for.²¹

“Sometimes it goes on for a longer time, their friends come, and they ask questions, and their questions are answered.” He has pamphlets at the ready to hand out to interested parents who wish to know more about the Bahá'í Faith. These pamphlets have on their cover a picture of the Lotus Temple and include the address of the official Bahá'í website if they wish to know more.

In short, whosoever comes to the school, they get to know that this is a Bahá'í inspired school, [that] this school is *not* named after my daughter, it is named after Mona the martyr...and [that] the principles of the school are in accordance with the principles of the Bahá'í Faith. In this way a small introduction is given at the time of admission to the parents who are seeking admission.

²¹ For more on Baha'u'llah's relationship to Mohammad, please see Fananapazir (2007). For more on Baha'u'llah's relationship to founders of other religions, please see Dehgani (2022), or Hatcher (1990).

Thus, parents are informed from the very beginning that moral education is inherently woven into the education students receive at Mona School.

Moral Education

This conception of education – one which sees the moral component as inseparable from the act of educating itself – manifested itself in many ways throughout my involvement with Mona School.²² From interviews to examples of community engagement and even what content was highlighted on the school’s public facing Facebook page, this aspect of education was infused throughout. “Moral curriculum is an integral part of their [the students’] activities,” Royia told me. Prior to the pandemic, there was a form of moral education for standards one through ten which was a combination of formal class spaces, and school assemblies which saw the combination of dance, drama and collective exploration of a virtue every week which all those in the school environment would strive to practice over the course of the week.²³ In relation to the school assemblies, a moral capability – or virtue – would be chosen each week by the teachers. Quotations related to the capability chosen would be introduced to the students at the assembly. “The quotations [come] just from the Bahá’í Writings, they know it’s a Bahá’í School, all the teachers have accepted, so they relate themselves to just the Bahá’í quotations,” Royia described to me.

Moral capability, spiritual capacity, virtue, and quality are all words I use synonymously within this study. They refer to a particular conception of the development of the human being which directs Mona School’s approach towards moral education – a conception itself directly inspired by the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith. Rather than understanding virtues or qualities as rational constructs solely generated by inter-subjective agreement between a certain number of

²² To see how moral capabilities influenced the school’s administration in relation to fees, see chapter eight

²³ For more on the school assemblies, see chapter five.

individuals, the Bahá'í Faith conceptualizes virtues as spiritual capacities which are inherent within the soul of each human being. These spiritual capabilities lie latent within individuals in a state of potentiality, it is through the act of education that they become uncovered and strengthened. Humans of course use their rational faculties to explore these spiritual capacities, but they are *as* embedded into the fabric of reality as the physical laws which govern the natural world. Each human has the potential capacity to be able to exhibit justice, love, truth worthiness, truthfulness, honesty etc...., all of which are described as spiritual in nature. Education, when viewed from this perspective, becomes as much a process of discovery as it does of the transmission of knowledge or information. A metaphor used in the Bahá'í writings to explore this concept is that of a mine, the human being is a mine full of gems, and it is the role of education to discover these gems. Thus, while the words virtue, quality, spiritual capacity, and moral capability are, as said above, used synonymous throughout this work, my preferred term is *moral capability*. I choose this for a few reasons. To begin, the word *moral* is more accessible to a wider audience. The word *spiritual* would bring ideas quite variant into the minds of those reading, although Mona School would see the word *moral* as synonymous with *spiritual*. In the worldview of a Bahá'í, to be moral *is* to be spiritual. When one is being just, they are exhibiting *spiritual* behavior. When one tells the truth, they are acting *spiritually*. However, this understanding of the word is not universal, and the word spiritual is associated with a wide range of behaviors ranging from the esoteric to the ritualistic. However, it is more generally understood what is meant by *moral* behavior, hence my preference for it within this study. I prefer to use *capability* because it implies something that can be acquired, learned, strengthened, and acted upon.

Another key component of moral education within the Bahá'í Faith is that talk that ends with just talk is insufficient, rather it should lead to action. If we are *capable* of doing something, it implies an action has been taken to practice it, and that an action can be taken because of our capability to do it. Thus, we see Mona School, at least prior to the restrictions placed on it because of the pandemic, engaged in various forms of social action, allowing its students to practically apply the moral qualities which the school emphasizes. This is explored in chapter four.

Mona School, although inspired by the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, makes no attempt to teach within the curriculum of the school a general history of the Bahá'í Faith, or knowledge of its founders. Rather, the school takes inspiration from the principles found within the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith and includes various quotations and prayers in various places throughout its educative process.

Dipika, one of the teachers who is not herself a Bahá'í, shed light on Mona School's orientation as a Bahá'í inspired school in this way. "The school [is a] Bahá'í inspired school, they also believe in one God, one world one God," Dipika told me, "The motto is also there, 'one world one people.'" She continued, "India [has] casteism, no? Many castes are there [in the school], many races, every background [of] the students are there," she told me, "Never we talk about the caste, casteism is not there. We treat everyone as an equal." She said that the school was very particular in creating an atmosphere in which inequalities were not highlighted. This doesn't mean that the challenges of society are ignored. The school engages in discussions about many social issues and students engage in many different activities highlighting social inequalities and

other issues in society,²⁴ but rather the school is conscious of creating an atmosphere of equity in which all are treated as noble human beings.

It was not a specific question of mine, nor did I ever ask directly about moral education in my interviews, however often when students or teachers were asked to reflect on the nature of education within Mona School, they raised its moral component. “Education is not only about academics,” Chitra, a teacher of the tenth standard told me, “It is more, much more. It is spiritual growth, it is [the] overall personality development of a student.” This vocabulary of education as being something that directly is tied to the development of personality was a theme that came up repeatedly in my interviews with those at Mona School. “We are living in a fast-paced society where moral values are deteriorated,” Chitra told me on another occasion. “These moral values, it has made them [the students] very strong, they have learned to overcome the problems of their lives.” She noted that it was often after the children left the school that they realized the importance of the moral foundation that the school had given them. “They have realized what patience is, they have realized what perseverance is, they have realized what brotherhood is. So, all these qualities have really helped in shaping the personality.”

Others teachers attributed these qualities with the definition of a *good* human. “We not only educate them,” Aarushi told me, “But we try to make them good human beings, and we conduct moral classes for them. And along with academics, we put more stress on their moral values.” Another teacher, Lata, told me that nobody wants their child to be a bad human being, they all want them to be good. She explained to me the importance of the school in helping to inculcate those values, and that she saw them grow in the children as they progressed through the

²⁴ See chapter five for more

standards of the school, and that if they were away from the school for a time, they would also be “lagging behind” upon their return.

I asked Lata to explain more about what she understood as a good human being to be. She told me that it meant that wherever the child would go in society, they would not see only what would benefit themselves, rather “they will want to serve the society.” She also saw a good human being as one that would not cause harm to others in any sense “not physical, mental or any – economical, means any type, they should not give any harm.” She also described to me a good human as one that should not use anyone else, but rather “when they are thinking about themselves, at that time they should think about society also, other people.” “You can teach a child how to be united,” Royia told me, “Or, at the same time, you can teach a child how to hate...the school actually plays a very important role.” The children in the school, Royia said, were the future of tomorrow’s nation: “We instill in them the values that are necessary, so then they will be a cause of unification.”

Figure 22

Geographical context for the location of Mona School



Note. Mona School is located in Satara, a city of around 326,000 inhabitants in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Nestled in the mountain range known as the Western Ghats, it is a picturesque city which lies next to fields and mountains, one of the teachers I interviewed described it to me as a “mini-Switzerland” that is extremely beautiful and moderate in climate.

Figure 23

The City of Satara (Pratish Khedekar, Wikimedia Commons)



Mona School finds itself striving to inculcate the principal of unity in diversity during a time in India's national ethos when the concept of a secular state in which citizens of diverse linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds are considered equal is being assailed by forces of division which cast certain populations as Indian, and others as invaders from the outside (Flaten, 2019). Mona School emphasizes unity in diversity and engages its students in many activities that highlight the beauty of the diverse cultures throughout India.²⁵ Moral education is considered by Mona School to be essential.

Students also saw moral education as central to their educational experience in Mona School.

When I asked Garima in the ninth standard what she expected to get from spending so much time

²⁵ examples can be seen in chapter six.

and energy on education she replied by telling me “I just want to be a good human being. That’s all I expect from education, I want to be a good human being who makes my parents feel proud.” I asked her to describe her vision of a good human being and she replied, “We should have a good character, and good values. This forms a good human being. Of course, education at some point [also] helps the students to grow better in some fields.”

Students mentioned different moral capabilities in relation to their description of a good character. Garima told me, “All the moral values, like truthfulness, being honest, not to be fooled by flattery, and serving the mankind” are all part of a good character. This notion of *service* also was expressed by many students and teachers alike. “Always Mona School is at the forefront in helping the people who are in need,” Chitra, a teacher of the tenth standard, told me “This social service activity is also in the forefront in Mona School...we give visits to old age homes and mentally challenged students”.²⁶ “This is one plus point of our school,” Deepti, in the sixth standard, told me, “That they don’t only teach us the book knowledge, but they also teach us how to behave in the atmosphere and in the society.” Deepti described to me one act she had taken to be of service to those around her, something that Mona School encourages within its students. She and her mother had sewn and distributed over 2000 masks to those around her, free of cost. She said they would give the masks to “the man who sells the watermelons, and the vegetable seller, and the poor people, and the bin man.”

²⁶ For an exploration of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Mona School’s ability to engage in social action, please see chapter five.

Figure 24

Masks made by Deepti and her mother to be distributed to others during the pandemic (personal communication)



These descriptions of the importance placed on the development of the character of the child are practical expressions of the point made in the Bahá'í writings about the primacy of a good character over knowledge of the arts and sciences. “A child that is cleanly, agreeable, of good character, well-behaved – even though he be ignorant,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “is preferable to a child that is rude, unwashed, ill-natured, and yet becoming deeply versed in all the sciences and the arts.” The reason for the primacy of the good character over the acquisition of knowledge alone ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, is because the child who conducts themselves well, even if they remain ignorant, can still be of benefit to others, “while an ill-natured, ill-behaved child is corrupted and harmful to others, even though he be learned.” Of course, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

concludes, if a child “be both learned and good, the result is light upon light” (Abbas, 2010 p. 190). Dipika, one of the teachers, told me that parents had even at times been corrected by their children about proper behavior that they had learned in the school. “The parents, they also told [me],” Dipika said, “if sometimes we say something wrong, our children correct us. ‘My Miss is not teaching like this’, ‘my Miss told me to be truthful, God is watching us. How can you tell like that mama? We should not do like that.’”

Discipline

One word that came up in multiple contexts, in response to various questions throughout my interviews, and often in the same sentence with moral education was *discipline*. It became clear that all the actions which Mona School took in relation to the pandemic occurred within a context where discipline was both thought of as a praiseworthy quality and one which had been practiced by the students since the first day, they entered the school. “People know our school for its discipline and its moral values,” Royia told me, “This is [how] our school is different from the other schools.” I personally witnessed this discipline in many ways. The most notable element for me was the timeliness with which teachers and students showed up for interviews. Not one of those whom I interviewed was late. One had technical difficulties but was in touch with me about it via WhatsApp and we rescheduled for another time. Other than that, *all* my interview subjects arrived on time. Similarly, of the fourteen different classes I observed on Zoom, all of them began on time. None of them were delayed. Manjari, one of the teachers, specifically mentioned time when I asked her to further describe what she meant by discipline when it came up in our conversation. “About time sir,” she said, “about submission of assignments...and writing work, and good teaching.” Other elements were described to me by teacher and student alike.

One place where discipline came up in nearly every interview with the teachers was when I asked about Mona School's reputation in Satara. It was almost universally described to me that people understood the school was disciplined. In fact, one teacher told me that this was on her mind when she was applying to work there. "Everyone knows that [Mona School is disciplined]," Lata mentioned, "and so before going [to apply] I was a little bit afraid [whether] I can adjust with the school or not, I didn't know, but as I joined, I [realized I] could do that."

Hemakshi, another teacher, described elements of the discipline at Mona School as: "A child has to come to school in a well-dressed uniform, [they] should be clean, with all work completed, [they] have to be punctual." "They are very punctual," Royia told me, "Once they get into Mona School, they know they have to be punctual and disciplined, there is no way out."

Royia told me that it was Mona School's reputation for discipline that brought many parents to want to enroll their children in the school. As part of the enrollment process, parents fill out a questionnaire that includes a question about why they want their students to enroll in the school. Parents often indicate that one of the reasons is due to the discipline which Mona School helps instill in their students. "They love their kids to be disciplined," Royia described to me, "and about the moral values, because no other school in Satara gives that to the kids." Shalini, a teacher of three- to five-year-old's, told me that parents had expressed to her the difference they had seen in their children after a few years in the school.

The parents, they themselves when they admit their child, just after one or two years they start getting the same experience, and they share with us also. They, their relatives, and all, when they compare the children of other relatives they say 'yes, something is different in our child' so that is great to hear from them.

I asked many of the students who mentioned the word discipline to explain what they meant by it. It was my impression that being asked to articulate what it meant was a new experience for them. In some cases, there was silence as they thought, others worked out their thought as they were explaining. I began to feel as if discipline had become a kind of catch phrase in relation to Mona School. Something that all associated *with* Mona School but had never stopped to conceptualize or reflect on its meaning. As one example of a student working out its meaning, we can see Harpreet's thoughts in response to my asking her to ask what she meant by discipline.

When I think of discipline, all the thing that comes to my mind is knowing what you're doing and doing whatever you're doing in a very proper manner...I've seen students, my friends, who are not from my school. They are my friends and they're very different, they are not that disciplined. That means that they...don't know what they're doing. They are very messy in all those things that they do. They don't put forth the effort, or they don't put their time into making the things that they do with perfection. They don't want to do it with perfection because they don't want to give the time that it needs. So, a disciplined child will always give whatever it takes, all efforts it takes into whatever the child is doing, while I think a child that is not disciplined will not put all that [is needed] for doing a certain thing in a proper way, in a proper manner.

Udai used the word strict to describe Mona School, but not in a pejorative fashion. Surprisingly, when I asked him why he thought people wanted to go to Mona School and he replied, "because the school is strict." "Strict?" I replied. He continued

Udai: My friends who are in a different school they [say] 'your school is [more] strict than ours'. But I tell them, like our school is not, but they hesitate [to agree].

Me: Are there reasons why your friends say that Mona School is strict?

Udai: Like our school, we have more writing. Like, uh, if [their] school completes the revision once, we complete it thrice or twice.

Saurabh in the sixth standard described the discipline at Mona School as physical cleanliness and development of moral behavior. There was an emphasis on the cleanliness and proper cutting of their hair, as well as the way in which they interacted with everyone in the school. Bhagyashri in the ninth standard also noted cleanliness in relation to my questioning what she meant by discipline. “The strictness we see in Mona School is not anywhere else,” she told me

I will say that the homework, which every day we are given is checked regularly by our teachers. Even the cleanliness of our clothes, shoes, nails, haircut for boys, everything is checked regularly. And this is what makes our school unique.

Several students described discipline as strict adherence to the rules of the school, while others described it as focus and attention paid to everything that one does in their life. Deepti in the sixth standard described discipline in relation to how one should treat others. “We should be like a good child,” she said. “This means we shouldn’t beat anyone; we shouldn’t harm anyone; we should help everyone when they are in difficulties.” Garima in the ninth standard also connected discipline with character. “According to me,” she said, “discipline is where you have a very good character, which our school molds us in a very good way to have it.”

As a practical example of discipline enacted in the larger student body, when the students returned to physical classes in early 2021, teachers noted to me how controlled the students were in their behavior. Chitra, a teacher of the tenth standard, noticed how the students were extremely disciplined in wearing masks, they didn’t remove them. “They followed whatever instructions were given to them,” she told me. “They were having their own sanitizer, they were sitting in their own place, and of course they were very attentive.”

The government of Maharashtra required the school to be inspected twice before it could open back up physically in early 2021. The first inspection was to make sure the school was well prepared, having followed the requirements of the standard operating procedures, the second inspection being on a day when the students were in session to make sure the students were behaving in accordance with proper protocol. Mr. Taghavi told me that the inspectors were impressed with the discipline of both the school in following all the requirements of the SOP of the government, but also the behavior of the school in following the norms of social distancing, hand washing and mask wearing. “It was a great astonishment for them,” Mr. Taghavi said about the inspectors after they had seen how the children were behaving themselves, “that the school could manage in this way...they were amazed to see how the children are following...you know they had distance with each other, leaving the class and coming in a very proper row, in a proper discipline.” The word discipline also often came alongside the words excellence and perfection, two other qualities which were highly prized by the school and which they strove to inculcate in the student population.

Conclusion

From its humble beginnings in a house with just nine students, to a school which now consists of multiple buildings and nearly 800 students, the Taghavi’s have seen incredible results proceed from their decision to remain in India and not relocate to Canada. Through the journey of the Taghavis’, they have witnessed occurrences at the school which for them signal that they are on the right path and are somehow being assisted by Mona herself. Following in her footsteps, they have built a school that has the express purpose to strengthen the moral capabilities within the student population. This purpose, however, was challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic,

and the school suddenly found itself having to navigate in uncharted waters. We turn to this experience in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: The Pandemic & Shifting to Online Education

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented shutdown of schools around the world leading to an incredible number of children who suddenly found themselves without an educational institution to attend. This chapter offers a brief exploration of how the Indian government dealt with its educational institutions because of the pandemic. It considers specifically the response of the government of Maharashtra – the state where Mona school is located. Within this national and state-level context, we then consider the specific experience of Mona School and how they navigated the winds of change which blew upon them, fanned by governmental policy, public health considerations and educational needs of the students. On March 12th of 2020 the chief minister of Delhi announced the closure of all schools in the nation's capital through the end of the month. This was followed a few hours later by the governments of the states of Uttarakhand, Manipur and Chhattisgarh also announcing the closure of their schools through March 31st (Correspondents, 2020). The government of Maharashtra followed with an announcement on March 14th that schools would be closed in the state through March 31st as a means by which to combat the spread of the coronavirus (PTI, 2020c). On March 16th, the government of India announced the closure of all educational institutions throughout the country through March 31st (TOI-Online, 2020). The closing of schools in India saw nearly 300 million children across the nation suddenly not have access to their schools (UNESCO, 2020).

Many did not foresee the length of time which the schools would remain closed, and assumed that they would resume after March 31st, the date until which the government had said they initially would remain closed. However, on March 24th, the prime minister of India announced a three-week country-wide lockdown – an unprecedented move at that time among all the

countries of the globe. “There will be a total ban on coming out of your homes,” prime minister Narendra Modi stated on national television (Gettleman & Schultz, 2020). India’s lockdown announcement was made a mere four hours before it went into effect, which threw the entire country into confusion and led many to criticize the lack of preparation, planning and coordination in its implementation (Kumar & Choudhury, 2021). On April 14, 2020, Narendra Modi told the Indian nation that the current lockdown would be extended through May 3rd as a further attempt to control the spread of the pandemic. This extension added to the economic hardship many throughout India, in particular the migrant workers who found themselves stranded throughout the country (Biswas, 2020; Kapoor, 2020).

As the lockdown wore on, economic hardships also affected the schools and pressure was placed on schools to not demand the payment of tuition fees from students.²⁷ It also caused questions regarding examinations, a key means by which students are advanced to subsequent years in their education (Sharma, 2020a). The closing of schools in India on March 16th came in the middle of the end of year exams, which were seemingly postponed when the schools were closed. Varsha Gaikwad, Maharashtra’s minister of education, announced on March 20th the cancellation of all end-of-year exams for standards 1-8; they would automatically be promoted to the next grade, with exams for class 9th and 11th to be conducted after April 15th (ANI, 2020). On April 11, 2020 – three days prior to the national lockdown extension – the state of Maharashtra extended its own lockdown through April 30th (Kunju, 2020). A day after the lockdown was extended, what seemed like a temporary break from exams turned into a flat cancellation as Gaikwad announced that the end of year exams for 9th, 10th and 11th standards had all been cancelled (Gaikwad, 2020a).

²⁷ For more on this phenomenon, refer to chapter eight.

As the May 3rd date for the ending of the lockdown approached, the government announced once again on May 1st that it would be extended through May 18th (Frayer, 2020), this extension came even as diligence in adhering to the conditions of the lockdown had loosened around the country as people once again began to coming outside their homes (Gettleman & Schultz, 2020b). The Indian government once again extended its lockdown on May 18th, 2020, through the end of that month, although various states throughout the country could choose when and how to remove restrictions on various economic activities (Zargar, 2020). The government once again extended the lockdown for a fourth time on May 31st, with it set to end on June 8th, but giving the states control to phase out their own lockdowns as desired. Maharashtra, along with several other states, decided to extend their own lockdown through June 30th, while simultaneously allowing a slow expansion of allowed activities; this did not include the opening of educational institutions (Desk, E.W. 2020). This phased lifting of restrictions came even as India was seeing an alarmingly high number of COVID patients (Schultz & Yasir, 2020).

Maharashtra once again extended its lockdown to July 31st, due to the continued high case load, although it was not as strict as the initial national lockdowns, with marriages and funerals being able to have 50 attendees, and a host of economic activities once again being able to resume, although with restrictions to make sure large numbers would not congregate in any one space (Sutar, 2020). Once again, the Maharashtrian government extended its lockdown another month through August 31 (PTI, 2020a), and again through September 31st, but this time with significant easing of restrictions (Rai, 2020). Again, the lockdown was extended through October 31st, but this time with restaurants being able to open at 50% capacity and the opening of rail travel throughout the state, although schools were requested to remain closed (Reporter, 2020). The lockdown was extended through November 31st, although it barely resembled the lockdown at

the beginning of the pandemic, as more and more activities were once again able to resume, and the number of individuals able to congregate together in one space was significantly increased (Kumar S., 2020). As the lockdown was once again extended through December 31, the government allowed the opening of places of worship, and the return to school for standards 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th (Soni, 2020). The lockdown was extended monthly through the end of January 2021 (PTI, 2020b; Banerjee, 2021), and then into the first week of March in certain cities throughout the state (Team, 2021).

Thus, Maharashtra entered on March 24th, 2020, an initial lockdown which would last nearly one year, and which saw 14 different phases. As the initial lockdown was extended, and then extended once again, it became increasingly uncertain as to when children would be able to come back to school. Responses by educational institutions to the school closures was greatly diverse and many apps and online portals were created, or further developed, which allowed individuals to guide themselves through various classes (Jena, 2020).

Table 3

Lockdown Timelines in India and Maharashtra

National India Lockdown Timeline	
Lockdown 1.0	March 24 – April 14, 2020
Lockdown 2.0	April 14 – May 3, 2020
Lockdown 3.0	May 1 – May 18, 2020
Lockdown 4.0	May 18 – May 31, 2020
Lockdown 5.0	May 31 – Phased Reopening varying by state

Table 3 (cont.)

Continuing Lockdown in Maharashtra	
Lockdown 5.0	May 31 – June 30, 2020
Lockdown 6.0	June 30 – July 31, 2020
Lockdown 7.0	July 31 – August 31, 2020
Lockdown 8.0	August 31 – September 30, 2020 – with significant relaxation of restrictions.
Lockdown 9.0	September 30 – October 31, 2020
Lockdown 10.0	October 31 – November 30, 2020
Lockdown 11.0	November 30 – December 31, 2020
Lockdown 12.0	December 31 – January 31, 2021
Lockdown 13.0	January 31, February 28, 2021
Lockdown 14.0	February 28 – March 8, 2021 – certain cities throughout Maharashtra

The Reopening of Schools in Maharashtra

The reopening of schools in Maharashtra after their announced closure on March 14 of 2020 was a process that was burdened and delayed by uncertainty at the governmental level. Part of the challenge was the sheer diversity of conditions under which schools operate in India. From dense urban populations, to isolated remote villages, circumstances differed immensely throughout the state. As schools awaited guidance from the government about how to move forward, myriad approaches were undertaken by institutions across the state. Those who had the infrastructure, moved towards online sessions on mobile devices and laptops (Correspondent, 2020), while those schools in more rural areas where device access was difficult and internet infrastructure

was less developed, or in some cases nonexistent, provisions were put in place to reach students via television and radio programming (Government of India, 2020), although the content was largely restricted to the pre-primary – 2nd grade students (Department of School, Education & Literacy, 2020 pp. 111-112).

As the lockdown wore on, public sentiment around online education, in particular the amount of time students were spending on a screen, began to be a concern (Nair, 2020). This was particularly true for children seven years and under, where some online classes for this age group were running several hours daily (Das, 2020). On June 15th, 2020, the Office of the Chief Minister of Maharashtra announced on Twitter that the new school year would go ahead and begin “through digital and online platforms on a pilot project basis” (Maharashtra, C, 2020). The government issued an SOP – standard operating procedure – in relation to how schools should move forward. It covered both how the online classes should be initiated, and how schools could physically reopen if certain conditions related to the coronavirus had been met, namely that there had been zero cases of coronavirus for a month in the general area surrounding the school.

Regarding online education, the SOP noted that for the pre-primary (kindergarten), first and second standard students “online methods should not be used,” instead it encouraged the use of the “available educational programs on the radio.” It also stated that third through fifth standards should meet no longer than an hour a day, sixth through eighth standards two hours per day and three hours per day for ninth – twelfth standards (Government of Maharashtra, 2020a).

In response to the apparent blanket ban on online education for students from pre-primary – 2nd standard, a social media campaign was launched with the hashtag of #righttolearn where parents from Maharashtra were joined with those from the states of Karnataka, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, where similar bans had also been enacted. This model of campaign was called a *Tweet*

Storm in which during a four-hour period on June 21st, 2020, as many tweets using the hashtag as possible were generated. The online protest focused on three rights which parents said had been violated by this act: (a) the right of children to education through any medium, (b) the right of the parents to choose what type of education their children received, and (c) the right of the teachers to work. Over 38,000 tweets utilizing this hashtag were posted between 2pm and 6pm on June 21, 2020 (Rodrigues, 2020). The government of Maharashtra, apparently in response to parental pressure throughout the state, revised their SOP on July 22 and allowed 30 minutes of screen time per day for the pre-primary ages, and two 30-minute sessions for students of standards one and two (Desk I. T., 2020).

Figure 25

#righttolearn Twitter campaign

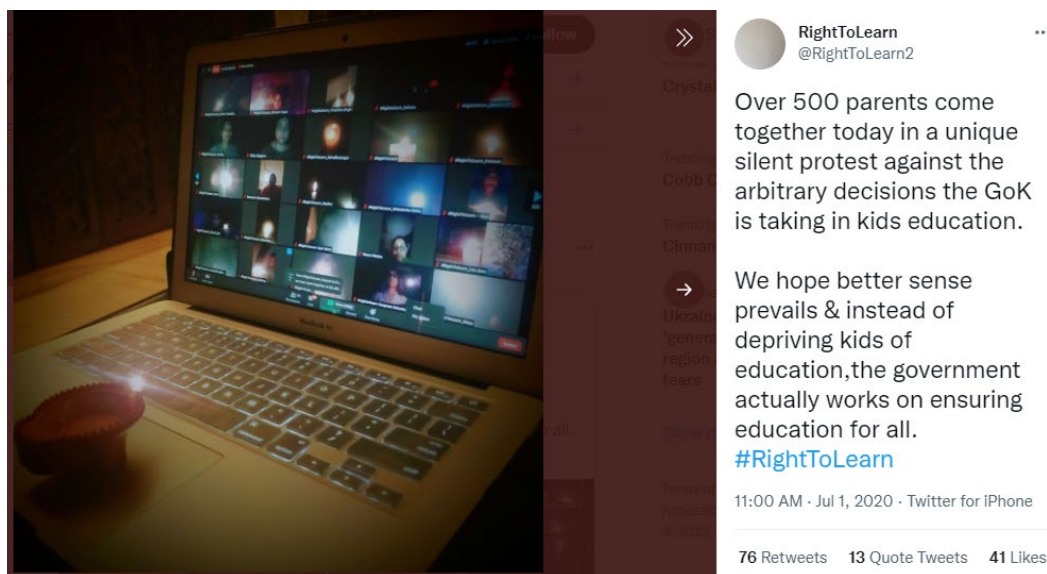


Note. Left: Example of promotional media for the tweetstorm related to the #righttolearn protest the ban of online education for certain ages of students in India (World, 2020); Right: Example of a tweet posted by a parent (Mittal, 2020).

In an interesting example of the global nature of the moment, on July 1st, 2020, as an extension of the #righttolearn movement, a digital candle march was held on Zoom with more than 500 parents in attendance (Kaushik, 2020a). Contained in a google document shared in the comments under a twitter post is a graphic outlining the maximum recommended time allowed for online education in several US states, including specific reference to the remote learning recommendations provided by the Illinois State Board of Education (Kaushik, 2020b). This was included with the express purpose of showing that educational policy in other countries had approved online education for kindergarten and pre-primary aged students.

Figure 26

Candlelight March held in support of the right for young learners in India to have access to online education



What follows is the experience of Mona School in relation to the new matrix in which it found itself being forced to act because of the pandemic. Within the wider milieu of educational

experiences in India and around the world, we will explore the local situatedness of one school, an abstraction of a single institutional example from countless around the world.

Mona School and the Lockdown

Mona School, like all other schools in Maharashtra, closed its doors after the government announced on March 14th that schools would be closed due to the pandemic. It was at first unclear what the school would do; it was not clear how long the lockdown would last. Chitra, a teacher of the 10th standard told me, “When there was a lockdown, of course mostly everyone was aware of this pandemic, but we did not know it was so serious.” As the initial lockdown was extended again and again, it became difficult to distinguish in the minds of the teachers. Many teachers were unable to say exactly how many lockdowns there had been, or when they had started. For example, one teacher when asked about the time when the second lockdown happened, told me, “I think it was June, I don’t clearly remember, I think it was June when this almost started, like, you know, unlocking started a little bit. Then again it got locked, then it got started for some time.” This teacher explained how they had insisted for permission from Mr. Taghavi to be able to come to the school to work, as they had materials there that were not available at home. After being given permission, with the caveat that they be extra cautious, the teacher began working from school. “For a few days we went, and after that again this lockdown thing happened, and we were at home again. So, we were continuing those activities, but from home,” the teacher said.

When the lockdown started “it was a very difficult time for Satara also, because traveling and everything was banned,” Dipika a teacher of 3rd and 4th standards told me. The school was in the middle of exams, which were interrupted. As with many throughout India, Mona school at first thought that exams most likely would be postponed. “Initially we felt that yes, after a few days

everything will be alright, and we'll be back to school and be able to evaluate the children, because their last final evaluation was still pending," Shalini a teacher of the pre-primary children told me, "So we were hoping for the best, now the school will start and all, but nothing of that kind happened."

"When the lockdown was announced, we were having our exams," Aarushi a teacher of the tenth standard explained, "the oral exams were going for the annual exam. And then suddenly this lockdown was announced, so we could not continue with our exams." It was unclear to both students and teachers how the end of the year examinations would take place. Udai a student in the seventh standard told me,

First like...we were having our orals of finals, the main exam of the year. And the oral exam on Monday, was like English, the hardest oral. My first impression of lockdown was like this is cool, like we are missing exams, and this is cool to miss exams, no marks, and no studies now, like this was our first impression. But now when the lockdown started like we thought it is just a boring life.

Ekta in the 8th standard noted how shocking the news had been as she was extremely excited to go to school that day.

Ekta: It was our oral exams going on and I had prepared with my whole heart, and I was very excited to give the oral, so I was in a state of shock that day.

Me: And what did you do for the next few days?

Ekta: First thing I did was I called my friends and see how they were doing. And sir, I thought that this would all end in a month or so, so I kept studying for my exams.

The initial lockdown came as a surprise to the students. Responses were varied in relation to the news that the school was being closed. Some were happy to learn that the school was going to be

closed. Others were disappointed that the exams they had prepared for had been postponed (and eventually cancelled), as they felt all their energy for preparation had been wasted. Harpreet in the 9th standard described the news of the closure of the school as “the most disturbing thing that I’d heard...in my entire life”:

Well, honestly, I thought I like was in a dream because last year we had decided, all my friends, that we are going [to do] whatever we have not done in like the eighth grade we are going to do that [this year]. For example, like participating in all the events that were taken in our school. Then we had a notice from a school that the school is actually closing because of the lockdown. And that was the most disturbing thing that I'd heard in the entire year or in my entire life – the most disturbing thing. And I was pretty upset by learning the school was going to close. Because I think...the thing that a child wants to do is go to school, and...when you know you're going to end in about two years, it's kind of disturbing that you're not going to school.

Janki in the 10th standard was happy at first, but as the lockdown dragged on grew weary. “At first I was happy like I’ll get a holiday for two, three days I thought,” she told me,

But I didn't know that it was like for months, and for months. Then I thought I'll get a break from academics, but then when I got to know that it is for months then I was so sure that is going to affect my academics.

And while students were wondering how it would affect their academics and when they would be able to take their exams, the teachers were also wondering the same. “The school was closed, but we were like thinking how to evaluate these children” Aarushi said.

How Students Used the Lockdown

Many students engaged in creative activity during the initial phase of the lockdown, from calligraphy, to painting, to playing guitar. Others learned new languages, improved their English, read books, learned cooking, played games, and spent time with their families. I asked Janki to explain how she used the time. “At first I thought quarantine will be a very enjoyable experience for me,” she said, “And like the starting days of quarantine were enjoyable for me because I thought it must be for like 10, 15 days. So, it was like a short break for me but afterwards as days passed by, days got boring.” She began cycling as well as other things just to keep herself engaged. “[I tried] to be more positive in such situations, because that was the main motto that we have to spread positivity around us.” Khushi also noted the boredom saying “at first when I heard the news like I was really excited...but after some days it got a lot boring staying at home.” Chandini noted that she suddenly found herself with a lot of time. She studied new languages, took pains to improve her English and grammar, she read books and practiced calligraphy.

In one particularly poignant exchange, Ambika told me that for her the lockdown was like “a new life”. As we were finishing our interview, she told me that she would like to share one more point.

Ambika: I would like, I would like to share one point.

Me: Sure, please.

Ambika: We understood the family time, importance of family time.

Me: What do you mean, family time?

Ambika: Like, my father was not having any time to discuss or to talk with us. Now he was continuously at home. So, we had a chance to know more about him...all are telling that

lockdown was horrible, or there were problems in their life. But according to me it was amazing, it was a new life.

Harpreet spoke of how she turned the initial confusion into a productive use of time:

Figure 27

Example of Harpreet's Art Journal



“I was very confused what to do because when the school was going on, I used to go to school, I used to come [home at] noon. And then I used to go to play with my friends and

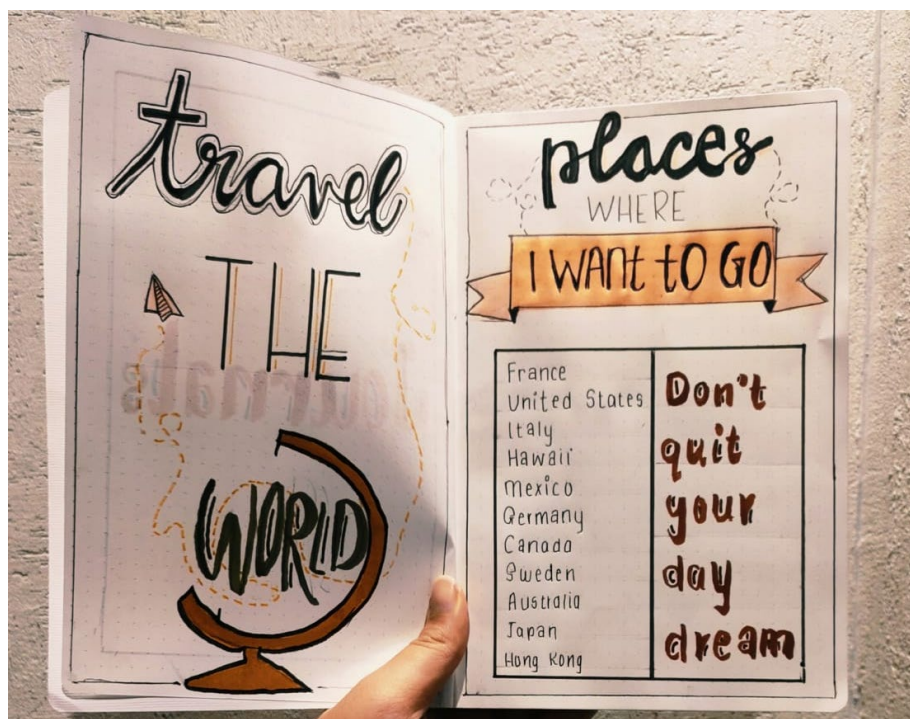
everything was just, you know, stopped, everything had to be restricted. And so, you know, even I was confused what I have to do. But then, I'm very fond of doing art though I don't want it to be as a profession, I just have a hobby. And so, I started maintaining art journals, so that was like it was very, you know, relaxing, mind relaxing and the stress-buster thing that I did.”

It is interesting to note that one of the pieces of art from Harpreet’s journal that she shared with me features a flower coming out of what appears to be an Instagram post (figure 27). During this time of increased social isolation, this is an interesting expression of the importance placed on

social media as a way of staying connected with others. Chandini also shared with me some of the calligraphy which she had undertaken during the lockdown.

Figure 28

Example of Chandini's Calligraphy



Reopening of Mona School

The uncertainty about how to continue education throughout Maharashtra also was felt by Mona School. In response to the June 15th SOP from the government which stated schools could open

physically from July 2020 onwards in areas where there had not been a case of COVID-19 in over a month, a lively discussion took place in the parent teacher association meeting held on June 26, 2020, in which 31 parents were present. Mr. Taghavi asked the parents at the meeting what they felt about the potential to open the school, if the area it was in met the conditions stated by the government. One parent responded, “children are alone at home and getting bored, their schedule is changed, I am ready to send my daughter to school.” Another parent, who was a doctor, mentioned that she would not take the risk to send her child to school as it was unclear from which kind of atmosphere and surroundings the other children would be coming from, or what precautions the parents of other children were taking at home in relation to the coronavirus.

After this parent spoke, it had great influence on the other parents in the meeting, as she was a doctor. It was generally agreed that fear of sending children to school was predominant among all the parents. Another parent stated that at the college she taught at they had not yet physically reopened and were conducting online classes and felt Mona School should continue to do the same. The official minutes of the meeting state the conclusion:

Since all the members were agreed to the point that children's health and safety should be the priority and they should be at home till the things become favorable or ease in society. Parents will monitor their children's work which is assigned to them by the teachers through online teaching and will make sure that a great deal of seriousness & zeal to be created at home for study and work closer with the teacher and school.

Learning New Modes of Operation

It became obvious to Mona School after a few weeks of lockdown that they would need to begin preparing for other modes of delivery; it appeared they were not going to be coming back to the physical classrooms as soon as they initially had hoped. This realization was also met by the understanding that none of the teachers had any training in the technology that would eventually be used by the school. It was clear that if Mona School wanted to continue to educate its students, it would have a lot of learning to do.

“[The teachers] love using the chalk, and the blackboard and the textbook. That's it.” Royia at one point mentioned. “Suddenly, because of this pandemic everything got changed,” Esha, a pre-primary teacher told me, “We have come out with all these things, and we had to perform everything in a new platform, in a new way. All things were new for us actually.” This sentiment was also echoed by Lata, a teacher of fifth through tenth standards. She mentioned how before the pandemic, they were only using the textbook and the blackboard “but now, we're learning

how to make PPTs, how to make videos, but this has taken two, three months to learn, because everything was new to us.”

I asked Mr. Taghavi what qualities he felt were most important for the teachers to have during the time of uncertainty that the pandemic created. He promptly answered, “readiness to learn, eagerness and having hope.”

Those teachers where they had the eagerness to learn, and they wanted to excel they really did very well. And those who, you know, had no eagerness in learning and were not ready to change their method, they were not the ones which could sustain.

Mr. Taghavi described that the teachers who were willing to “accept some constructive criticism” were the ones who could successfully navigate all the unknowns which were suddenly a reality of their positions. Not all teachers were willing to move forward with new modes of education. Five teachers ended up leaving the school, one of them telling Mr. Taghavi that they would be willing to come back to teach when the school returned to physical classes.

When we were showing the way to them, or when we were discussing a problem on their part, they were not stubborn, and they were ready to learn the new things. And they had the hope that they will do it very quickly, and they were not losing the hope. So, these qualities, the teachers who had [them] they have excelled, and they have sustained, and they have done their best.

Throughout the course of my research the most cogent vignette of a group of teachers learning how to move forward during the pandemic came from those who taught the pre-primary ages. They had a good command of English, were extremely enthusiastic about their jobs and were eager to talk about their experiences. What follows is a practical example of the *eagerness to*

learn which Mr. Taghavi noted above was one of the most important qualities to have during this transitional phase.

Learning how to Move Education Online

The qualities of the readiness to learn, eagerness and the hopefulness come through strongly in an experience of the pre-primary teachers. The teachers explained to me the process of learning they went through to learn how to make videos to share with their students. “In the beginning here,” Shalini, one of the pre-primary instructors, told me

The state government had not encouraged online classes for this age group [lower and upper kindergarten]. So, we were thinking of some activity-based learning for them, means they should not be deprived of their learning process and should be busy with something. So, in this initial stage we teachers were busy with making some educational videos for them and we were sending videos to them. The parents used to watch the videos, and they used to get the activities done from the children.

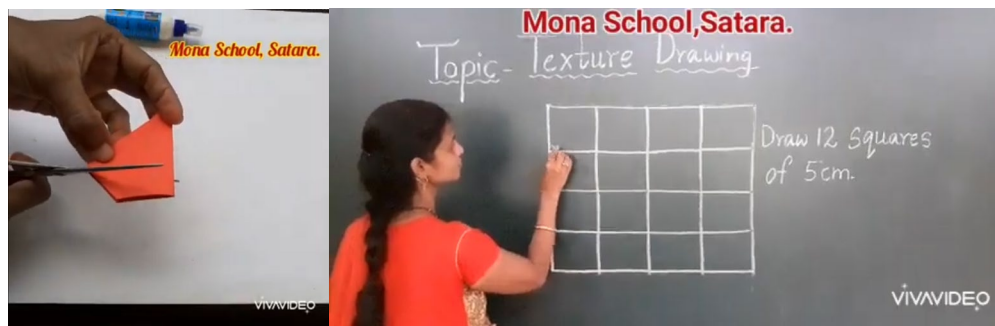
“Actually, to make a video was not like that much comfortable for us in the beginning,” Esha explained. She was used to watching videos and had of course taken videos on her phone of herself and her family when they would go out, but had never contemplated making professional videos, let alone performing for others in a video. “A professional video like this...that was a little bit – not a little bit – much more different,” she explained.

Esha and her colleagues began by scouring YouTube for examples of educational videos, “from there we saw, ok like this people are making videos.” She also consulted friends of hers that lived outside of Satara in the nearby city of Pune who were more familiar with the process of making videos who gave her tips on what specific apps could be used; “We heard about many apps like kinemaster and viva.” After recording video on her phone Esha would then use these

apps to apply various effects, such as fast forwarding, and to add music. “Then, [the question of] how you will give a watermark to your video, how you’re going to give that special mark, the stamp of your school, is there, because it is something official going through from your school.” She also had to learn how to make edits in her video. “So, all these minute parts we have learned,” Esha stated with assuredness. Esha and her colleagues began by producing one video a week to give to their students, then as their skill grew, they began to produce two a week, then three, “and then regularly every day we used to give them videos.”

Figure 29

Stills from Videos made by Mona School Teachers



Note. Left: video lesson on how to make a flower from paper. Right: Texture drawing lesson

“We started making videos like what they can do at home,” Jagruti, another pre-primary instructor told me,

Different activities for them, for example for nursery I used to draw a circle, then I used to cut small circles and then I used to say, ‘okay good morning, today we will learn some pictures which start with the letter C, C is for circle’. Then I used to cut small circles and I used to stick those circles on the letter C. Children can easily handle, the parents can give them glue, they can apply glue and give it to them.

Jagruti continued telling me about the process by which she would produce these videos with the help of her husband at home. “We all [the primary teachers] used to make videos at our places, at home” she recalled. “My husband used to hold the phone in such a way that I am doing the activity, and he is holding the camera,” she described. She laughingly noted that she used to tell her husband “Don’t cough, don’t sneeze, don’t do anything just hold the camera this way!” She mentioned that her husband jokingly told her that she was giving him a lot of trouble. “It was fun that we actually ended up learning so many technical things.” Jagruti continued to describe all the technical details she had learned to make a video:

Okay, so [the] video is four minutes, the question of how we can send that arises. Then for other phones, it can send to other Samsung and other [android] phones, they can send videos, but for me and [another teacher] we both had iPhones, so we were stuck like how to send videos to them. We have made the videos but what to do? So, then compression came into the picture, we downloaded Kompress. Many things we learned in this phase. The teachers had to learn what a megabyte was, what a kilobyte was, how they could upload a video, how to download it, how to compress it. Esha saw in this process a great increase of capacity among the teachers:

Everything was there, minute by minute things were there that we learned through this pandemic. Actually, we are grateful to this pandemic also because we have learned many, many things new in our life which are really adding to our knowledge and adding to our career also, looking forward in the future.”

The teachers not only had to keep the technical aspects of the video production in mind, but also the fact that the parents and students were also in lockdown and could not easily step outside of the home to get supplies. As Jagruti described it, “They all are stuck, stuck at home so the

activity should be that much good that parents they don't have to run out of their houses to get things." They would come up with activities that used common household items such as spices or rice. "One dough activity I did for [the] number three," Jagruti explained,

I did not have colorful clay, so I had flour at home – refined flour – so I added green color and I made a dough out of it, so it was like clay. Everyone has refined flour at home, so it's a very simple thing that we had. I learned so many things out of it, so it was nice, it was fun."

"Like [for example] we are teaching them alphabets, or any common thing," Esha explained regarding the content of a few of her videos. "Suppose alphabet is there, so writing letter E, and how you will write, stroke, slanting lines, sleeping lines." Or in another activity about animals, "So a specific animal is there like sheep," Esha described, "I have done cotton dabbing, cotton ball pasting on sheep." The teachers had become quite competent at producing and sharing videos with their students. Then, just as they had gained the capacity to regularly produce educational videos with skill, once again they were challenged with something new. "Then, we had gotten permission from the government also now pre-primary can be online for half-an-hour," Esha explained. Their classes would now be going live on Zoom.

Schooling on Zoom

"We are going online!" Esha humorously declared to me. Regarding their transition from making videos to live Zoom sessions she told me with excitement "That is totally different, totally different. What we have to see, what we have to do, what we're going to teach, how we're going to teach, blah blah blah. Many questions arose in my mind!" When they made videos to send to the students, if they made a mistake, they could just re-record it, they could edit things out, "any changes we have to do, we can do it." However, Zoom would be live, no chance to edit

something out or to go back and change something upon review. “When we heard about Zoom, we were just like, ok, now its video,” Esha recalled, “Now we have to go online and we have to teach live class, ok then, that’s something different.”

“The main concern,” Jagruti recalled, was whether “these small kids going to sit with us for like 40 minutes?” Because they’re small kids, four years, five years. So, we cannot expect them to sit for such a long time with us.” Esha echoed this concern. She didn’t think that the kids would sit for even 15 or 20 minutes because of their young age. They had questions if the children would like it, if they would find it interesting, but at every turn felt encouragement both from their fellow teachers, as well as Mr. Taghavi and Royia.

By the time the pre-primary teachers began using Zoom in August of 2020, the lockdown restrictions had again relaxed enough for the teachers to be able to come to the school if they wanted. The pre-primary teachers preferred to teach from the school as they had access to all sorts of props and equipment which they did not have at home. Going to the school also gave them a sense of professionalism. Jagruti told me:

Sir [Mr. Taghavi] actually said that ‘you can do it from home, it is safer for you’.

Actually, we insisted that we have many things here. So we go to the school, it is much easier for us. We also get that school vibe, as we are in school, we are leaving home and going out for work and everything.

Of the three pre-primary teachers I spoke with, only one had previous experience using Zoom, and that was with speaking with their family members in Delhi during the lockdown. The teachers prepped for their first session on Zoom, and ultimately the day arrived. Both Jagruti and Esha recalled with detail the first time they held a live class on Zoom. “I will never forget my first session” Esha recalled “it was too awesome, means too awesome.” Esha told me she was

“totally nervous from inside” to go in front of the kids for the first time via Zoom. She was using a phone that only had a camera on the back to conduct the session, so she didn’t even have visual feedback from any of the children as she was conducting the lesson. “We were not aware of how to take it from [a] laptop,” that would come later Easha said, “Gradually our knowledge increased, and we learned many things.”

Figure 30

Examples of early Zoom Classes in the Pre-Primary Section Take via Mobile Phone



Esha continued to describe to me her first day on Zoom. “It was really memorable for me; I remember all the topics I taught on that day. I taught drawing, I [taught] exercise.” She also taught the students about fruits and vegetables and made sure to get confirmation from them that they had understood what each fruit and vegetable was. She had been joined and accompanied by many of her colleagues who were able to see the children on the screen of the mobile phone. “Sana sir was guiding us from behind the camera, showing thumbs up and everything was going

nicely...that also made us feel confident,” she mentioned. She also noted that she really felt as if the children were gaining something, they had once again been reconnected with their students in a live fashion, “Something is going to them. We were happy, we were so happy when these things were happening to us, and we were totally nervous from inside.” Esha was pleasantly surprised when she saw that the children were really enjoying the initial session. “They like to watch cartoons and all, and they like to play games on the mobile and laptop,” Esha stated, “they were able to attend the session for 15 minutes, all were enjoying and responding and doing the

Figure 31

Picture of an early Zoom class in the pre-primary section, before they made the move to laptops



rhymes with the actions and they were all responding very, very well.”

After her first session was finished, Esha felt relaxed.

However, she then thought of having to do it again, and again. “The next week we had two sessions. Then after that, we have gradually increased our sessions, then two sessions, then three sessions. Now we are having every day.” Esha had seen the confidence and capacity of herself, and her colleagues grow. “Now we [have] become very, very confident to handle our kids and our nursery children over there in the Zoom, and they’re attending all very well.” She expressed how happy it made her to know that the children were able to learn through Zoom, and she noticed things that gave her the sense that the children came to the sessions with enthusiasm. “They are also waiting [for us] now, ‘When [will] our teacher will come?’ ‘When are we going to

join a session?’ ‘When are we going to learn something?’, even we feel also happy to see their happy faces and all.”

Jagruti also described to me one of the first Zoom sessions. She was helping to accompany Shalini, one of the other pre-primary teachers, along with Mr. Taghavi, Royia and Sana. They had all come to encourage the pre-primary teachers during their first sessions. They had decided to have the class outside and had arranged a mobile phone with a back facing camera on a selfie stick attached to a chair that was on top of a table. Jagruti was nervous that the phone would move or flip upside down during the session. “If it will move, then Shalini will be upside down [motions with her hands the phone flipping over] and I didn’t want that!” Their first session was 20 minutes long, but because the phone’s camera was on the back, Shalini, like Esha, was unable to see her students. “Like we used to face the mobile, and it’s a back camera it’s not even a front camera. So, it’s like we used to talk and talk, and we don’t know what is happening,” Jagruti mentioned. Like Esha’s session, others were standing behind the phone looking at the screen and providing encouraging motions to Shalini to let her know that the kids were responding well to her lesson.

They decided to start the Zoom session 10 minutes before the scheduled time, and to their surprise, all the children populated the room soon after they had opened the link. “We were like ‘oh no they are coming!’” Jagruti recalls. They had been caught off guard as they thought the students would come late! Shalini told them she was ready to go ahead and start early. Soon after the class began, the sunny weather began to change. This class was during the monsoon season when weather can change very quickly. They had worried rain may start, so they had an umbrella with them. Then the wind started. “Whatever we just placed near Ms. Pavar it was all running here and there.” Even though the wind was gaining strength, and causing Shalini’s hair to blow

around, she remained focused on the camera and the delivery of the lesson. “Suddenly it started drizzling,” Jagruti recalls, “we had an umbrella, we opened it and one teacher was holding it, and I was inside the umbrella holding the camera like this [pantomimes holding a mobile phone in a scrunched manner in a tight space], so it was [a] good experience.” They had initially planned for the session to last 10 minutes, “but it exceeded for 20 minutes, we were amazed to see. We were wondering how it can be possible, how it happened actually, when we were scared to, you know, take the session for 10 minutes,” Jagruti said. So it was that the pre-primary teachers began their classes on Zoom.

Moving to Laptops

Only the initial four or five sessions of the pre-primary section were held on the mobile phone. Not long after, Royia suggested to the pre-primary teachers that they begin to use a laptop to teach their classes. “Royia miss suggested that if you [used] a laptop you would be able to see your children, and then you can interact more with them,” Jagruti related. The pre-primary teachers thought this was a wonderful suggestion “I mean, if we can see the kids and then we can interact that will be great” Jagruti said. The introduction of a laptop as the tool by which to teach led to another series of challenges. They had to learn where to place the laptop so the reflection of the screen would not show up on the boards they were using to teach their students, they had to learn the concept of screen sharing, and how to make PDFs and PowerPoints. And as they were using their mobile phones as hotspots for their data, they also had to experiment with the best places in the school to get a strong wireless signal to make sure their Zoom sessions would not be interrupted through a weak data signal. “We used to take our phone here and there, ok there are three bars, ok so now this is a good spot,” Jagruti related. However, all these challenges

were overcome, and they now had the advantage of being able to see 24 students at once on the screen, a significant upgrade over not being able to see any children at all.

“It was very easy to interact with them, we could see the children in front of us,” Shalini recalls.

“If we want to ask them something we were putting them on unmute, so it was good for them also.” “In the first session,” Shalini recalls,

I was just talking to them as if I can see them and all they were not aware that I can't see them. I taught them patterns with fingers, zigzag, semicircle, circle, and another teacher was showing me from another mobile what the children were doing. I was very excited, each and every child was following. I praised one child, taking his name 'yes, very good you're doing great'. So even the children felt 'yes miss is looking at us'. They were happy that after three months some teacher is talking to them. It was a nice experience.

Ultimately the pre-primary teachers grew comfortable using Zoom to deliver their online classes.

“Now we are all well versed with Zoom” Jagruti stated. “The best part is they listen to us, and even children they enjoy. If we say 'ok now stand up for rhymes' immediately they stand. We do not feel like we are not physically present,” Jagruti stated, although she paused to reflect and ultimately corrected slightly her last thought “that is a sad part, because we enjoy more when they are physically present.” They also grew to rely on one another's presence as they delivered their sessions. “We feel more confident and comfortable working with each other” Jagruti said.

Although they are all technically capable of handling the classes individually on their own laptops, and don't need to be with one another during each session “we want each other [to be there],” Jagruti said, in part because they gain more experience. If something goes wrong during the session, and they are together, they both learn how to deal with the issue. “We are working hand in hand, so we want each other to be present” Jagruti said.

In the above we see a group of teachers who were ready to learn new methods, despite their own personal nervousness regarding the methods. We see an eagerness, almost an earnestness, with which they approached the task of learning new technical skills to facilitate this new type of education. When there were obstacles, they found ways around them, and they never lost hope about being able to reach their students. This of course was not done in isolation, they also benefitted greatly from the encouragement and support of Mr. Taghavi, Royia, Sana and their fellow teachers.

This example also illustrates how the teachers were acting within an environment where they had to take into consideration multiple factors: shifting government policy that in relation to the type of education the teachers were able to deliver; their own limitations in relation to technology and its use, requiring perseverance in learning new skills; and their uncertainty in relation to how the students would respond to the various approaches, requiring encouragement and experimentation.

Thoughts on the School's Transition to Zoom

It wasn't initially obvious for Mona School to gravitate towards Zoom as a platform to use for online classes. It wasn't even initially obvious for Mona School to want to bring their students together synchronously at all. They of course knew platforms existed that would allow synchronous connection, but they initially weren't seriously considered. "We were very scared of these new platforms," Royia told me, "We were like, with the network issues and all, it's impossible."²⁸ There was also uncertainty surrounding how the teachers at Mona School would feel about working with Zoom, and how the students would respond. They first encouraged the teachers to produce videos and send them to their students. They also encouraged teachers of the

²⁸ To read more about the network challenges faced by Mona School related to online education, please refer to the section on network challenges in the next chapter.

higher standards to make PowerPoint presentations annotated with their own voice offering the lecture. “So, initially, this is what they used to do. 20 minutes long, we dealt with the entire chapter with their voice.”

As Mona School advanced along this path of videos and voice annotated PowerPoints and videos it became clear that at some point, they would have to begin online synchronous sessions with the rest of their school population. The school felt acutely the lack of the interactivity in this mode of instruction. “This had just become one-way teaching, we had to start interacting with the kids,” Royia said. They decided to hold a few sessions with the 10th standard students, reviewing elements of their classes which they had already completed through the video and PowerPoint method. About those early sessions Royia recalled with enthusiasm, “We saw the interaction level of the kids was amazing when it came to Zoom.”

Table 4

Mona School Timeline

Mona School Timeline - 2020	
March 15 th 2020	School Announces Closure on Facebook
April 13 th 2020	Tenth standard WhatsApp group created
April 15 th 2020	Online sessions begun for tenth standard via WhatsApp and the school’s online portal on the website
April 27 th 2020	All other standard WhatsApp groups created

Table 4 (cont.)

May – June 2020	Video lessons and voice annotated PowerPoints for all standards except tenth
June 4 th 2020	First Zoom Class for tenth standard
June 18 th 2020	Online Zoom sessions begun for third through ninth standards
June 18 th – August 12 th 2020	Video Lessons for pre-primary, first and second standards
August 12 th 2020	Zoom sessions begin for pre-primary, first and second standards

Mona School’s transition to synchronous live sessions on Zoom was a staggered process that began in three stages. The earliest group to use the platform were the 10th standard students, followed by the lower standards, and finally joined by the pre-primary, first and second standards. The process itself was staggered in part because the school was uncertain if the lockdown would be ended, and students would be allowed to come back. “Usually we start [the new school year] by early June,” Royia told me, but it had taken them extra time to train all their teachers how to use their new systems, and there was confusion and uncertainty among all elements of Indian society – from the government to the parents – as to whether schools should begin online education, or whether they were going to open back up physically. Mona School began its new school year online at on June 18th, although they had been engaging with the 10th standard since late April of that year. “We started with grade 10, because usually every year they

start early, so we started with them, and then we moved to the other sections of the school.”

Royia stated.

Janki, one of the students in tenth standard recalled the interactivity from those early sessions on Zoom.

It took two or three days for the teachers as well as the students to get [used to] Zoom, like...everybody was new to this, but after a few days the Zoom classes went smoothly. Actually, those Zoom classes were very interactive and they were very realistic as the teachers [had] shown many presentations...I feel like it is way more easier to understand things when you show it in presentations, like, instead of just reading it from the books...

Aarushi, a teacher of the tenth standard also noted the quickness with which the students picked it up. “The children after just or one two sessions they got used to the system,” she told me echoing the sentiment of what many other teachers also stated. Of course, the school had prepared them by sending a message via WhatsApp describing how they could log onto the Zoom session and how to use the system. Kalyani, one of teachers, described how quickly children pick up technology. “Today’s generation is more knowledgeable, they know all these things, and the ones who aren’t, their parents are there to guide them,” she stated matter-of-factly. “Oh, students are too well-versed [in Zoom], in fact we learn more from the students, really!” Chitra, a teacher of tenth standard, told me.

Outside of only a handful of individuals at the school, Zoom had never been used by anyone before. Those that did have experience with Zoom hadn’t ever used it as a tool for online education; this was a completely new experience. “This app was new to us,” Hemakshi, a teacher of the seventh through tenth standards told me,

Actually, we were not knowing what [meeting] ID means, what password means, we were not having knowledge about these things. It was totally new for us. We downloaded the Zoom app, [but] then we were not knowing how to use [it].

Mr. Taghavi had sent a message out to all the teachers in late May of 2020 encouraging them to download the app and acquaint themselves with it, as it would shortly be used for all their classes. Hemakshi recalled that the teachers had made a group on WhatsApp specifically in relation to helping each other learn how to use Zoom. Eight teachers were part of the group, and they would take turns practicing the delivery of lessons to each other. They would offer feedback to one another and suggestions for how they could improve. “I got lots of support from the teachers” Hemakshi recalled. She also practiced at home with her husband. “He used to be in the other room, he would send me a meeting ID and I used to practice with him with the video on.” Hemakshi wanted to be sure that her first session on Zoom would be mistake free, “I thought that my first Zoom session should be perfect,” she related “that’s why in a day I used to practice three to four times, with one teacher, with another teacher.” She also went as an observer to other classrooms to see how they were being conducted by others.

Speaking about the process the school went through to transition to online education, Dipika, one of the teachers, told me that “it was a very big pressure and hurdle, because we were not technically educated.” She mentioned the importance of being encouraged by both Mr. Taghavi and Royia in the adoption of this new technology. “I said to Royia miss, teaching I can do, but I am not sure technically how much I am sound.” Dipika was encouraged to practice with Royia, and other teachers were invited. She mentioned that she felt as if she had gone back to college, in the sense that once again she found herself in a new learning environment, where she had to greatly apply herself to a task that was unfamiliar and uncomfortable. For her first lecture she

asked Mr. Taghavi if she could deliver it from the school so both he and Royia could be there for support if something went wrong, a request to which they quickly acquiesced. “I gave my first lecture on Zoom, and when it got over, I was so excited.” She felt that she could do it on her own and that nobody could stop her now. She then began delivering her lectures from home “The first lecture was a very big hurdle at home also, I said pray for me, this is my first lecture on the Zoom [at home].” Yet she had gained the capacity and began to successfully deliver Zoom lectures from home as well. “This you can agree with me sir, teaching is the only one profession where every time we want to learn something new,” Dipika said.

“The government had asked [the schools] not to start with the [online] school,” Royia stated, “but we still started because we knew it’s going to take time till they make their decision.” The official government sanction for all schools to begin utilizing online education came on June 16th, nearly two months after Mona School began their own online educational initiatives with the tenth standard. “They [the government] wanted to start in groups, like they started it for year nine and ten, but we did it all at once,” she recalled “even for the kindergarten section, they said there should be no kind of online education, but then we thought that’s not right because that gap which will be there for the kids will not help them in any way.”²⁹ On July 22, the government of Maharashtra issued a revised SOP in relation to online education, recommending pre-primary students be allowed one 30-minute session online daily, and first and second standards to have two 30-minute sessions daily (Government of Maharashtra, 2020b). Nearly three weeks later, Mona School began online synchronous sessions for this age group, although they had been engaging with them electronically since early June.

²⁹ The school provided videos via WhatsApp to the younger children but did not begin online Zoom sessions until the government gave permission.

At one point during the summer of 2020 Mona School heard that Google Meet was offering its premium video conferencing features for free (Tribune, 2020). One of the premium features was no limitation on time per session. Mona School never paid for a Zoom subscription, which meant that all its sessions were limited to the free 40 minutes. Of course, as familiarity and skill with the app increased, it became almost second nature for the teacher and students to hop back on a second link after the first 40 minutes of a class had expired, but initially this was extremely disorienting, and delayed learning. I experienced these delays myself when in the middle of a lesson suddenly the session would end. Upon reentering it often took several minutes to get reoriented and to make sure all the students had returned. This offer for a free premium Google Meet was attention grabbing.

There were two problems with transferring to Google Meet, Royia told me. “First of all, it took almost two months for the entire staff of the school to get well-versed with Zoom.” A significant amount of time had been invested in training the teachers how to use Zoom. Technology did not come easy for all, especially some of the older instructors, the oldest being 65. “The ones who were above 50, it was a big challenge,” Royia said. Moving to a new platform would mean having to retrain their teachers all over again. “Just now they have gotten well-versed on how to mute the kid when he is disturbing the class, how to remove him from the session, security issues,” Royia told me. A few of the teachers along with Royia experimented with Google Meet but they didn’t find it as intuitive as Zoom. The second issue was that the parents and students had also gotten used to Zoom. They now knew how to rename themselves, how to mute and unmute and run all the functions of Zoom. It also would have been difficult for the parents and students to suddenly move to a new platform.

One element that Zoom introduced into the practice of class delivery that was mentioned by many of the teachers was that of the preparation of PowerPoint slides to accompany their lectures. They also generated PDF documents with homework to send to their students via WhatsApp to be completed by their students in conjunction with their classes. “It takes time to prepare,” Purva, a teacher of 5th standard told me, “Because to make slides – we have to make everything on the laptop. In the class, we know what to teach, we can teach easily, but in Zoom we have to prepare everything first, and then we have to present for the students, so it takes more time.”

Student Experience with their First Zoom Sessions

Students had various recollections of their first experience with Zoom. Ambika in the eighth standard said that her first Zoom session, “was an introduction, and students were sharing all their points about lockdown and all...I told we missed school a lot.” Deepti in the sixth standard noted that her first Zoom session was the subject Hindi. “It was very much interesting because we were meeting after nearly four or five months,” she told me, “We were much excited to see our teachers, because in the school, teachers are a lot like our parents because if anything happens, they only tell us you shouldn't do like this, or they love you in the school as our parents do.”

Udai in the seventh standard mentioned that it was “weird” attending his first Zoom session:

Me: What was your first Zoom class like can you remember what you were feeling, what your emotions were, what the experience was?

Udai: It was weird, like seeing the board and all. It was first experience, it was weird.

Me: When you say weird, why was it weird?

Udai: like it was a first time using it and we didn't have any experience about it, that's why.

The students and the teachers, however quickly found their footing with Zoom, and by around October of 2020, all were feeling comfortable with the platform, and the school had settled into a routine with the online classes. However, even though online education through Zoom once again allowed the teachers and students to be together in a virtual space, it still was very different than what the students had previously experienced.

How to Continue Moral Education?

One large question which loomed over Mona School was how to continue its moral education component. Mona School employs two main different means by which it infuses moral education into the school. The first is the all-school assemblies, attendance at which are compulsory for all students, which will be explored further in the next chapter. The second means is through the utilization of a moral education curriculum inspired by the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, developed by the Ruhi Institute and utilized widely around the world. These classes are voluntary, and students opt into them, often after having received presentations about them at the school. The all-school assemblies were unable to continue due to the pandemic and the voluntary classes also were briefly put on hold, although Mrs. Taghavi began very soon after the initial lockdown to contact those parents she considered friends and knew well to begin a class for morals with their children. "I started with nine children" Mrs. Taghavi told me. She then began contacting other mothers, "I wrote for them clearly what I am going to do...teach children all the virtues which are in the Bahá'í Faith, and that we believe that teaching children about all subjects [including] morals is very important." Mrs. Taghavi was well-known amongst the parents for

teaching these types of moral classes, and that they were inspired by the Bahá'í Faith; many mothers responded. “The number reached to 80 people from second to fifth standards.”

In addition to classes for the children between ages five through eleven, Mona School employed a program specifically for the ages twelve through fifteen known as the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP). Mrs. Taghavi invited some of the older siblings of the children in her classes who had been involved with JYSEP to help with the classes. While nearly 100 of the students at the school were involved in this process, it remained very difficult for Mona School to increase the number of children in these classes. “In school, it was a completely different zone,” Royia told me in relation to how they would invite students to join these programs, “we would talk to the kids, grab their attention [and] they would fall in love with whatever we are doing [with] the moral classes and that is how we would start.” Royia described how she felt unsure about how to approach the children individually in their homes with these same explanations. It took her a while to learn how to approach the students about the program. By November of 2020, Royia had reached out to enough “junior youth” to be able to start the program over Zoom.

Conclusion

Mona School approached the move to online education in a posture of learning, within a larger context which saw shifting government policy, uncertainty about the nature COVID-19, questions about how long the pandemic – and specifically the lockdown – would last, and how to continue with moral education without the physical school. The school faced a series of challenges both in terms of the adoption and learning of technology, but also of management, organization, communication, and support. Not all the teachers managed to move forward with the new changes that Mona School was required to make to continue reaching its children with

education, and as stated above, five teachers ended up leaving the school. The key qualities needed were the ability to be open to change – to learn not only new things, but also from one’s mistakes – and eagerness and hope. And while many teachers spoke candidly about their initial unfamiliarity and discomfort with the platforms adopted by the school to teach online, they also expressed a feeling of confidence that they had gained in utilizing a series of new tools to educate their students. “Technically we were not up to date when the pandemic started. We didn’t have any technical knowledge,” Kalyani, a teacher of 4th and 6th standards told me, “But we learned sir, and our best we are giving to the children now. Whatever best we can give to the children; we are trying our level best to reach them.

CHAPTER 5: What School is *not* During a Global Pandemic

As the pandemic shut down schools all over the globe, it became quite clear that something unprecedented was happening. Never in the history of modern mass schooling had over 80% (UNESCO,2020) of the globe’s enrolled learners suddenly had access to their educational institutions removed. What effect would this have on learners around the world? How would this impact their development?As schools around the world experimented with different methods of distance education, many who had the infrastructure and resources turned to online modes of teaching, including Mona School, as we saw in the previous chapter. This turn towards digital technology came with its own set of questions and challenges. What would the experience be like? How would children take to learning from screens from a location that was not their school? How would this influence the family dynamic? The learning dynamic? Would the school be able to maintain its moral education component? Data helping us to investigate these questions began to appear almost immediately after the pandemic started, and research has continued to gain greater insight into the above and other questions the further we remove ourselves in time from the initial closures of schools in February of 2020.

One thing that became clear was that the pandemic “exacerbated pre-existing inequalities” that existed prior to the closing of the schools (O'Toole & Simovska, 2021). One study which surveyed youth across the United State of America pointed out that significant numbers of youth, 29%, felt disconnected from any adult at their school (Promise, 2020). Another study focused on the northeast of India found that education experiences had deteriorated since the pandemic due to poor technological infrastructure, the lack of financial resources to provide the infrastructure necessary, and mental health deterioration due to the uncertainty caused by the lockdown and pandemic in general (Debbarma & Durai, 2021). Undergraduate and

postgraduate students reported having sleepiness, longer naps, symptoms of depression, chronic stress, headaches, insomnia, digestive problems, hormonal imbalances, and fatigue because of the pandemic causing their studies to move online (Majumdar, Biswas, & Sahu, 2020). The general degradation of the teacher-learner experience was a finding from another study looking at a survey of 500 teachers and 1700 students in ten schools throughout Delhi (Tyagi & Malik, 2020). However, another study which surveyed 184 university students from four universities in the Delhi area found a general positive impression of online education among the students (Khan, Vivek, Nabi, Khojah, & Tahir, 2021).

What follows is a depiction of the experience of teachers, administrators, and students at Mona School regarding their experience with online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is expected that the experience below will help to fill in the gaps of our understanding regarding the experience of schools around the world following school closures in early 2020. As explored below, there are many elements of a school that simply cannot exist in an online setting. This is significant because an estimated 1.043 billion students around the world from pre-primary to upper secondary potentially experienced some form of distance education, whether it be via internet or other means (UNICEF, 2020).

I will explore within this chapter the parts of a school that simply go away when it goes online, when the physical locus of the education is taken away from a building and moved to the home. I will also explore the challenges and differences that arise when school is moved online. It is a significant shift, and one that has a great effect on what those whom I spoke with called the *atmosphere*, *spirit*, or *energy* of a school. As we learn in the natural sciences, there are emergent properties that only become manifest when certain conditions in various systems come into being (O'Connor, 2020; Mayr, 1982; Ponge, 2009), there are certain elements of a

school that only become manifest when there is a critical mass of children, students, and administrators all in the same physical location. When the conditions that allow such properties to emerge are removed, what is left are pieces that attempt to replicate the previously emergent experience but are ever only an approximation.

Growing Pains on Zoom

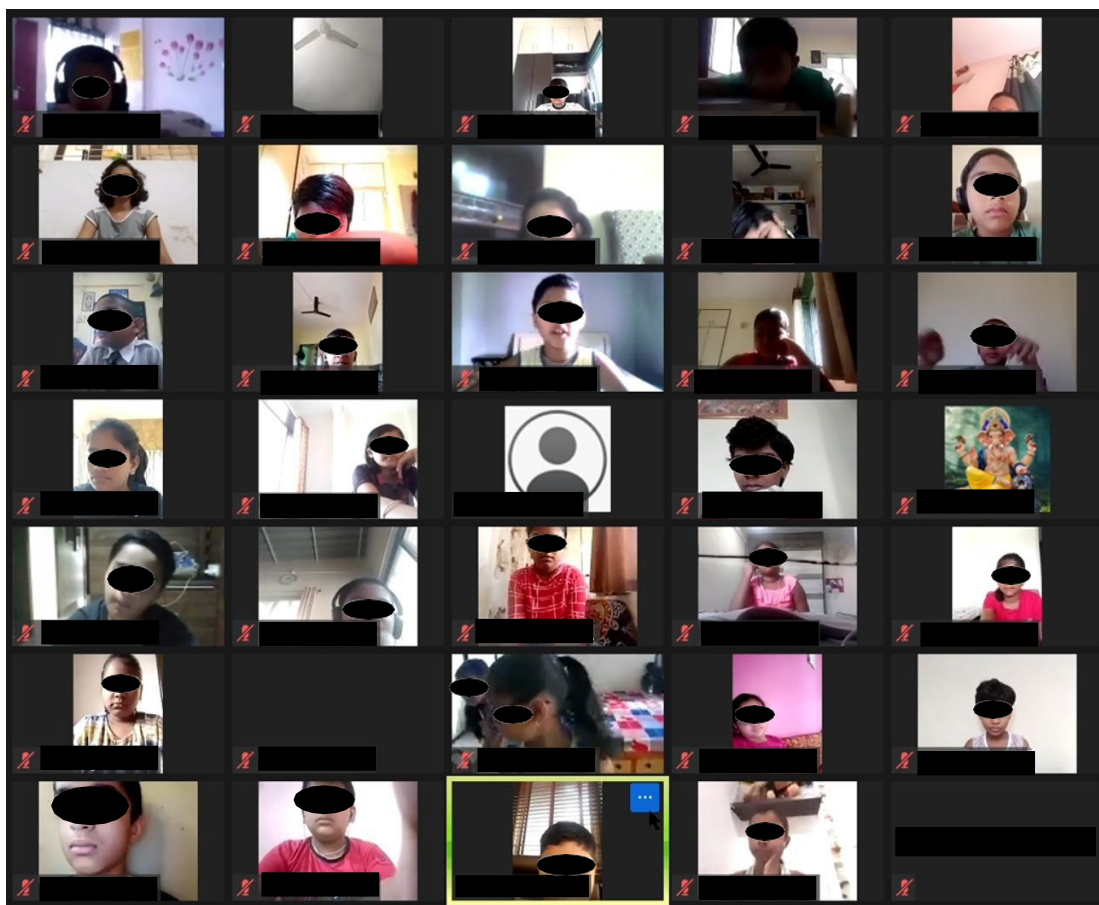
As Mona School began employing Zoom, the chat feature was left turned on, available to the students. Also available to the students was the ability to mute and unmute at will. The teachers used their cameras and required it of their students as well. However, as teachers were experiencing all throughout India, the ability to maintain decorum in an online classroom was at times challenged (Sharma, 2020b). Student hijinks which occurred in Zoom classrooms around the country reached the ears of the teachers and administrators of Mona School. They had heard of students at other schools recording video of their teachers, editing them in ways that were disrespectful and then sharing it throughout their own social networks. When the teachers heard of this happening, they became quite uncomfortable with the idea of students distorting and mocking their own videos. This ultimately led the school to make the decision to have the teachers of the higher standards turn their cameras off during the class sessions. “We weren’t feeling safe,” Royia told me, “Especially for the higher classes, we had heard of many children who had taken video and photo of the teachers and those were used as jokes.” This had not occurred at Mona School that anyone was aware of, but they wanted to prevent it.

This decision to have the teachers turn off their cameras affected the education the students received. Udai in the seventh standard told me that when they are in front of the teacher physically “we can see their mouth moving...we can understand their emotions, but in Zoom, the camera is off.... like in every session.” Turning the cameras off helped create a sense of security

and safety among the teachers, but significantly reduced the quality of the instruction the students received. It was for this reason that Mona School decided to reverse the decision for the 2021-2022 academic year and have the teachers turn their cameras back on.

Figure 32

Example of the camera of the teacher being off, while cameras of students are on. The teacher is the white silhouette in the middle of the screen

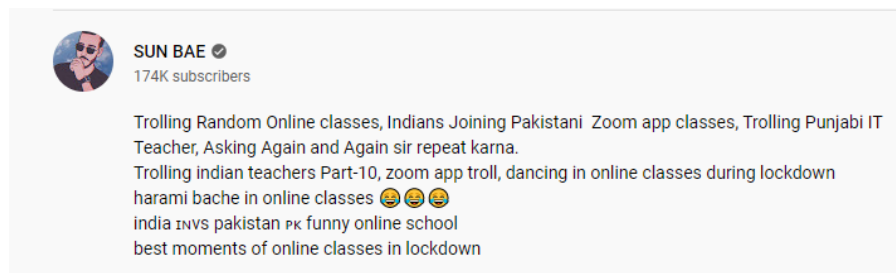


It is worth asking if the teachers were also concerned about similar behavior existing between the students, that is, if there was a concern that students would misuse or abuse the images of each other. This is a legitimate question, as almost as soon as online classes via Zoom began after lockdown, Indian media became filled with stories of various ways in which they were being

abused. Entire YouTube channels dedicated to pranking Zoom classes throughout India produced videos that were widely viewed, one such video from July of 2020 (Figure 33) having over 2.5 million views (Bae, 2020). Often teachers in these videos are made fun of and their images and videos are not obscured; their identity being quite clear. Some of the videos obscure teacher and student identity, but not all. Early on in Mona School's Zoom experience, they also had experienced pranksters of this sort coming into their rooms and disrupting classes. It was only after this had happened multiple times that they began utilizing the waiting room function and only allowing those with their proper names and roll numbers into the actual session.

Figure 33

Description under Zoom YouTube prank video



Note. Description found under a video with over 2.5 million views on the YouTube channel SUN BAE which produces videos that specifically have the purpose of trolling teachers in online Zoom classes in the subcontinent.

It seems that the concern to ensure the proper attendance of the students outweighed any concerns which may have existed for the potential abuse of the students with one another.

Obliging the students to keep their video on continuously was seemingly the most effective manner by which the teachers could be sure that the students were indeed in class. As we will see below, simply having the video on did not correlate to students being present in the class – other distractions abounded – however if the video was off there was no way in which teachers could

be sure the student had not wandered off and was not paying attention at all. It may also be the case that the teachers were overly worried about a problem which had not actually occurred within the school. After all, this was a new experience for them, and the potential for misuse of their image may have loomed large in the imagination.

While I did not witness any seriously disturbing behavior from any of the students in the classes I joined and observed, both students and teachers told me examples of times when students had disrupted the classes. These disturbances were seemingly more common in the beginning of the implementation of Zoom. For example, from time-to-time students would enter the rooms under an alias and disturb the teachers at the beginning of the class. “A lot of students...used to have two devices,” Harpreet in the ninth standard told me, “From one device they used to put their own name, from the other device the other name.” Harpreet told of one student who did this and was caught and removed from the session, a form of punishment Mona School employed from time to time if students were not behaving within the framework given to them by the school. In my interviews with teachers many noted they had never had to remove anyone from a session, and several others mentioned that they had only had to do it a few times. “I don’t know why they do that,” Harpreet said of those students who would cause disturbances in the class “[it] just waste[s] the time of the students as well as the teachers.”

One example I witnessed of a student being removed from a session went like this. A student had obviously been talking and laughing with someone who was off screen. The teacher called them out by name and asked the student, “Why are you talking with someone continuously? [The student unmutes and begins to say something but is cut off] If you want to talk, I can’t allow you to be here, and you have been reminded enough times” [Student mutes herself and continues

talking with someone off screen] while the teacher continued. “Even now you are talking, you are to be out of the session then.” The student was then removed from the session.

Mrs. Taghavi told me about some instances of students entering a classroom under the name of Royia Taghavi. It was common for Royia to float throughout the classes throughout the day to observe how they were being conducted and offer any assistance she could. “They came with the name of Royia,” Mrs. Taghavi told me. The students knew of the unique way in which Royia spelled her name with “yi” and were sure to spell their name the same. “They were coming in and they used to raise their hand” to get the attention of the teacher, who would be fooled and think it was Royia. “[the] teachers said ‘Yes Royia?’ ‘Yes, please Royia?’ and then they [the pranking student] went out [of the Zoom room],” Mrs. Taghavi said. The real Royia, enlisting the help of her technically oriented sister Mona, found out who these children were by seeing which student either had left the room during the time the fake Royia came into the class, or by looking at who had turned off their camera. After several experiences such as this it was decided to begin to implement the waiting room from the fifth standard through the tenth standard. The teachers began only allowing those students into class who had properly listed their name, including their role number. Any name that was unfamiliar to the teacher was not allowed into the room.

Harpreet also described an occurrence where a friend of hers in a class was turning her camera constantly on and off. Teachers told me, and I observed myself in many of the classes I visited, that as there was a school policy that students must have their cameras on, they would stop the class any time a student turned off their camera to remind them to turn it back on. Thus, every time Harpreet’s friend would turn off the camera, the class would stop, and the teacher would remind them to turn the camera back on. Also, when the camera was turned on her friend’s

brother and sister kept “coming into the frame always making some funny faces.” After being reminded several times to keep their camera on, and to keep their siblings from coming into the frame and disturbing the session this individual was removed.

One example I witnessed of a class being interrupted for a student having their video had an interaction that went like this:

Teacher: Suniti, are you here?

Suniti: [Turns camera on]

Teacher: Suniti, unmute

Suniti: [is walking around with the device, then sits down and settles the device]

Teacher: Quickly!

Suniti: [unmutes] Yes miss?

Teacher: Suniti, what is going on?

Suniti: Miss, I was unmuting mys...I was raising my hand and my hand, it was...it went off [the video]

Teacher: Really? Why are you playing with your video?

Suniti: [Mutes, and sits silently]

Hemakshi, another teacher, told me of an early experience with her tenth standard students. She was unaware of the ability for participants to annotate the screen. “Actually, some students, they were scribbling on the screen.” She was surprised to see that such an action was possible. She kindly requested her students to refrain from such behavior.

One behavior that I did witness, and that Mrs. Taghavi told me had become a bit of a problem, is that of students taking a screenshot of themselves at the beginning of class, setting this screenshot as their profile photo and then turning off their camera. Once the camera was turned off, Zoom would show the profile photo instead. This had the effect of giving the appearance that the student had their camera turned on. Of course, it would be obvious after only a small amount

Figure 34

Example of student taking screen shot and using it as their profile photo to be able to have their camera off



of time that this was a photo, as it was static and unmoving, however for a teacher who must concentrate on delivery of the lesson, as well as giving attention to around 50 students, this type of behavior was extremely difficult to detect. This was made even more difficult due to the frequent intermittency of internet connections; it was not uncommon for a student's video to freeze for relatively long periods of time before the connection would stabilize and the movement would begin again. A teacher simply couldn't decipher between a student pulling a prank or a student suffering from intermittency without devoting severely limited amounts of concentration and time on one student.

Figure 34 is an example of a student placing a still photo to fool the teacher to think that their camera is on. Of course, it is placed here as a still photo, outside of the movement of the video of classmates as context, but this exact image stayed on screen for an entire 40-minute class session, unchanged from beginning to end. It even appears as if the left arm is extended holding the mobile device in the act of taking a selfie, an unnatural

position as compared to the average student who has placed the device in front of them and whose hands are not holding the device.

Like a Package

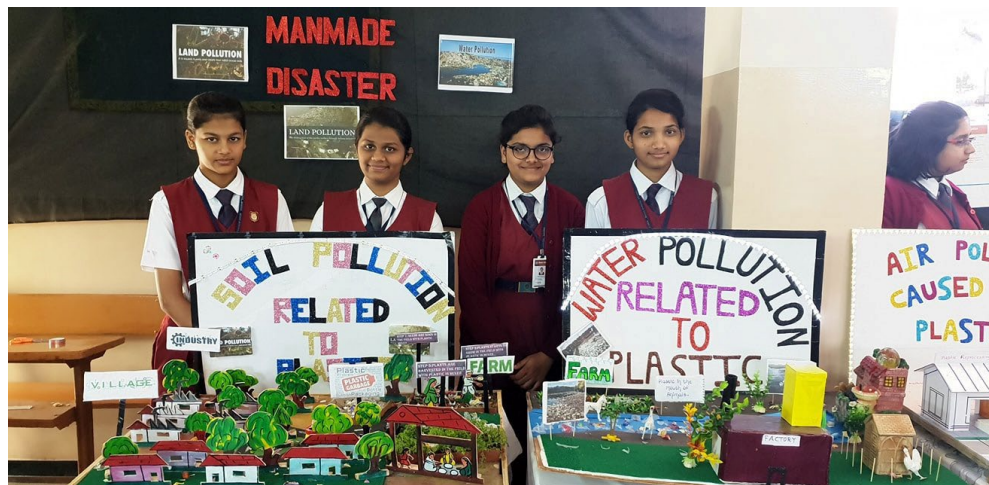
When students and teachers were first asked to think of the differences between online schooling and the physical classroom, it was common for them at first to say there was no difference.

Perhaps they were thinking in terms of content of the syllabus, as in terms of content of the actual material of the class, it appears that there was very little difference between online schooling and the physical version from a syllabus perspective.

However, as conversations progressed, and individuals were given time to reflect, it became clear that not only were there significant differences between the two modes of education, but there was also much that was left out, much that simply could not be replicated in the online space. “[School] assemblies were not there, our PT [physical education] classes were not there online, and many other classes like computer and all the side subjects,” Lalit, a student of the 10th standard told me “[Our] main focus was on the main subjects.”

Figure 35

Students presenting models related to pollution at a science event (picture taken before COVID-19 pandemic)



“It’s like a package of everything together,” Royia told me about the entire schooling experience while describing what was missing, or simply couldn’t be done when school moved online. “We had a lot of events every year, on science, art, and crafts, [etc....] where the child would come and exhibit their talent. Now it can’t be done on Zoom which is just for two hours.” Some of the events which Mona School would host, such as the end of year gala where the families of all the students in the school would be invited, would have thousands of people in the audience whom the children would perform in front of. “[Now] we have events, but it’s all virtual, it’s not on a platform where the child comes in front of thousands of people...the child didn’t get an opportunity to showcase their talent and build their confidence.” She told me about how the pre-primary students as small as three would get in front of these large audiences and recite rhymes from memory. “Now, we can’t have it here [online],” she said with a hint of exasperation. Royia also spoke of the importance of physical health and fresh air and how it was difficult for the school to maintain its physical education through Zoom. “In school they would have it in a week

for two and a half hours, now on Zoom they have it in the week maybe for 40 minutes.” She spoke of the whole education of the child, both the physical and the mental, and how they were both being challenged by having the education at home.

The mental health is also being affected for the kids who would really like to come to school because they just liked school for the teachers, for their friends, and just to be out of the home you know...so yes, it’s a big gap, because it’s just two hours of Zoom [daily] vs. eight hours of physical school. And these things, we cannot do it you know? And I see the change in the students.

Figure 36

Dance during an all-school assembly



Note. Example of a dance at a school assembly. Ironically the dance was focusing on how the overuse of a mobile device leads to headaches, drowsiness, and irritation of the eyes (picture taken before COVID-19 pandemic)

Garima, a student in the ninth standard, described

to me all that she was missing since the classes had moved online. “I miss the co-curricular activities which took place in the school,” she said, “like the elocutions and debates [where the] speaking skills of the students increase and the confidence level

increased.” She told me that they continued doing debates and elocution online, but it wasn’t the

same as it was in the school. She continued to describe to me other parts of the school that were missing

Dance and singing events...motivational dramas, all were not conducted online because it was not possible for the students to gather at the same place [for] dramas and all. We missed that. Certain events were conducted where the students had to show their talents and their skills like art events, science exhibitions etc.... which didn't happen online, so I miss that.

In addition to these events and opportunities which were no longer able to be part of the schooling experience, Royia mentioned other elements that were hard to replicate on Zoom, all what she linked to the quality of discipline,³⁰ which as we saw earlier was an important feature of the Mona School experience. She mentioned that the entire concept of a normal day of school had been interrupted. "It's almost eight hours," she told me regarding the typical school day before the pandemic. "The child gets into the discipline of sitting in one place for that much time." She also mentioned how much more difficult it was to emphasize punctuality online. "They have to be in school right on time at 8:30, that's where it begins – punctuality. The bell is rung at 8:30. And if the child is not in at that time, they have to face the consequences." However, on Zoom enforcing punctuality became very difficult.

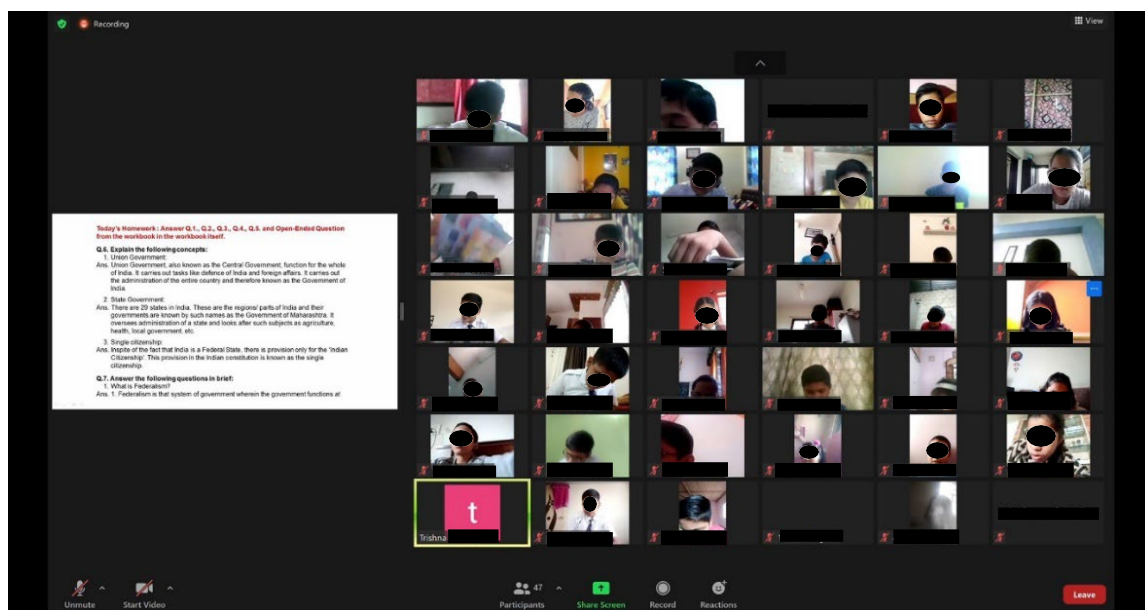
So...now here [on Zoom] they come five minutes late, the teacher is waiting because she cannot start the session, they will miss it, right? There's no point in knowing who is late, they'll say 'sorry miss, we couldn't get the connection', 'sorry miss there was no electricity', they come up with excuses. But in school they cannot come up with these excuses.

³⁰ For more on how Mona School conceptualized discipline and how it manifested within the school environment, see chapter three.

Ratan, a student in the eighth standard, noted this point on punctuality. “At school, we would be more disciplined,” he told me, “And our schedule was more, like we can say, was more timely. We could do everything on time because school was there.” Without the physical structure of the school, Ratan found it more difficult to maintain proper time management for his classes. The phrase *school was there* is an interesting one. School was also *there* on Zoom, but Ratan had made a distinction between the impact of the physical school being *there* and the *there* of the online classes.

Figure 37

Seventh standard civics class



In addition to punctuality, another part of the school experience which Mona School found it difficult to encourage was personal cleanliness and grooming. Again, Royia connected this to discipline. “The haircut should be proper, the nails should be neat, clean [and] cut, the shoes should be you know, like clean, not something dirty,” she said, describing the habits of cleanliness among the children which Mona School works hard on developing. “The child’s

personality is completely groomed when they come to school” Royia described, “and then every little thing...the way the child conducts himself during classes, they’re missing right now on Zoom, because as soon as they come, we mute all of them, so it avoids a lot of noise.”

Education at Home

Decentralizing education from an institution to the homes of each individual student and teacher has its own effects on education. The lines between education and home life become blurred, and days run into one another. “[On Zoom we would] study in one place,” Janki a student in the tenth standard told me. “We [would] attend our lectures on one place, learn on one place, so it was like a feeling of suffocation, like everything in one place.” She mentioned that she would multitask, doing other things while the teacher was lecturing. Janki then noted the feeling of satisfaction that came with the transition from the physical school to the home. “Like, at the end of the day when you leave the classroom, like you have that satisfaction that yes you have done something today,” she described, “but in an online class, it was like ‘ok, this class is over now next class’, ‘this class is over now next class’, just like that.”

Mona School had encouraged the students to find a place to study which would be free from distractions and help to facilitate their learning. The ability to find a place conducive to learning, however, often in a space shared with multiple generations of family, could sometimes prove difficult, and distractions abounded. “At home, children are more distracted by things going on in the house” Kalyani, a teacher, told me, “Like when family members are talking, they get distracted.” This issue of distraction was a recurring theme among not only the teachers, but also the students that I spoke with.

Khushi, a 10th standard student, noted that “sometimes it was really chaotic like at home. We have family members that move around, or they talk. Sometimes it was disturbing.” She

contrasted this with the “really good atmosphere” of the school where students knew that they had to study. Early on in her online education she sat in the living room, a public place where her family members would often move around in. “But then I shifted to [my] room, and now I close the doors of the room, so that no one can come.” She had seemingly found the solution. “Whenever we are learning at home...we continuously will be distracted,” Saurabh said, “but in school, our attention, we are focused on what we have to do.” We can see in figure 38 a student who is in the middle of taking an exam dealing with the distraction of individuals in the background eating and talking, apparently with others who are not in the frame.

Figure 38

Example of individuals in the background while student is taking an exam



While Mona School had encouraged all students to find a place in their home that would be conducive to studying and would give the students a chance to concentrate in their studies, often even in the case when a student was able to find a separate space to study, they would still be interrupted. For example, Garima in the ninth standard told me that even if she had locked herself in her room “we are able to hear some noise of the tv, or the movies, or speakers, phone, whatever is in our house. So, we get distracted, and we cannot concentrate easily.” She contrasted this with the feeling she gets in the school. “In school we have peace of mind, we get that inner peace where we can concentrate and focus on what we have to do, like what we have to study.” Ekta in the eighth standard mentioned that studying at home was quite distracting as, “My family members used to come to my room and ask me if I was hungry, or if I was thirsty or

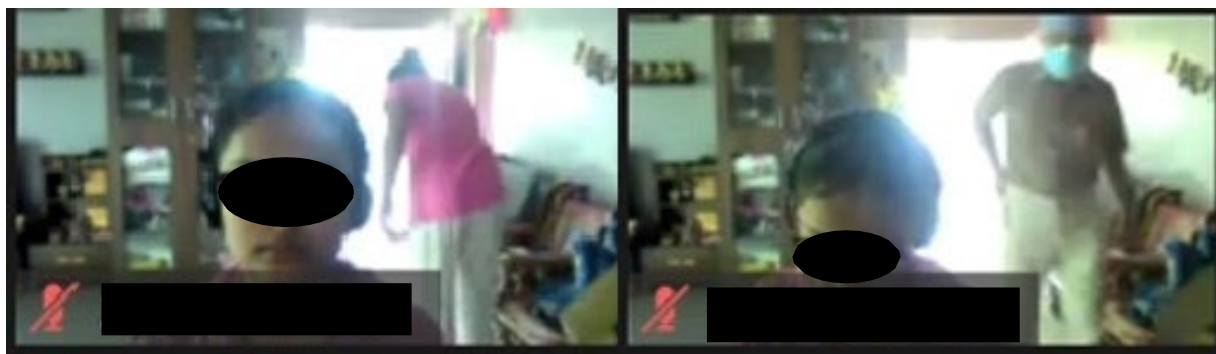
if I needed something, and the atmosphere, sometimes was not that conducive [to studying].”

Another student mentioned that if they shut the door to their room to dampen the noise from the house, they would get quite hot as there was no fan in the room, and it would get stuffy.

However, if he opened the window to let in fresh air to circulate, the noise from the neighborhood would then be allowed into his space and would distract him from his studies.

Figure 39

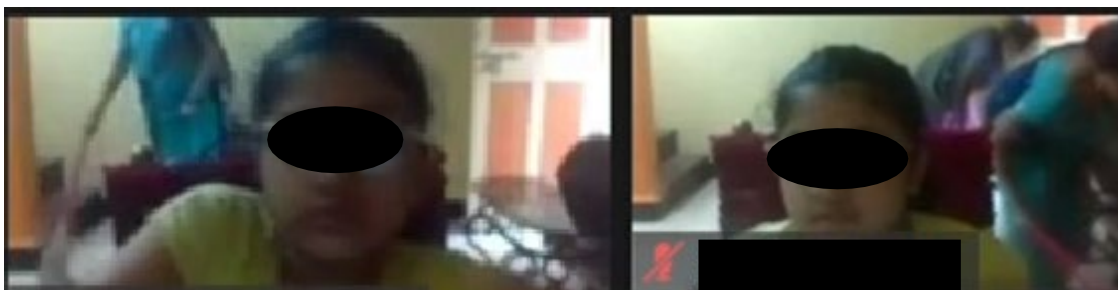
Example of a individuals on screen in the background with a student



In my observation of the classes, it was a frequent occurrence for individuals other than the students would show up on screen doing various tasks in the background, or even at times interacting with the students on screen. At times conversations would occur between students and these individuals, all while they of course were on mute. In many cases students appeared

Figure 40

Example of individuals sweeping and cleaning in the background while student studies



to be talking to someone who was off screen. In figures 39 and 40, taken several minutes apart from the same class, we witness individuals in the space in which these students are studying.

In both cases above, the type of activity shown in the photos was regularly occurring

Figure 41

Example of distraction by a sibling



throughout the entire 40-minute session. In other cases, siblings would come into the frame, or at least hands or feet would. For example, in figure 40 we see the feet of a sibling who had been for some time kicking the student. The student would push the feet away, and as the behavior persisted, he began to hit the feet of the offscreen sibling. A parent came into the frame to assumingly tell the student to stop hitting the feet of the sibling. The sibling then

Figure 42

Students joining class from a stairwell and from what appears to be a construction site.



began to jump on the bed, hitting the device, causing the camera to turn off. The student quickly turned the camera back on and repositioned the device, as it had been knocked from where it had been positioned. The student then apparently carried on a conversation with the sibling

off screen, who then eventually comes into the frame. This student was constantly distracted during this class by the presence of this sibling.

In other cases, the space that students had found that was less distracting were either outside, or in stairwells of their homes or apartments, as seen in figure 42.

At times there would be two students studying together in the same room with one another. Sometimes they would be in the same frame, giving attention to the same device as if they were in the same class together. At other times they would be using separate devices, giving the impression they were in two different classes. Figure 43 shows such a case, in which both students are listening to their class using headphones, which can only be seen as an attempt not to disturb the other student in the room with the audio.

Figure 43

Two Students Studying in the Same Room, pictures taken on two different days of class



A different type of distraction was mentioned by Udai in the seventh standard. He mentioned that his brother would use multiple apps at the same time on the mobile device he was studying from. This would allow his brother to have both the Zoom app and YouTube open at the same time.

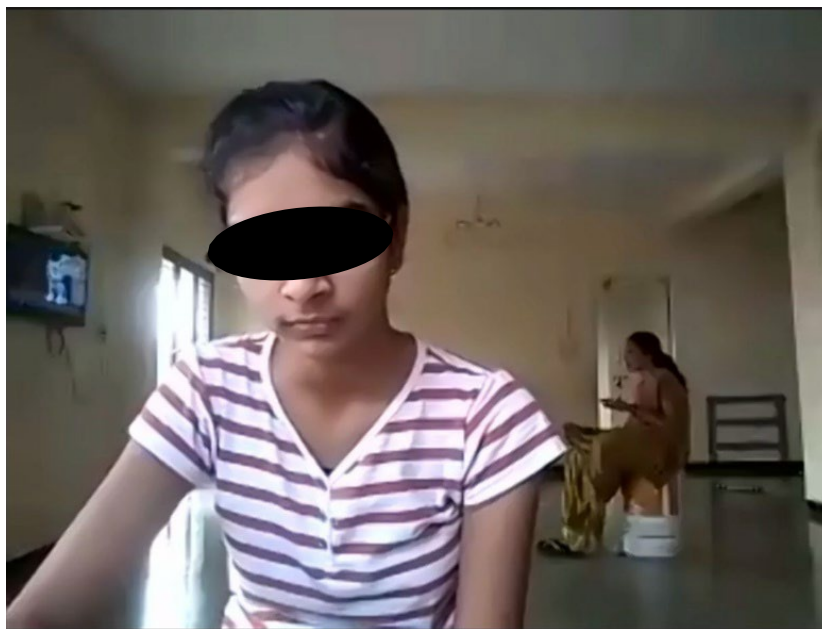
“Anybody can watch YouTube through[out] the Zoom session,” Udai told me. He didn’t know of anyone else besides his brother that did that regularly but thought that it must happen from time to time with other students.

Deepti in the 6th standard noted the difference in atmosphere between the school and the home.

“Classes in the home [are] also good but, like, if we are in school there is an atmosphere of studying, means at home also we study, but some circumstances come in between.” These circumstances could be family walking in and among the educational space, or “noisiness” which would compete with the attention for the teachers. “In the school it does not happen,” Deepti explained, “we have everything – means like we have the teachers in front of us, and then we have a feeling like that, yes this is the school, we come here to learn and study so we should study well.” She mentioned that they study at home as well, but it just wasn’t the same as in the

Figure 44

Example of a student studying in a space with someone watching television in the background



school.

Deepti also talked about what she called a “feeling” that you get when you are physically located within the same space as the teacher. She noted that because the teachers are seeing the students physically, they will “get the feeling that yes, the students are understanding” Deepti said, “on online sessions they were

also seeing, but physically is different, and online is different, na?” She went on to describe more about the difference in atmosphere between the home and the school. She differentiated between a physical and mental presence and how both were necessary if one wanted to be successful in their studies. While she explained you could be physically and mentally present for studies both at home and in the school, the chance of that presence being “broken” was significantly higher at home.

We are physically here and mentally also here on the online session, but as sometimes there are network issues or anything, we can’t get what the teacher is meaning to say, or at the same time when something important has begun, [because of the] network [or] technical issue, the link between us is broken [sic]. But in school, it doesn’t happen, and our mental body is also supporting us to go with our physical body at school.

The difficulty of having mental presence in an online session was also described to me by Royia, who explained with some exasperation about the phenomenon of some students playing with their video to give the impression of being present, when they were not mentally engaged. “Like, our school is very disciplined when it comes to kids having to be present in school,” she told me, “And if you’re not present you have to take a prior permission.”

But right now, since everything is online so what the child does, [say] they are traveling from Satara to Panchgani. They just attend the session online on Zoom, switch off their video in between, [and] just switch it on to show the teacher they are there. But mentally the child isn’t present in this session, so what’s the use of it?

A few of the teachers, in reflecting on education from home vis-à-vis classroom education used the words closeness or nearness to describe one of the differences. They didn’t mean it in a physical sense, but rather in terms of the ability to maintain attention and concentration, as in

closeness to the work the students must do – cognitive closeness with the teacher and emotional nearness to the students. “They are at home with the parents or their grandparents, sometimes somebody [is] talking in [the] other room on the phone, it diverts the students’ attention,” Dipika, one of the teachers, told me. She continued to describe that in the online session, they are sitting there, looking, and listening to her, but “somehow, we can see the attention fully 100% is [not] there...that is missing.” And although she regularly would call and talk with both the parents and students who were struggling with attendance or turning in homework, it still didn’t bring the same level of closeness as what was there previously.

Another dimension of this is the amount of time spent online vs. in the school. Six hours of instruction in the school day, vs. at the most three on Zoom. In the physical school, Dipika told me, “Students are with this teacher [for a long time], and [the] teacher is everything for the students.” Purva also noted this issue of closeness. “To teach physically in the school is very good, we go near to the students’ hearts, and we understand their problems,” Purva related to me, “we feel very nicely and properly where they are [understanding] and where they are lagging behind.” She noted, as others had, that in the physical school the students could meet them at different times of the day in passing and often ask questions of clarification, “but online, once it is over, we are not meeting them [again].”

Presence of Parents as Distraction vis-à-vis a Boon

It is important to note that while it was common for individuals to come on screen, and for students to appear to be having conversations with individuals off screen, most students most of the time were in spaces where they did not appear to be interrupted, and where they could focus on the class. However, it was clear from interviews with the students that going physically to a school offers a qualitatively different experience than being at home. It is also important to note

that the distractions at home from the parents was a phenomenon that largely affected the higher standards. The presence of the parents for the younger ages was a boon for the teachers, as they were largely dependent on the presence of a family member – generally a parent or grandparent – to assist the young child in completing the activities of the class. “Maybe until fourth standard some parents are sitting with students,” one of the pre-primary teachers, Vaishali, related to me, “and above fifth standard they’re sitting alone.” Urvashi, one of the pre-primary teachers described to me how the parents assisted. “Whatever instructions we give to children, because [they] are small they don’t understand” she said.

The parents would immediately assist the students in whatever task the teacher was requesting of the student, to help the child stand to recite rhymes, to bring the notebook for the child to write or color in, to help them with their drawing or coloring. “Parents do that work” she said. I asked her if the children ever became distracted because of the presence of their parents, she replied “not yet, but we had asked the parents to make the environment proper...we asked them to make a school atmosphere, so nobody interferes in that.” Even though the parents were sitting with the children, they were mostly off screen.

Although the parents are with the smaller children, because the sessions were held entirely in English this at times could create confusion for some parents. “[A few parents] are not able to understand English,” Esha told me, “So they are giving a call [after class].” They would call her to clarify instructions that may have missed or not understood completely. “Because...we are teaching in English only in the Zoom session, afterwards if they are having any query...they’re asking their questions in their mother tongue.” She would talk with parents in Marathi or even at times in Hindi.

This potential presence of parents in the educational space of the students had the effect of causing some of the teachers to be more aware of what they were saying, and how they were addressing the students. One teacher described the effect the parents had on her presentation, “their parents also are there with them, we should talk polite. Everything changed.” She compared how much “freer” she felt in the classroom without the potential of the parents listening in. Now when she taught, she felt as if she had to think about everything she would say before she would say it. The presence of the parents, she told me “Creates a difference. With the students we are very free, we can say whatever.”

Network and Technology Problems

At the center of Mona School’s online educational endeavors stood two pillars: internet, and devices. Together these formed the technological solution that allowed the school to move forward. However, these had their limitations and caused issues throughout education.

Hemakshi, one of the teachers, spoke at length about the various issues she had encountered with her students in the online classroom. Sometimes the internet would cut in and out; the video of the students would not show up, even though the student was insistent it was turned on,

We keep on telling them to put on their video, [they] say that ‘miss my video is on’ [and] in the participants [list] also [is] showing it is on, but it’s not on”; “sometimes they have password problems, they keep on messaging me that ‘miss my password is coming wrong’, and they send me a screenshot also, then I keep on motivating them [to] keep on trying.

The mobile internet data packages that the students purchase for their devices at times finished, so they didn’t have data to join the class; “sometimes they say that ‘miss my laptop battery has

gone down’³¹...or ‘I’ll be joining with the mobile or with some other laptop’; “these are the problems students have frequently,” Hemakshi told me.

Descriptions of the link between student and teacher being broken due to an issue with the internet was a common theme that came through in interviews with teachers, students, and administrators. Drops in network connection, or intermittency, caused by a range of issues were a seemingly constant feature of the online classes and were often cited as one of the reasons why students said they preferred classes in the physical school. Khushi told me that “in physical classes, we can immediately, if we have any doubt, we can ask it. But sometimes in Zoom, there’s a problem [with the] microphone, so the voice cannot reach to the desired person.”

Garima also stated something similar, comparing the experience of the physical school to that of the online classes, “in Zoom basically when we clarify doubts there might come some network issue, we can get disconnected through which we cannot understand what the teacher has to say, or the voice breaks.” She contrasted this with the physical classroom in which this issue never occurs, and they are always able to hear the teacher properly. Later in the interview, Garima had been positively describing her experience. I commented that it seemed her experience had been a good one. She responded by saying “I did have a good experience, but I think going physically to the school is the best experience ever because sometimes as you know, the net cuts and we have to suffer.” This intermittency was ever-present as Lalit stated “we didn’t have any surety of how strong the internet connectivity was going to be that day. So sometimes we used to miss a few points, but in [physical] school it was very clear, clear to all of us.”

Saurabh, a student in the sixth standard, noted how he felt angry when experiencing internet

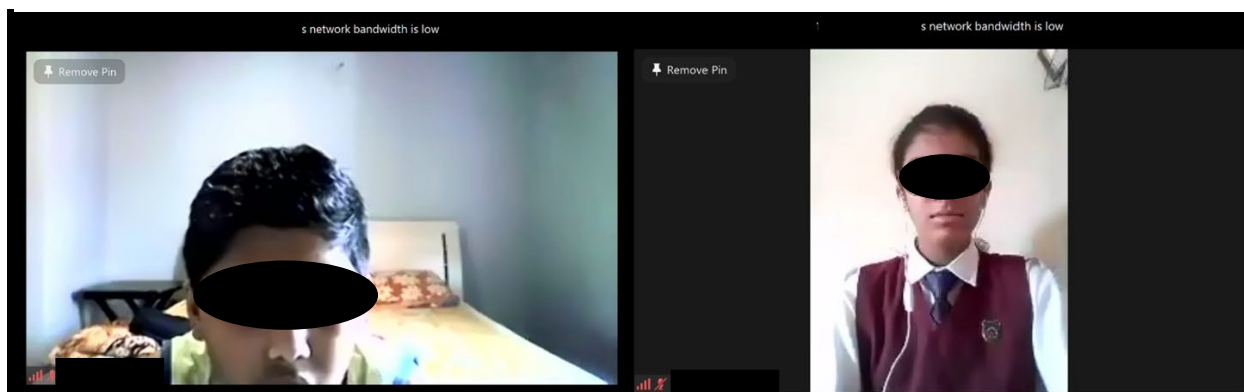
³¹ With frequent power cuts in Satara due to the electric grid being overburdened, the students at times were not able to charge their laptop or mobile at a particular moment of need.

issues “I faced that many times,” he told me, “And I was really like, angry.” He mentioned how he would be completing a large amount of work, and then suddenly lose connection. “When I was linked with the teacher, I was very happy, and in the middle, there was a connection issue and I got really angry.” He went on to describe what he would do after the connection of a class would be interrupted. “When the connection is gone, we would call our friends...and we would ask ‘is it ok with you?’” They would help each other troubleshoot and figure out what was preventing them from connecting.

I often witnessed examples of this intermittency while observing the classes. At times the network issues cause students to either be late or miss a class entirely. At times it was the technology itself. Video would be jumpy, voices would cut in and out while talking, and Zoom would even make note of the time when the connection was particularly bad, as evidenced in figure 45.

Figure 45

Example of Zoom highlighting the low bandwidth of students



With the move to online education, data suddenly became a much more prominent consideration for all involved. “Our teachers used to do two GB [gigabytes of data] for the whole month,”

Royia described to me, “now they have to use daily two GB.” This was an increase in cost for the teachers as they suddenly were required to spend more on data costs than they had before. Royia mentioned that with most of the teachers teaching from home during the pandemic the administration had told them “You had to put fuel in your car and your vehicle to come to school, but now you pay that money for your internet pack.” Data was an additional cost to all involved, but the prices for data in India remain some of the cheapest in the world in price per gigabyte; as low as \$0.05 according to one study (cable.co.uk, 2021). Teachers noted various costs for the data that they were using. Most had a pack that allowed them to use two gigabytes per day, which seemed to be sufficient for most of them. A few mentioned that they may run out and need to purchase additional gigabytes of data at certain times.

Lalit offered a summary of his experience with online education which echoed many of the sentiments stated to me by both students and teachers:

.... taking classes from school is anytime better than online classes. So right now, we actually don't have...I can say not so good infrastructure of any network and [it] goes and comes, so maybe we have missed a lot of things in school. And in [physical] school we get to meet our friends, to meet our teachers and so, at first, I – when we were not used to it, we would just sit, we would listen to all those classes and it was new to us, we felt curious about it. We started learning through it and we adjusted to all these situations, and now we are – we can use this with pretty ease. And now, we don't have any problem right now.

Although network issues were constantly brought up in a discussion around the comparison between online and physical education, the content of the interviews suggest that this is not the main reason why students preferred in-person classes – rather this is just one piece of an

aggregate experience that students have in a physical school. We can see that the students named many reasons why the in- person experience was preferred. Students referred to this as *atmosphere, feeling* or *energy*. These reasons included the ability to ask questions – in the local parlance *clear doubts* – of teachers or fellow students without delay or interruption; the social interaction and fellowship with friends from all standards; the ability to freely see everything in one glance with one’s own eyes; sharing one’s tiffin [lunch box] with fellow students; collective physical education activities; artistic skits and presentations; and service projects to alleviate the material suffering of the poor or provide companionship to the elderly. All these aggregated together to create an *atmosphere of learning* which simply could not be replicated by the decentralization of the locus of activity from a school to the individual homes of the students. This was felt by all the students and teachers I talked to and expressed in a diversity of ways.

School as an Equalizer

Observing the online classes via Zoom offered a very interesting view into the worlds of the students. Because of the requirement from Mona School for all students to always have their video on, as I was sitting in these virtual rooms and observing classes, I had an amazing, almost literal, window into a small slice of the reality these students inhabited. This simultaneously was fascinating and troubling, revealing many things; for example, the diversity of spaces from where the students joined classes. From lush, luxurious surroundings, to humble abodes with corrugated steel roofs, and everything in-between, the spaces from where the students were studying said a lot. I realized that in one sense the physical school becomes an equalizer, as all students are in an equal space studying – the school building. Online schooling removes that equalizing factor, and the realities of the spaces where each student studies is suddenly vastly varied, affording some more comfort, autonomy, and peace than others. Some students had given

thought to the space which would appear on camera, beautifying it with various hangings, or what appeared to be strategic placement of a camera to show off a particular background. Other students had a very tight frame which did not show much more than a bit of a non-descript piece of wall.

In figure 46 we can see the spaces of four students. The top two are from the same standard in the same class, as are the bottom two. The top left student is studying from a space with a corrugated roof – a well-known sign of a home from an individual from a lower-income family – and is seen with a curtain that has been hung on a line across the room, perhaps to beautify the background. We don't know if this is a common space, or the bedroom of this student. In the top right photo, it is quite safe to assume that this is the student's bedroom, with his bed in the background. The walls are a painted plaster, and the environment much brighter and cheerier than his classmate. In the bottom two photos we again see a stark contrast in the environment in which the students study. In the photo on the left we see sculpted ceilings, well-kept painted walls and a staircase leading to a second floor, indicating the home is relatively large. In the photo on the right, we see what appears to be a door with peeling paint, plaster walls with cracks running through them and a simple ceiling. The space on the left is full of light and gives a sense of openness, whereas that on the right appears to be dark and feels tight.

Figure 46

Examples of the variety of spaces from which students joined class, highlighting economic disparity



Another equalizing factor which Mona School employed during physical education was the use of school uniforms. Uniforms were a required feature of Mona School prior to the pandemic. However, as the lockdown occurred, and shops were closed, students were no longer able to

purchase new uniforms, and many outgrew the ones they had. Because of this, the school was not able to require the students to wear their uniforms, although they strongly encouraged it. Many students told me that the wearing of their uniform during online classes helped them maintain the feeling that they were indeed going to school.

The Power of a Glance – The Difference Between the Physical and Online Classroom

Regarding teaching in the physical classroom, many teachers spoke of the ability to be able with one glance to capture several layers of information about the class. This was in contrast with Zoom, where a teacher would have to look at individual students on the screen. All faces of the children are not even available at one time on Zoom, requiring teachers to scroll through different pages of children. “In front of us we can see 47 children at a time,” Shalini, a primary teacher, told me in relation to her physical classroom, “It’s very easy, in one glance I can see the full class, what they are busy with, what they are doing. I can see each and every one.” Zoom, however severely limited this ability to see with a glance what the students were doing, at times even though the cameras would be on, she still wouldn’t be able to see her students as the cameras had not been adjusted properly, she told me. She also found it uncomfortable to tell the students to adjust their cameras so that she would be able to see them, “I find [it] very rude in a session to say this.” Royia noted the difficulty that the teachers had of simultaneously teaching, sharing their screens, and handling the technology. “She [the teacher] cannot see whether a child is sleeping there, or busy doing something else, or just yawning or whatever,” Royia described. “In school, the teacher quickly points out ‘excuse me, you have to sit properly, be alert, be awake’ the child quickly understands, you know, how to take [care] of himself well.” Hemakshi also noted the vast difference between the physical classroom and the Zoom room. “We were in between [the] students [before],” she told me about the physical classroom, “but

now we are all alone. We feel no one is around us and we think that we are only talking to [a] machine, like we are only talking to [the] laptop.” Although she told me that she could see and interact with the students via Zoom, there was still a qualitative difference between seeing them on Zoom and seeing them in a physical classroom. “This is something different,” she said about interacting with the students via Zoom, “we see small icons on the laptop of all the students, but physically we can’t see them.”

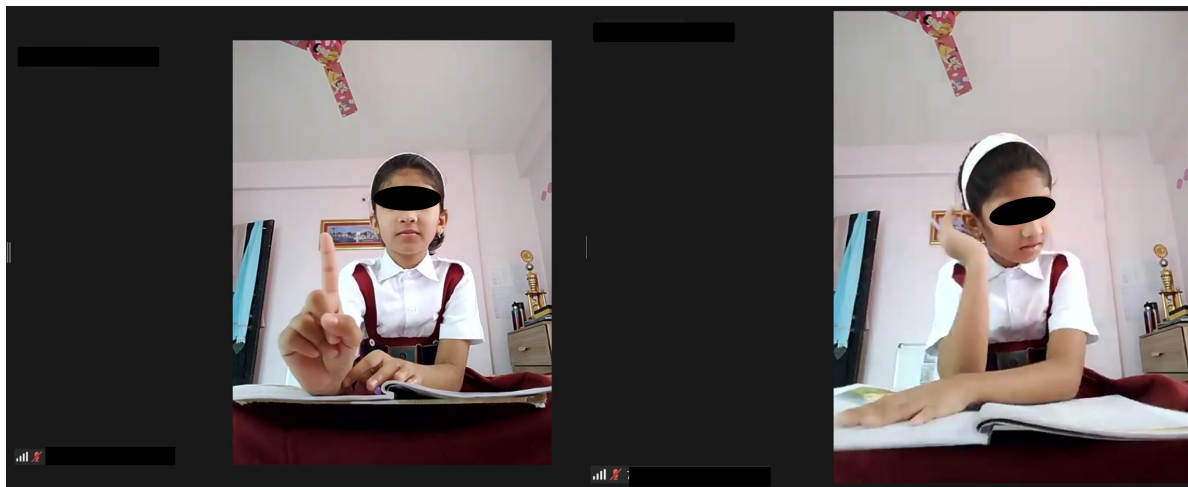
Teachers were also not able to see all children on the screen at one time “we can see 15, 16 students on the screen,” Lata told me. And although she could at times rotate between the different pages of students to be able to see them all, “mostly when teaching we are not able to rotate” she said, as she would be busy with the presentation. However, during times in the class where interaction was called for, she would rotate throughout the pages of students asking questions and making sure all the students had understood the content, “at that time we are rotating,” she told me. Dipika told me that she could see 20 to 25 students at a time on her screen. “While teaching I switch the screen, so I come to know what’s going on, what they are doing.” Even so, she was still dependent on the student themselves raising their, virtual, hand if they were having any issue, at which point “quickly we go to them [to see] what happened.” The number of students they could see while sharing their screens during presentations was significantly reduced, to around four students.

From time to time, I would see students who obviously wanted to say something, either wanting to ask a question or make a comment and they would raise their *physical* hand to indicate as such. In one such instance, shown in figure 47, over the period of a minute or so the student raised their hand multiple times, and then muttered something to themselves and put their hand, and head, down in what appeared to be a defeated demeanor caused by not being called on by the

teacher. If the class would have been physical, according to what teachers were telling me about the power of a glance, there would have been a greater chance this student would have been seen and called upon.

Figure 47

Student trying to get attention of a teacher to make a comment



Another element of this was what one teacher described as *reach*. “What happens in the classroom, we are asking them, we are in front of them, they are in front of us, so interaction [is] more,” Lata mentioned. The physical room allowed her to elicit more response from a wider number of students Lata explained. She mentioned that in the Zoom sessions, they also call upon students to interact, but that participation was significantly less than in a physical classroom. “[On Zoom] everyone we are not reaching, that is the problem,” she stated matter-of-factly. Hemakshi, a teacher, also noted the different in responses from the students on Zoom vs. the physical classroom. She mentioned that in the physical classroom “we give more importance [to] the presentation of the students,” she described. This presentation was in terms of orally describing a portion of the lesson, the recreation of some lesson via written lessons, or simply

asking students to recall some bit of information. These types of “presentations” were all weaker over Zoom according to Hemakshi.

One example is that...if we ask any question to any student online, sometimes we will not be able to hear them. They said that ‘we have a network problem’, or ‘my audio is on but I’m not able to speak loudly’. Though they may be speaking, but [we] will not be able to hear it. Physically, this problem we won’t have. What we expect from [the] student we get it when they’re coming physically, but we won’t get it when students are online.

Teacher Control, Student Obedience

Another theme that came through talking with some of the teachers is what they described as the loss of control as a teacher and the loss of the obedience of the children. This was described both in relation to the higher standards, as well as the pre-primary sections, although it manifested differently in these different age groups. Dipika, a teacher of higher standards, mentioned that she received many phone calls from parents expressing frustration that their students were not sitting for the Zoom session, they were not doing their homework properly. She correlated this directly to the loss of the control that the teacher has in the physical classroom, where the teacher can help engender an atmosphere of discipline in the studies. “It matters I think,” Dipika told me in relation to the effect an atmosphere of discipline which a school engenders can have on students. “All their life cycle was changed now,” she said in relation to the pandemic causing school to move online. Now, Dipika told me, “They’re free, they’re relaxed” describing many students’ attitude towards their study. She would send PDFs of the homework through WhatsApp to the students, but many would submit it late. She thought maybe the students were thinking “I will do it afterwards, I can do it like that,” she mentioned that “in the school setting, in the six hours they would complete the [work] and show to me.” She thought the loss of the

structure of the school caused students to feel freer, relaxed and less motivation to complete their work.

Shalini mentioned a similar phenomenon, but with different causes. In the pre-primary classes, where she worked, almost always there was either a parent or grandparent accompanying the students, who were ages three to six and needed the help of an older person. “In the [physical] class, whatever we say the children are obeying us, but now the parents are assisting them, and the children are not obedient,” Shalini told me. She could no longer easily tell the students to “leave that, now you have to finish this, this part is to be completed during the session itself, or you have to recite this full rhyme in the class.”

She explained that in a physical classroom when the children are all together without the presence of their parents “we need not force them, they do it along with the other children.” She spoke of the ease in the physical classroom with which she could guide the entire class to do activities. “And the learning was faster on their part, as in the group they learn faster” she said, “now, we require great help from [the] dear parents, they need to assist the children.” Even though she would still be leading the class and guiding and giving instructions, “the actual work to be done is with the parents, so it depends on how they are teaching and how they are getting the work done from the children.” She mentioned that during an online session it was extremely difficult to see how the work was being completed by the children, she often wouldn’t know until the parents had submitted the work via WhatsApp after the class session itself.

The Shortened Class Day on Zoom

Zoom presented a challenge of a shortened period. “We can ask our doubts on Zoom, but like the whole class gets disturbed...we ask doubts, but not [from] everybody because of the short time.” Saurabh in the sixth standard also noted how not everyone was able to ask their questions on

Zoom. “The interaction in the online classes is different,” he mentioned, “we will keep raising our hands in these online sessions, and we actually sometimes don’t get a chance. But [in] physical school we get that chance”

Udai in the seventh standard also mentioned the effect of a shorter school time. “In [the] Zoom session we have [a] smaller time period, so like we have to complete it fast,” he told me. “In school we have like seven to six, eight hours. We get much time....” He went on to describe an environment in which there was plenty of time to ask questions or to clarify doubts on the lesson that had just been presented.

The Relationship Between Students and Teachers

Both teachers and students noted points about how their interaction was on Zoom as compared to the physical classroom. Students spoke often of clearing doubts, which was the process of them clarifying any points which they had not fully understood from the lesson. There appeared to be less comfort, freedom, and convenience when it came to clearing doubts in an online forum.

Bhagyashri described a certain freedom that had been removed by moving online. When they were going to physical classes, they could find their teacher available multiple times during the day in which they could ask their questions. “We used to go to [the] teacher in recess, or before recess...but now the only thing is [we] have to raise our hand, and then the teacher unmutes us and then we can ask what our doubts are.” Ekta told me that she used to have far more discussions in the physical classes, “but here the teacher just explained the lesson, and we are given worksheets.” Deepti used the word energy in relation to how the teacher and student would both be motivated to learn and teach in a physical classroom. “The feeling which we have when she is in front of us is different than the feeling which we have when she’s online,” Deepti

explained, “She can also see us, means she also gets an energy, and we also get an energy to learn more.”

Many students also mentioned how they missed the social component of meeting with their friends at school. “We don’t have tiffin breaks” Garima in the ninth standard told me, “We don’t have our recess time where we used to mix up with our friends and enjoy the time.” Many students mentioned that they missed their friends. For example, Ekta in the eighth standard mentioned that the thing she missed the most about going to the physical school was her friends. Chandini told me “The one thing I missed a lot was like, my friends...in the lunch break we used to meet, so now there’s like nothing.” Bhagyashri used the word “fun” to describe what was missing from online education. “The fun,” she told me, “Which we used to have eating together and chit chatting, eye to eye contact, these things [are] missing in online classes,” I asked her if she felt it was important for a school to have such things. “Yes,” she replied,

these are like precious memories, like some jokes which we create, and these remain in our mind forever. But now, like online classes are there. Teachers tell us jokes, and we communicate with teachers, and teachers make us laugh, but the laughter and chit chat with friends, and eye to eye contact with them, that’s the main things which really lacks in online education.

Janki in the tenth standard talked about the freedom of movement and interaction she had in the physical classroom that simply just was not possible on Zoom. “In physical classes, like we can, we could just turn back and say like ‘hey did you catch that? Like did you understand what she told?’” Janki told me. “Here [on Zoom] we were obviously on mute, so we have to wait for the teacher to finish, then we have to ask.”

Moral Education

In a school such as Mona where moral education is not seen as something separate or optional, but rather an integral part of education and the purpose of a school. Relocating individuals all to their separate homes had a severe impact on the ability of the school to maintain this type of education. One of the reasons why is because of the social nature of the development of moral capacities. Many realize the necessity of a community in the process of developing moral capabilities (Smith, 1999; Farid-Arbab, 2018). Our patience, kindness, truthfulness, generosity etc.... cannot truly be tested until we encounter others around us in various social interactions. A teacher who is aware of this element of moral education is put at an incredible disadvantage when learning moves online. As Urvashi, a pre-primary teacher explained, in the classroom “we come to know how they are, how they get along with their peers and [how] their nature is, but when they are at home, we are not aware [of] how they are because only for some time they are in front of us.” She also noted how the presence of the parents also disrupts this process, as they may behave differently in front of their parents then they would in a classroom away from them. Chitra, a teacher of the tenth standard, described to me the variety of activities prior to the pandemic which the students would participate in. These were outwardly focused on providing some act of service to the wider community, which in turn helped develop the moral capabilities of the students. “We go to old-aged homes so that children see how is the condition of many of the oldest people and how they are thrown out by their children,” Chitra told me while describing one act of service students engaged in. In addition to providing the elderly with much appreciated social interaction it also had the purpose of helping the children realizing the importance of respecting and taking care of their own parents. Chitra lamented the fact that during the pandemic they had not been able to carry on all the activities that the school had employed before to help instill understanding of moral capabilities within the students.

However, she did note how the school had been able to continue a bit of this online. For example, in celebration of India's independence they had told children to prepare a patriotic dance which would celebrate the diversity of cultures throughout all of India. "We had told the children to prepare the patriotic dance, and...send us the video. So, through this way they are doing it [engaging in some activities]".³² And even though the school did its best to recreate these types of activities virtually, often by having the students record videos that would often then be shared on Facebook, it wasn't the same. Chandini, one of the students, told me,

Figure 48

Mona Schools students visiting the elderly.



Note. From left to right: Students performing for the elderly; students playing games at stations set up for the elderly; students handing out snacks for the elderly (all photos taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic)

We had dance, we had dramas, we had role plays, debates. But in here [online] they were not there for us, the teachers used to give us, like, you have to do a video and send it, but I really miss, like, doing it on the stage.

³² For more on how Mona School employed social media to help make up for the limitations imposed upon it by the pandemic, see the next chapter on the use of social media.

Another activity designed to both raise the moral capacity of the students while also providing a service to the wider community which could not be continued during the pandemic was what the school calls the “Wall of Kindness.” Ratan, a student in the eighth standard told me this is where “we, all the students give one thing, and those things are given to poor people which come in our school and take them.” The students collect stationary supplies, food items, clothing items, toys, shoes etc. and then use the courtyard of the school to arrange them.

Figure 49

The wall of kindness



Note. From left to right: Mona School Students with clothes; a family after receiving new clothes and food; Mona School students preparing to give out food (all photos taken prior to COVID-19 pandemic)

Families and individuals who are in need are then invited to the school to be able to select from the items that have been collected.

All-School Assembly

The move to online learning also severely disadvantaged Mona School’s efforts to provide moral education with the loss of one of its main components – the all-school assembly. “Every week, two times, we have a gathering of all the students of one section,” Aarushi, one of the teachers, told me “That is from class five to class ten...and for all lower classes, that is class one to class four.” These two sections, Standards one through four and five through ten used

this space to explore moral capabilities. Aarushi continued to describe the purpose of the assemblies,

We have assemblies where we gather and we talk about these values, and they play some stories, they say some quotes. They also learn their meanings and they try to inculcate the values in themselves as well as they try to send a message all the other students. And we [the teachers] also assist them in doing so.

“The teachers used to choose one particular topic, say unity,” Royia told me, “And the whole week was dedicated to unity.” Mona School would call the sections together in the main hall to be introduced to the moral capability which the school would introduce to the students that week. Many different activities would happen at the assembly, dramatized skits emphasizing the moral that had been chosen, choreographed dances exploring the notion and quotations would be introduced exploring that capability. The students and teachers would take the energy from the all-school assembling into their classrooms for the entire week. It was understood that both the teachers and the students would need to spend that week practicing the implementation of that moral capability. “[In the assembly] we used to have [it was] based on some moral like for example honesty, or justice, or we can say truth, or obedience or honoring one’s parents, kindness, love, equality,” described Hemakshi, one of the teachers. She described one of the activities which the students would engage in during the assembly to help them explore truthfulness one of these virtues. Two students would both be given two quotes which would be related to the topic, these two students would study the quotes together and then would be given the opportunity to share their explanation of the meaning with the other students. These students would then work with others to create a skit based on their understanding of the meaning of the verses. “So, Monday usually we used to have an

explanation of verses,” Hemakshi explained, “and then on Friday we used to have skits...and then after the skit we were [having] a question-and-answer session [for] all the students.”

They would ask the students what they had learned from the skits and again reflect on the meaning of the quotes that they had been given at the beginning of the week.

Figure 50

Dances and skits highlighting the theme of one world one people for a school assembly.



Note. Left to right: dance highlighting the importance of honesty; skit exploring the importance of unity between Christians, Muslims, and Hindus; dance/skit honoring the life of Mona Mahmudnizhad, whom Mona School is named after.

The responsibility for preparing the skit rotated among the various standards in the school. “[It] takes two weeks to prepare [for it],” Dipika, one of the teachers, told me “And the third week our turn is there.” The standards and the school took great care in the preparation of the program of the assembly. “Taghavi sir is so particular,” Dipika mentioned in the care and attention that Mr. Taghavi gave to the preparation of the assembly. Mr. Taghavi would visit the group preparing for the assembly and consult with the teacher about what topic they were planning on presenting and how they would bring about participation and understanding among the students. “Then sir [Mr. Taghavi] is adding to that, is asking questions...this is a task when my class is there [to prepare for the assembly] that I should think that, you know, my class should be perfect.” Dipika spoke with energy and fondness about the assembly. She specifically requested me to mention in my research about how much she and the other teachers were missing this aspect of Mona

School. “You should mention [in your research], Dipika requested, “the assembly program we are missing so much.”

Many of the students when asked what they were missing about school pre-COVID, or what was not included in the online version of education very quickly noted the assembly. Saurabh noted that he missed the assembly “very much.” I asked him why. “Because every standard gets a chance to perform in that assembly, we have a skit. Many students [and] classes come in the hall,” he answered. He also mentioned that it was an occasion where the members of different standards could socialize with one another, and a space in which news about the school was shared to everyone. “We miss that,” he said “we are the students who are observing the students [who] are performing. [We] can also give answers. It’s actually very good, and I love that.”

Royia mentioned how difficult it was using a platform like Zoom to develop moral capabilities within the students.

In school we would practice it, like ok this week you’re all going to learn about generosity. So, we want to see you performing acts of generosity with your friends. Now you can’t see this at home. Even if we ask them, ok [show us] the act they’ll just take a picture and send it to you, just for the sake of the picture. But in school, we see that they do follow it, you know. [For example] ‘courtesy is the prince of all human virtues’, we want you to use courteous polite words. Now how do we know they’re using at home or not?

“When it comes to the gathering [for the assembly] that’s impossible to continue,” Royia described. However, the school did find ways to continue weaving in moral education during the online sessions. “Once in a week,” one of the teachers, Chitra, said, “different topics are taken like truthfulness, good character, deeds, punctuality, service, sacrifice, determination.

All these values and topics are discussed during online sessions and these students they interact” she described “And I should tell you, they talk so beautifully that even we learn from them, really.” “We have to experiment” Royia told me, “We weren’t sure how the kids would take it right now on Zoom.” They experimented with different ways to replicate the assembly on Zoom.

We just started...and we saw that the response was amazing...the only thing was since Zoom has a limit of only 100 at one time, we couldn’t have all the classes [together]. If that ability was there to have all the kids at a time, then we could have done the assembly too. So, it’s just about experimenting, it’s not that we can’t do it, but we didn’t want to do it because we thought it wouldn’t be as effective. And everything depends on how the kids take it you know? Everything is dependent on that.

Pedagogic Implications of Using Zoom

As seen throughout the exploration above, the use of Zoom profoundly impacted the educational experience of both teachers and students. Teachers and students alike saw their behavior in the classroom effected. For example, teachers were more self-conscious about their image via video, and in how they talked. The autonomy and safety which teachers had in their classrooms at school was removed, limited, or severely changed. Students found an educational experience which had been severely degraded due to the distractions which the home provided, the interruptions which limits of the technology causes, the lack of connection they felt with the teacher caused by their video being turned off, or the lack of *energy* in the online spaces. Teachers expressed that they were unable to gain a command of the classroom on Zoom the same way they were in a physical space. The information that could previously be gained with

one glance, suddenly became a laborious process of scrolling through screens, and at times simply could not be attained at all.

Technology, while liberating in one sense as it allowed for education to continue synchronously in the first place, also caused its own issues. Intermittency of internet connections frequently caused the connection between students and teachers to be broken, resulting in an unsatisfactory relationship according to several students. There was a certain *impersonal* nature of an online class that couldn't be overcome, leaving students missing the simplest of physical acts, such as leaning over to their neighbor to ask if they had just understood what the teacher had said. All the simple interactions which went unnoticed and taken for granted before when they were in school suddenly became center points of nostalgic reflection for the better days when they were all together in class. The pre-primary teachers spoke of their inability to guide behavior of the smallest of students, not being able to help them throughout the day in both their educational activities, and in their social interactions with other students.

In a discussion I had with Royia in February of 2021, she expressed to me the frustrations they were having about the limitations of Zoom as platform for education. "Right now, if you ask somebody who is working with the administration what was the difference about this year, they will say nothing because it hasn't affected them at all," Royia told me, "The clerk of the school has the same responsibility that she had, the principal of the school more or less has the same responsibility that he had. *The change is in the teaching-learning process.*" Royia described to me that classes in Indian schools were already at a disadvantage when it came to numbers, as the ratio of students to teacher was generally high in classrooms. At Mona School it was roughly 50:1, students to teacher. However difficult it had been to reach each student individually before the pandemic in a general classroom, that difficulty had been exacerbated using Zoom. "If it was

one to one, like how we are talking right now, we could have done very well, but this is one to fifty which makes it very difficult,” Royia said,

there is going to be a huge gap in the teaching learning process. Basically, school is all about the teachers teaching efficiently with an effective tool. And at this moment, we feel Zoom is not an effective tool because we can’t reach to children personally.

Several months later, in May of 2021 I asked Royia if this was still how she felt. She told me that Zoom or any virtual platform can never take the place of the face-to-face personal teaching that used to take place in the classroom. For now, all these virtual platforms are just a tool to reach the kids, but quality education could only be delivered when kids are actually in the classroom with the teacher.

Another observation I made in the Zoom classrooms was that students frequently did appear bored and displayed body language indicating it. Figure 51 highlights photos of bored students in classes. Boredom is not exclusive to Zoom, students are bored in classrooms of all types all around the globe, however the experience presented in this chapter suggests that Zoom makes it easier for students to “check out,” and more difficult for teachers to notice when students *are* bored. Zoom “fatigue” is a real phenomenon among those who spend large amounts of time on the platform (Peper, Wilson, Martin, Rosegard, & Harvey, 2021; Toney, Light, & Urbaczewski, 2021; Bailenson, 2021).

Figure 51

Examples of bored students



The school also found itself limited in what it could do in relation to the mutual exploration of moral behavior, which is key to the identity of the school itself, bound up as it is with the connection to the school's inspiration – the martyrdom of Mona Mahmudnizhad. The assembly, that common space which acted as a center post around which the activities of the week revolved, was unable to be replicated in virtual space. Attempts to continue the exploration of moral behavior were introduced, but nearly all the students and teachers I interviewed made mention of the all-school assembly and how its absence was felt, and in many cases missed. The moving of education online can, in the true sense of the term, be understood as a *reduction* of the education process. The opportunities for social action which the school prided itself in and again were tied closely to the identity and purpose of the school, could not be continued. Individual efforts by students did occur, one student with her mother sewed and distributed thousands of masks, another would buy biscuits and sanitizer to distribute to the poor children in her neighborhood, but the systematic institution-wide engagement with orphanages, homes for the aged and distribution of resources for the poor were absent.

Of course, the shift to online education was not without its positives. Teachers spoke with a sense of accomplishment in relation to the skills they had gained. A few teachers mentioned that

now they had gained the ability to put together PowerPoint presentations, they would most likely continue using them in their physical classrooms when they were allowed to return. A nimbleness had also been introduced into the school, when – as is explored in further detail in chapter eight – the school suddenly had to move back to online classes after having been allowed to open physically again for a short period of time in early 2021. This flexibility could possibly be utilized in the future when, at very short notice, the school would not be able to physically be open. For example, during a bandh³³ (strike) when travel throughout the city of Satara would be limited or impossible.

Conclusion

Although all students and teachers expressed preference for the in-person schooling experience, complimenting this perspective was the sentiment of gratitude that the students had for both the school and the teachers in making the effort to shift the education online. If it was universally understood that school in a physical classroom is preferred, it was also nearly universally understood that if there was a choice between online schooling or no schooling at all, taking online classes was better than nothing.

Bhagyashri put it this way:

During this time in pandemic, even online education helped us to at least study and at least we could progress. If online was not there, then our one year was just wasted, and being 9th [standard] as the base of 10th [standard], it was very important for us to study. And this online education made that possible.

³³ These types of disruptions are not uncommon throughout India and can be caused by all sorts of occurrences, from autorickshaw driver strikes, to the arrest of prominent personalities, communal disputes between Hindus and Muslims or even political disputes between prominent personalities (Chatterjee, 2016)

Some students also displayed a mature sense of empathy and appreciation for the efforts of the school and teachers whose hard work they had observed. It was understood by some of the students that the initial disorientation and unfamiliarity that existed around the school's move towards online education was a common experience between both the students and the teachers. This came through at times during interviews with the students when I had prompted them to think of the differences between physical and online classes. Often after offering an observation that was critical in some sense, they would quickly follow up the comment with a counterbalancing statement which showed their appreciation for all the efforts of the school during the pandemic. For example, Deepti, after noting how network issues had caused major interruptions of not only the technical side of things but also the mental investment and focus in the class, followed up by saying:

In this pandemic situation without wasting one year the school gave that precious time to us by teaching us online. So, it is good that [the] school didn't waste [sic] our one year, and they taught [sic] us online. The teachers, principal and ma'am, everybody has taken great efforts to teach us in this pandemic.

Some of the teachers also highlighted the common experience that existed between the students and teachers in relation to this new mode of learning. Aarushi, a teacher of 10th standard noted that when they were first considering what to do to continue their education

...we were discussing continuously about how to start with these classes and what activities should be taken, how children should be taught, because everything was new for us, as well as the children and their parents. So, we were thinking [about] how they should be made comfortable, how they should be made familiar with this situation. That's what we were thinking about.

Moving online left a lot out of the schooling experience which previously had been part of the Mona School experience. This loss was felt by all, and the school did its best to work within the limitations the pandemic placed upon it to replicate some of what was lost. We'll explore these actions in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: Social Media and Mona School: Attempting to Bring What *isn't* Back

With the physical school closed, and the ability to come together for various activities for the time being stopped, Mona School found itself without some of the most potent ways in which it could (a) create a sense of community, and (b) allow a collective exploration and encourage practice of moral capabilities among the student population. What follows is an exploration of how Mona School employed the use of social media to make up for this loss. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the national context of India regarding communication. It is followed by an analysis of the many ways in which Mona School employed WhatsApp and Facebook to maintain a sense of connection with the wider society, and to promote a sense of community among the students and teachers at the school.

The closure of the physical campuses of schools around India cut off communication between schools and their students. One study conducted in the Southern Indian city of Chennai found that 80% of children in Indian private schools never used websites or electronic platforms in relation to their schooling prior to the pandemic (Vegas, Shah, & Fowler, 2021), suggesting that there were little to no established forms of digital communication between schools and their students. In 2019, the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University in collaboration with the Maharashtra State Council of Education Research conducted a survey of 1000 schools in the state of Maharashtra to assess capacity of schools around the state to use information and communication technologies (ICT) within the framework of a school. This study, released in March of 2020, just as schools in India were confronted with the need to increasingly rely on ICT to maintain educational activities, found that 90.7% of schools surveyed reported in-person meetings being the primary means of engagement with parents and community members. Only 35.8% of schools reported using WhatsApp for this type of

communication. Under 10% of schools surveyed reported having their own social media page (Ocasney & Sharma, 2020).³⁴

Mona School prior to the pandemic did not use WhatsApp or any other means of electronic communication to regularly be in touch with the students and their parents. They instead employed the use of a school diary, in which the students or teachers would write any message they wished to convey to the parents at home. However, Mona School did have a Facebook page, and used it regularly. After the pandemic, both WhatsApp and Facebook factored into Mona School's expressed desire to be a source of hope, encouragement, accompaniment, and solace for the families of the parents during the pandemic.

An attempt was made – using Facebook – to bring back many of the collective, social elements of the school which had to be put on hold due to the closing of the physical school. Of course, as was seen in the previous chapter it is not possible to virtually replicate many of the elements which existed in the physical Mona School experience, but the school made creative use of both platforms to keep both students and parents engaged.

This effort by Mona School was reflected in both the frequency and content of the posts on Facebook as well as the communications via WhatsApp. It was, like everything during this period, an initiative that was in a constant mode of learning: learning what to post, how to design the posts, and what to highlight in the post. I argue that the use of Facebook and WhatsApp was part of a coherent approach of the school to (a) continue the best they could to uphold the standard of education that existed previously to the pandemic, and (b) help both the parents and

³⁴ The specific question asked was “how would you describe your school’s web presence? Check all that apply” the option to check regarding social media pages reads “we have social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).”

the wider community understand through very visible mediums that the school was taking just as much care about the education of their students as they were prior to the pandemic.³⁵

Use of WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a widely used platform in India. According to Hootsuite, in 2020 of the 448 million Indians who use social media – including the WhatsApp platform – some 74% of them had used WhatsApp on a month-to-month basis, that is some 332 million users of WhatsApp in the sub-continent. The average user spent approximately 21 hours per month using the platform in 2020, and the WhatsApp smartphone app had the highest number of monthly active users among all apps, and the second highest number of downloads in 2020 (Hootsuite, 2021). And although, as stated above, prior to the pandemic only 35.8% of schools in Maharashtra used this method of communication to reach out to their parents and community, studies undertaken post-lockdown indicate that the adoption of WhatsApp as a communication tool in Indian Schools increased. One study highlighted the fact that in both private and government schools in Chennai WhatsApp was the preferred means of communication, with over 60% of families surveyed saying they used the platform for “text messages, voice calls, or video calls” with their schools (Vegas, Shah, & Fowler, 2021). Another study indicated that 52% of students, in a six-state area surveyed, utilized WhatsApp to help facilitate their learning at a distance (Cappelle, Chopra, Ackers, & Gochyyev, 2021). A self-learning program was also developed for use with WhatsApp by the government of Maharashtra in collaboration with ConveGenius, an Indian software development company. This program was known as Swadhyay, meaning “self-study” in Hindi, and would lead students through a series of exercises on WhatsApp via a series of

³⁵ This becomes particularly relevant in the discussion around fees, which can be found in chapter eight.

inputs by the student (Kalra & Jolad, 2021; TNN, 2020a). All the above indicate that WhatsApp became an increasingly used tool for educators within India to facilitate their activities.

While many throughout India saw WhatsApp being used as the medium through which education occurred, others used it as a means of communication. This latter use is how Mona School utilized WhatsApp; it became the central hub through which all activity was organized after the closing of the physical school premises. Following the initial lockdown in the second week of March 2020, Mona school very quickly created a series of WhatsApp group channels; one for each standard. The group for 10th standard students was created on April 13th, while the lower standards followed on April 27th. These became the official communication streams between the school and the students and were designed to be one way, meaning that the group members could not reply to the communication. If the students did have questions of clarification, they would communicate directly with the teachers on their own direct WhatsApp line.

Harpreet, a student in the ninth standard, described the beginning of the use of WhatsApp for school communication:

Like for us students, it was like, it was very confusing...we didn't even know how our school was going to reach to us [after the lockdown]. But then surprisingly, [the] school created a group on WhatsApp for each class, and it was a very good platform. On WhatsApp they could communicate to us, and if we had any doubts even, we were open to ask it to our teachers to call or to message them via WhatsApp, so we did that. And our school updated us what is going on...So I think that's a very dear thing that our school did. The communication was very strong from the school to the parents and students, so it was great.

Esha, a teacher at the school spoke about the way WhatsApp was able to provide a connection to the school during the uncertainty caused by the lockdown:

Suddenly when we're going to get in lockdown, we were just panicking about what is going to happen and how we're going to manage, and what will happen to the schools and kids, and academic year. Actually, everything was closed and suddenly [it] is announced now it's lockdown, completely locked down. No one can go out; nothing will be going to happen. No, no, everything is no. So [we] were just connected with WhatsApp to the school, but we were not able to go to the school.

And while it may have seemed very natural to the students for WhatsApp to be used as a platform of communication, it was not natural for many of the teachers. Royia Taghavi told me that

[The teachers] love using the chalk and the blackboard and the textbook, that's it. But now it's a complete different shift. Like even when it would come to texting – WhatsApp – many of them [the teachers] didn't even have WhatsApp. And it's a hell of a lot of work. So daily in the morning they have to send the link, after that they attend their session. Which kid was absent they have to write it on the group, so they're always busy with this communication that has to take place.

I asked the teachers to describe for me what their day of work looked like. Many noted the long days they had, as besides the responsibilities of teaching they also had household responsibilities; many were mothers themselves. For example, one teacher told me that her school day began at 9 am, but that she had household responsibilities to take care of. Her classes would end at between 1:15pm and 1:30pm after which she would mention on her various WhatsApp channels who had been absent that day and assign their makeup work. Many afternoons extra activities were

conducted which were usually either at 3:00 pm or 4:00 pm. She mentioned there were often investigative responsibilities as well to find out why, for example, some students had extended absences. She would call the parents to investigate why their child had not come to class. She would then come home and have household work, after which she would begin preparing her lessons for the next day, usually around 10 o'clock. These preparations would last until 12:00 am, sometimes even 1 a.m. She also mentioned that she usually was preparing her lessons for the next day "from evening until 10 o'clock." Hemakshi described a day that began at 5:30 am and lasted until 12:30 a.m. the next morning:

Table 5

Hemakshi's Daily Schedule

Hemakshi's Daily Schedule	
5:30 a.m.	Wake up, prepare breakfast and lunch.
8:00 a.m.	Wake up her 2.5-year-old child
8:30 a.m.	Leaves house for School
8:50 a.m.	Send Zoom link via WhatsApp inviting students to their classes that day
9:00 a.m.	First Session
9:50 a.m.	First Session pt. 2
10:40 a.m.	Second Session
11:30 a.m.	Second Session pt. 2
12:20 p.m.	Third Session

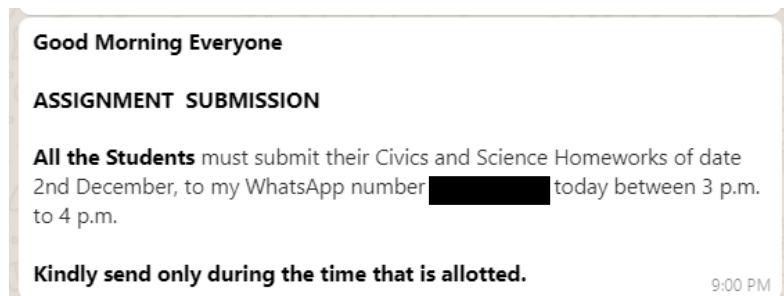
Table 5 (cont.)

1:15 p.m.	Message the WhatsApp group noting the students who were absent and sending their makeup homework. Calling the parents of students who have been absent for multiple days in a row. If books are at the school, checking students' workbooks.
3:00 p.m.	7 th and 8 th standard class tests
4:00 p.m.	9 th and 10 th standard class tests
5:00 p.m.	Message WhatsApp group noting who was absent from the class tests
5:30 p.m.	Reach home, do household chores. Cook dinner.
10:00 p.m.	Begin Lesson Planning for next day. Creating PowerPoints etc.... Also putting baby to sleep or putting him back to sleep if he wakes up.
12:30 a.m.	Go to sleep.

Vaishali, one of the teachers in the school, told me that before the pandemic, she only had used her mobile phone for taking and making calls, “otherwise I [was] not using WhatsApp.” It was only because of the forced necessity of the app in relation to the pandemic that she began to use it. Lata, another teacher, noted that she used her WhatsApp daily to receive the homework of the 55 children in her class. However, to cut down on the number of messages she would receive every day she would have 10 children daily send the homework, so it would be spread out over

Figure 52

Example of Request to turn in Homework



the entire week. As the school became more proficient with the use of the app, they began to designate certain times during the day when homework was to be turned in (figure 52).

Royia was in the position of helping to discover the technological tools which the school would use to maintain contact and help to education the schools. She took the approach of learning the tools herself, and then holding workshops and training sessions with the teachers to help them learn. “Always technology was a big no for me, then I had to learn it,” she said, “and then after that we have to let the teachers know about this.” And while Royia was familiar with WhatsApp and used it frequently, the app had never been needed before to maintain contact with the students. “Before we didn’t need WhatsApp, they had a school diary through which we used to communicate with them [the parents],” she told me. The students would write whatever was required in their diaries, which served as a written record by which the parents could keep up to date with their needs and requirements. But now that the students were no longer coming to the school, WhatsApp became a convenient way to keep in touch. “When they are regularly coming to school,” another teacher, Shalini, told me, “It doesn’t happen [parents calling or messaging the teachers], but this was a special case for the parents, so they were free to call the teachers [via WhatsApp].” As Garima, a student in the 9th standard put it “basically, the social media apps got a lot of importance in this pandemic because internet was something which no one would live without in this pandemic to connect to each other.”

WhatsApp was not only used as communication to and from the students, but also to for the teachers and administrators to communicate with one another. “Actually, what happened,”

Chitra, a teacher of the 10th standard told me,

we have made like one Mona family group of we teachers and sir [Mr. Taghavi] where we all coordinate with each other, we share what happened throughout the day. What activities were held during the session. What challenges we face because many times what happened sometimes there is a connectivity issue. A child gets disconnected or is unable to attend the session. So, all such reports and all [are] shared on the Mona family group, so that sir also is aware of all the activities that are held during the day.

Table 6

Uses of WhatsApp by Mona School

Uses of WhatsApp by Mona School	
Daily communication with the students	• Sharing of the Zoom links for classes • Listing of students who were absent from sessions • Sharing of documents related to homework assignments • Times and dates of exams • Notifications of which students were absent, or had not turned in homework
Sharing of announcements from school	• Regarding holiday breaks • Regarding payment of fees • Regarding the celebration of various holidays and days of recognition

Table 6 (cont.)

Messages from the school directly to the parents	• Collection of exam sheets from the school • Invitations for open days where the parents are invited to discuss the activities and academic progress of their children with the teacher.
Intra-Institutional Messaging	• Teachers Discussing Challenges with one another • What has occurred in the classes that day? • Children who were absent for various reasons

Daily Communication with Students

All students I spoke with mentioned that either they themselves, or their parents, had at one time or another been in touch with their teachers via WhatsApp, whether it be via text or a direct phone call. If students had questions about a lesson or homework, they would get in touch. If the parents had questions about Zoom sessions or what their children were supposed to be doing, they would be in touch with the teachers. Parent teacher meetings were also conducted over calls on WhatsApp. As Mona School settled into the new school year in early summer of 2020, WhatsApp was instrumental in helping to orient the students to their new mode of distance education.

For example, on June 4th, 2020, a communication came from the school to the tenth standard students stating that they would hold their first session on Zoom:

Good morning Everyone

Dear Students

This is to bring to your attention that we will have synchronous online class session using Zoom Platform for subject Science II to be held tomorrow at 4 p.m.

Therefore, you should install and download the Zoom app by today so as to be the part of the session. The personal ID and password will be shared with you ten minutes prior to the session.

Remember, turn on video and be focused, attentive and respectful, and other teachers are also going to be a part of the session.

Also you should keep your Audio on mute mode so that everyone will hear the instructions, explanation and discussion of the teacher.

Please note the same.

Thank you.

As another example, the communication on June 16th, 2020, from the school to the students of the incoming ninth standard read as such:

Dear Students,

How are you all? Hope everything is fine and you are safe and healthy. I am sure you all had a wonderful time and are now recharged with full energy and vigor for the preparation of Std 9th.

The distance learning has now become the new normal for all the institutions. Creativity is at an all-time high as our School and we teachers are trying to figure out ways to reach, teach and start the Online lessons making the topics clear to the best possible way.

This is to inform you that we are starting with **New Academic Session** from June 18, 2020 for Std 9th. We will be sending the **Timetable, Videos/PPT's and Worksheets** on the School Website in your **Student Login Corner** which should be viewed and done by you religiously and with utmost sincerity on the full-scape paper.

Regarding Zoom sessions, the school sent out this communication via WhatsApp to the ninth standard students on the afternoon of June 16th, 2020:

Dear Students,

As we are starting with online learning from June 18th, you should make the text books and workbooks available from Balshetwar Booksellers, the books are available at the store. You can download the **Diksha app** for the better understanding of the lessons. Lately, based on the lessons completed, we will be having a synchronous online class revision session using Zoom to make the topics clear to you all with no space for doubts.

You should install and download the **Zoom app**.

Figure 53

You should join in at a pre-scheduled time

Typical daily announcement with links to the Zoom rooms for that day's classes

which will be informed to you accordingly.



As the school settled into online learning, WhatsApp was used mainly to communicate daily with the students regarding their classes. At the beginning of each day, announcements would go out on WhatsApp with links to the Zoom rooms for the day's subjects (figure 53).

Figure 54

*WhatsApp communication
highlighting a special day*



Figure 55

*Example of invitation to group
activity via WhatsApp*



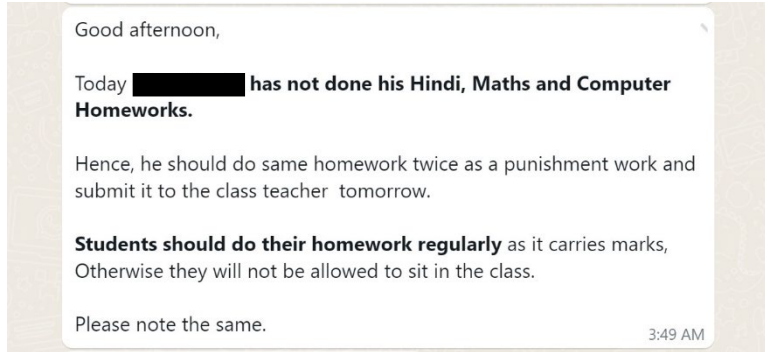
WhatsApp was also used to send out notes that highlighted the observances of various special days throughout the year, such as Children's Day, as seen in figure 54.

WhatsApp was also used to send out invitations to group activities, such as the popular and well-enjoyed role play events, where students dress up as a famous personality from various fields of endeavor (figure 55).

Mona School used WhatsApp to notify which students had been absent from class or had yet to turn in the homework (figure 56). It is of interest to note that these notifications would come to the public channel, so all members of the class could see it. I found this choice by the school interesting. These messages could just as easily be sent individually to each student. When I asked Royia about these types of announcements, she let me know that prior the pandemic, if a student would not complete their homework, they would note as such in a *school diary* which each student had. This diary served as a means of communication between parents and children and teachers would write in the diary as a note to the parents whatever the

Figure 56

Student being called out for not doing homework

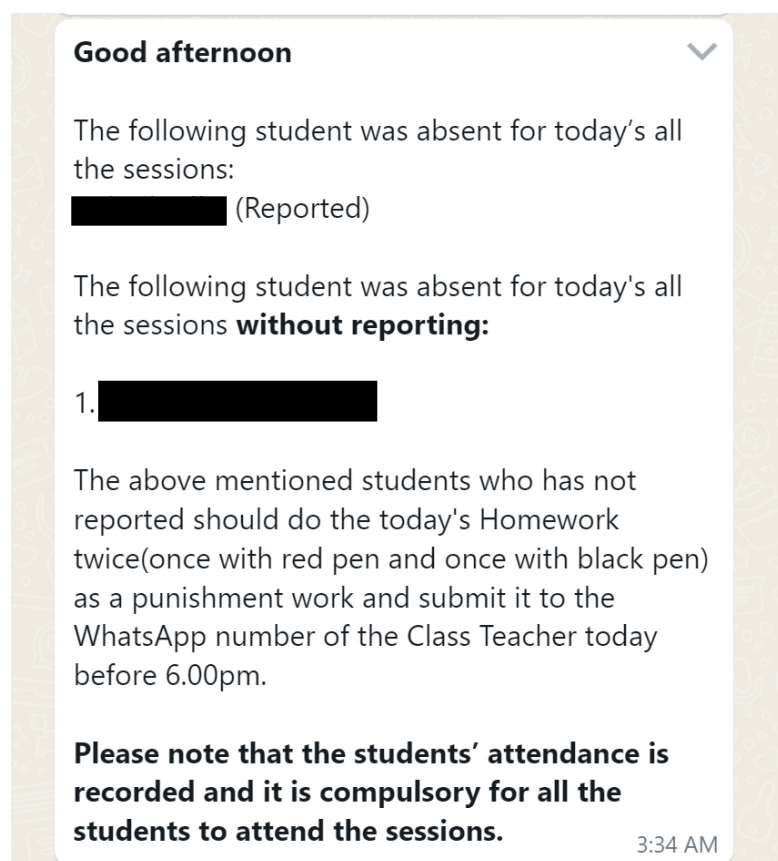


child had not done. “But right now, the students don’t have the school diary,” Royia said, “The WhatsApp group is a medium where we can keep the parents updated about what is happening.” The messages were sent to the public group with the intention of giving increased

motivation to all the students to complete their work and attend classes out of a desire to not want their name publicly announced to the class. “The main reason we mention the names on the group,” Royia continued, “Is [for] the parents to understand that [their] child has not done the homework, and also [for] the other parents to know that it is important for their children to take homework and assignments seriously.” Thus, the act of sending these announcements publicly served as kind of a calling out of students which Royia noted gives more “importance to the work to be done.” The note also served as a record for the school regarding the work of these students. Despite the intention of creating motivation among students and parents to have their homework done, I felt this mode of communication could possibly serve as an embarrassment for the students who were named. I was even more puzzled by the decision to state these names publicly considering Mona School’s very conscious decision *not* to announce in any way which

Figure 57

Student being called out for being absent



students had not paid their tuition fees,³⁶ a practice which other schools around India had engaged in for the purpose of encouraging payment.

Of course there is a difference between not paying tuition due to the external forces of the pandemic causing families to endure economic hardships, and not turning in one's homework or being absent from class. The latter being a choice by the student to not do the work that they could

have done and submitted in time. Students who were absent for COVID related reasons were excused from the requirements of attendance and homework.

Student Communication on WhatsApp

Students also communicated with their friends mainly over WhatsApp. One student noted they used Snapchat, and one other noted they used Zoom, but the others all mentioned they used WhatsApp to communicate with their friends. However, communication varied, Janki who was in 10th standard, had very infrequent conversations with friends:

³⁶ This is explored with some detail in chapter eight.

Yeah, actually in this lockdown period, I did not communicate with my friends like, like I did, but not at that extent like a normal basis, like, few friends I communicated with, but the communication was all about which class is tomorrow, which notes and all. So, it was all about that.

However, Harpreet in the 9th standard had frequent communication with friends via WhatsApp:

...you know we mostly call every day. Some of my friends, we are so close to each other that we have a call every day. Even if not every day, alternate days we try to keep ourselves in touch and try to know what is going on in our lives. Like what is going on, every day, like for example my friends joined gym so how was the gym going. So that is all we talk about every day.

Garima in the 9th standard noted that:

We used to have a group call, we used to talk for hours at that pandemic time after the session. And we used to spend time together; we have the facility of group video call and group voice call in WhatsApp, so we used to do that.

And Ratan stated that to keep in contact with friends “I use WhatsApp. Every day I call them. I asked them doubts, what I have, or even they asked me doubts what they have for the homework.”

Use of Facebook in Mona School

Mona School’s page is run internally and has served as an outlet for the school since its creation on December 8, 2010. Mona School’s maintenance of a Facebook page is rather unique among schools in Maharashtra. Less than 10% of schools surveyed in Maharashtra maintained a social media page prior to the pandemic (Ocasney & Sharma, 2020). Mona School’s Facebook page is followed by 2,363 people and liked by 2,291. Its content is public and available to be seen by

anyone whether they are logged in to Facebook or not. 2,221 (94%) of its followers are from India, the next three highest countries with followers number at 41 from the USA, 16 from Australia and 13 from Pakistan. From within India, 1,398 (60%) of its followers are in the same city as Mona School, Satara, while the next three highest cities number at 277 (12%) from Pune, 79 from Mumbai, and 27 from Nashik; all cities located in the state of Maharashtra. In what follows I make the argument that the school's Facebook page largely served as a replacement for the communal, physical space which was lost due to the campus of the school being shut down because of the pandemic.

Table 7

Use of Facebook by Mona School by Type and Quantity

Mona School Facebook Posts by Type and Quantity March 15th, 2020 – November 24th, 2021	
Type of Post	Number of Posts
Announcements Related to Pandemic	12
Achievements of Students and School	7
Moral Education, Virtues, and Assembly	28
Celebration of Days	55
Internal Student Activities	88
Teacher and Staff continuing Education	3
Creation of Trust for Students to Return	6
Total Number of Facebook Posts	199 (roughly once every three days)

Mona School posts regularly at a pace that since the beginning of the pandemic is roughly three times weekly, and posts can be said to fall into one of the following seven categories:

1. Announcements dealing with the logistics of the school in relation to the pandemic
2. A public space in which the school could share the activities and achievements of the students internally at the school
3. An attempt to replicate the feeling of community engendered by the all-school assembly which was impossible to continue due to the pandemic
4. Highlighting achievements and recognition given to the school and its students by outside organizations
5. Noting the celebration of holidays, days of recognition
6. Continuing Education of the Teachers
7. Helping to create trust in the parents that as their children returned to physical school, they would be in a safe environment

While Mona School has been operating its Facebook page since 2010 and has used it to highlight various activities that the school has undertaken, its use since the announcement of the closure of the school on March 15th, 2020, has outpaced any previous use (Table 8), and has also evolved to include a much wider range of topics. The number of posts which Mona School placed on its Facebook website between March 15th, 2020, until December 2, 2021, is just two shy of the total number of posts from the previous 4 years (Table 9). The most significant change however in frequency of posts is the number of videos which the school has posted (Table 7).

Table 8*Video Post Comparison Pre and Post COVID-19*

Video Post Comparison Pre and Post COVID-19 Pandemic	
Total Number of Videos Posted Pre-Pandemic (January 2016 – March 2020) ³⁷	27
Total Number of Videos Posted Post-Pandemic (March 2020 – December 2021)	354

Table 9*Annual Number of Posts on Facebook page*

Annual Number of Posts on Facebook Page	
2016	30
2017	52
2018	47
2019	66
2020	122
January 1 st – December 2 nd , 2021	95

Table 10*Total Number of Posts Pre and Post Pandemic*

Total Number of Posts Pre and Post Pandemic	
January 1 st , 2016 – March 14 th , 2020	207
March 15 th , 2020 – December 2 nd , 2021	205

³⁷ Data available from Facebook analytics does not go back further than January 2016.

Table 11

Number of Posts One Year Prior and One Year After Initial School Lockdown

Number of posts 1 year prior and 1 year after initial school lockdown	
March 14 th , 2019 – March 14 th , 2020	64
March 15 th , 2020 – March 15 th , 2021	144

Moral Education and Making up for the Missed Assembly

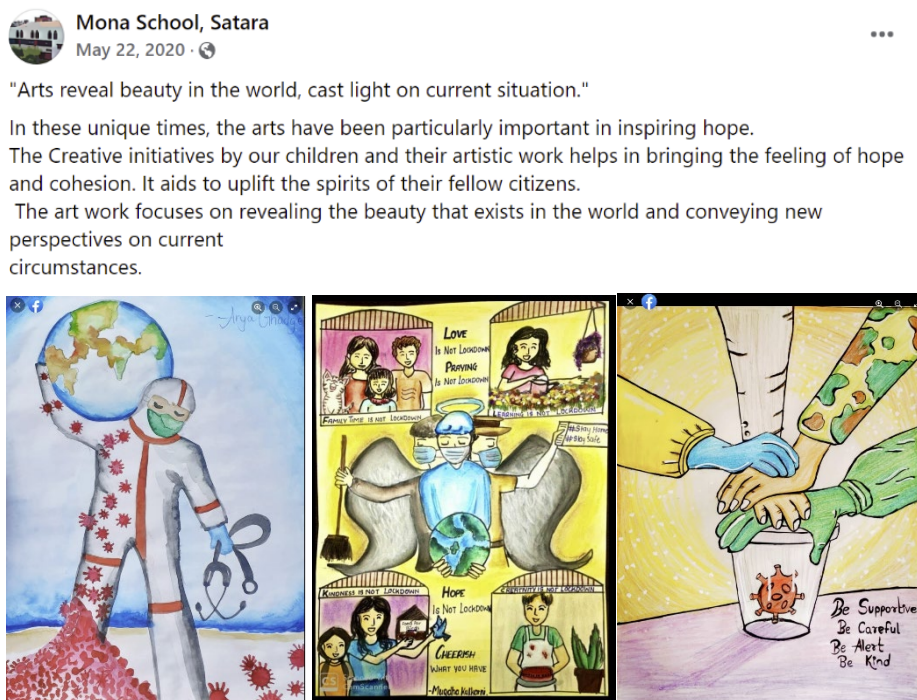
As noted in the previous chapter, one of the largest absences which the school felt during the period of online education was that of the all-school assembly. As previously mentioned, this assembly served as one of the main spaces in which the students of Mona School could (a) mix with students from other standards, (b) engage in group artistic expressions such as drama and skits, and (c) promote moral education through the highlighting of various virtues which the student body would then practice throughout each week in the various social spaces of the school, whether it be during lunch, in class, in-between classes, or during extracurricular activities. As the pandemic wore on, Mona School experimented with various ways in which the type of activity which the all-school assembly promoted could be brought to its students in a decentralized fashion, and then promoted through the public space of the Facebook page. Mona School had posted 28 times throughout the pandemic on themes that were related to moral education and projects which the students undertook in relation to them.

Most of these posts begin with a short quotation either from the Bahá'í Writings or inspired by them which highlight a particular virtue which was the focus of the student activity highlighted in the post. For example, one of the first posts of this type following the lockdown in March of 2020 was about the role of the arts in the promotion of hope during the current global situation

(figure 58). This post itself was inspired by an article posted by the Bahá'í World News Service on May 11, 2020, which highlighted artistic expressions from around the world and how art could be used as a tool to find ways to relieve anxiety and “increase the feelings of hope, cohesion, and unity in a society” (Service, B.W. 2020). Artwork undertaken by students at Mona

Figure 58

Hopeful Pandemic Artwork



School promoting these themes was highlighted.

Mona School sees moral education as an integral part of education. This came across in many ways throughout conversations I had

with students, teachers, and administrators. Moral education was not seen as something extra, but rather as an integral component of an education which would shape the character of students in it. This also came through the various Facebook posts which Mona School shared. In one post from September 28, 2020, Mona School had a “virtual fancy dress event” on the theme of Social Workers/COVID Warriors. One student dressed up as Joti Rao Phule (Figure 60), a Maharashtrian social reformer from the late 19th century who, among other endeavors, sought to eliminate the caste system (Omvedt, 1971). The student is holding a poster which says:

Lack of education leads to lack of wisdom

Which leads to lack of moral

Which leads to lack of progress

Which leads to lack of money

Which leads to the operation [sic] [oppression] of Dalits

See what state of the society one lack of education can cause

Figure 59

Student Posing as Dr.

Prakash Amte



Figure 60

Student Posing as Jotirao

Phule

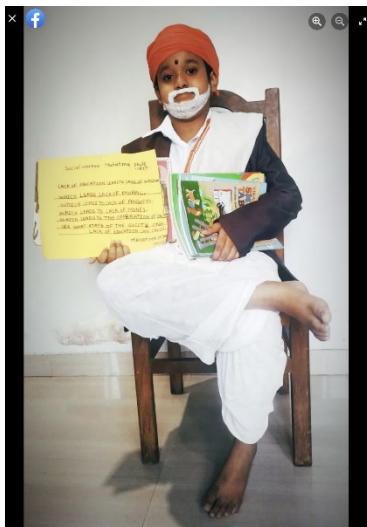


Figure 61

Student as an Accredited

Social Health Activist



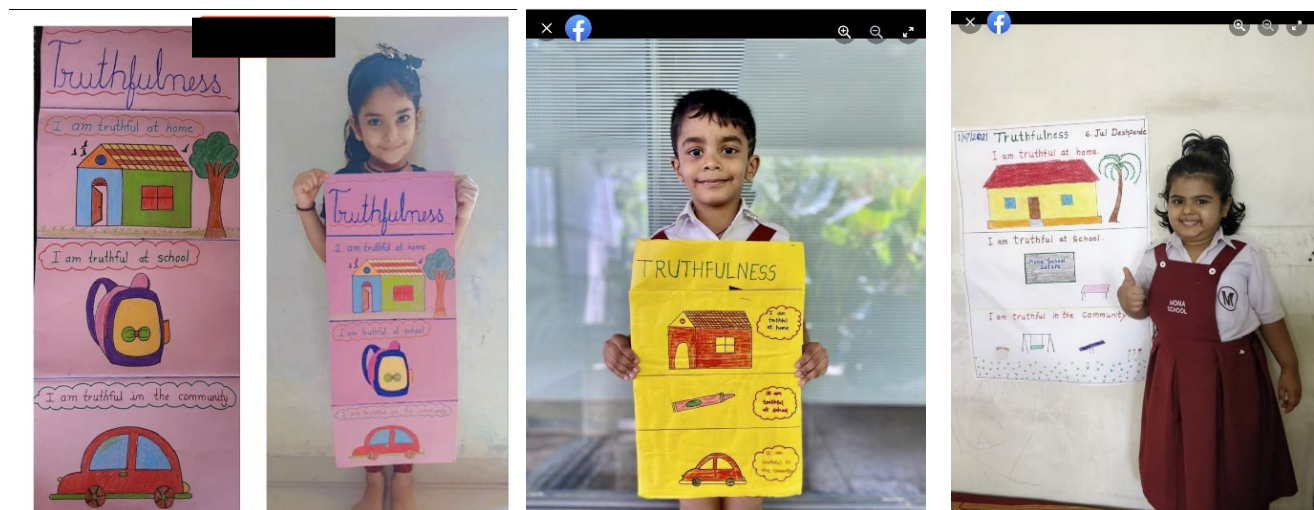
Another student is seen wearing simple clothes and posed in front of a television which has the picture of the individual he is dressed after, Dr. Prakash Amte (Figure 59), a doctor who has long been involved with serving tribal populations in Maharashtra (Desikan, 2008), and who in 2019 was awarded the Indian Council of Medical Research lifetime achievement award by Bill Gates (FIT, 2019). The student has a quote next to him attributed to Dr. Amte which reads “No matter how educated, talented, rich, or cool you believe you are, how you treat people ultimately tells

all. Integrity is everything.” A third student highlighted below poses as an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA, Figure 61). The ASHA programme was begun in 2007 in rural Maharashtra to train individuals who could help increase the health of rural and tribal regions in the state (National Health Mission, n.d.). The student is standing next to a sign that reads “We are promoter [sic] of good health practices. We provide information to the community on basic sanitation and healthy living. Our aim in life is service to mankind is service to God.”

All three examples illustrated above show elements of the type of morals which Mona School strives to inculcate within its students: (a) education is inseparable from moral education, education without moral education is not complete; (b) treatment of others is one of the standards by which we can measure character; and (c) the goal of education should be to empower the student to be of service to society.

Figure 62

Students Posing with Signs about Truthfulness



As stated above, during the weekly assemblies of Mona School in the pre-pandemic times, a virtue of the week was presented. The school brought this back virtually and from time to time

would use its Facebook page to highlight the virtue of the week, and how students had striven to put it into practice. For example, during the week of July 2nd, 2021, the virtue of the week was *truthfulness*. Mona School shared a Facebook post that included a short quotation from the Bahá'í Writings, “truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá as quoted in Effendi, 1938). Accompanying this quotation are a series of photos of children with artistic creations outlining where they practice the virtue of truthfulness: “I am truthful at home, I am truthful at school, I am truthful in the community” the drawings read.

Figure 63

Facebook post highlighting social action by Mona School



However, it is unclear how effective these virtual efforts to promote morals through virtue of the week were. “In school we would practice it,” Royia told me about the virtues of the week, “Like, okay this week you’re all going to learn about generosity. So, we want to see you performing acts of generosity with your friends.” However, Royia told me that they couldn’t see the children

performing the virtues of the week at home. At best they could tell them about the virtue and have them send a photo to the school. “Even if we tell them, ‘This is the act’, they’ll just take a picture and send it to you, just for the sake of the picture,” Royia told me, “But in school we see that they *do* follow it...how do we know whether they’re doing it at home or not?”

As stated in the previous chapter, one of the activities which could not be continued because of the pandemic was the *wall of kindness*, the location in the school where students and their families would regularly donate food, clothing and toiletries which would then be distributed by the students at the school to populations around Satara district who were in need. While this activity could not continue by the students, Mona School early in the pandemic collected several hundred pounds of grains and had them distributed to those in need.

Announcements Related to Logistics and the Pandemic

The school’s initial posts on Facebook following the closing of the school dealt with announcements in relation to the pandemic. The first communication coming from the school regarding the pandemic was on March 15, 2020. It was posted on their Facebook page and stated the following:

Dear Parents,

School shall remain closed per the government directives till 31st March 2020.

This decision of the government is for the safety of children and control of the spread of the Corona virus. We urge all the parents to see that their child/children to stay at home.

This is a golden opportunity for children to prepare for their annual examination which shall commence from 1st April.

Students will receive a new time table for the exams which they have missed between the period of 15th March to 31st March, when they come to school on 1st April.

Please note standard 10th board exam will be as per the time table of the board and there won't be any changes in it.

Please stay safe and take necessary precautions.

Mona School

This communication echoes the student sentiment – and popular sentiment around India and other countries which were experiencing closures – that the lockdown would be a temporary one that would end in a relatively short period of time, allowing life to return to usual patterns. This of course did not happen, and the lockdown was extended. The next communication from the school came on April 16th through its Facebook page:

Dear Parents,

As per the directive of the State Government the second semester exam of the current academic year for all the sections (Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary) will not be held and students will be promoted to the next classes on the basis of the first term and Unit test evaluation.

We wish to draw your kind attention to the following points:

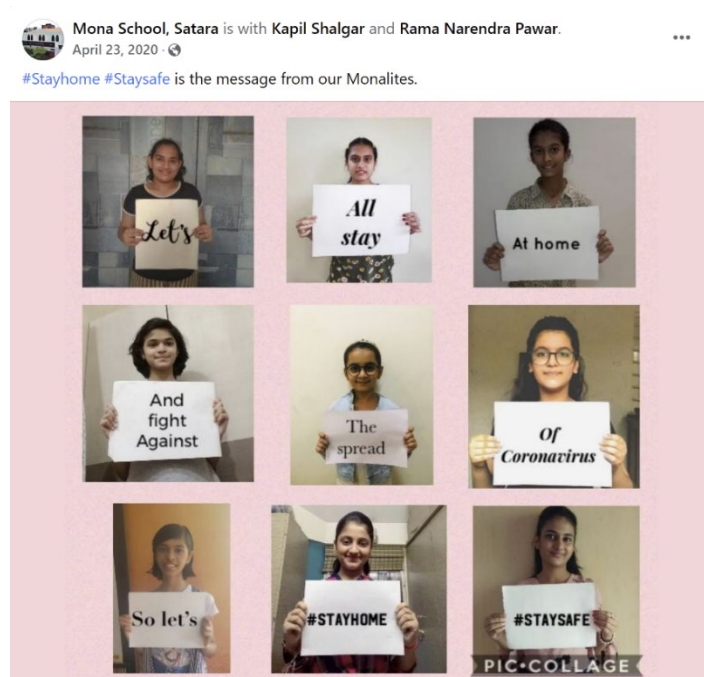
1. The Final evaluation sheets will be handed to the parents as and when the government permits the school to be open.
2. The portion for the 2nd term semester exam was completed well in advance. In order to evaluate the students for the same the school has uploaded practice papers and self evaluation on the school website (students corner). Interested parents may download the same from the school website www.monaschool.com and may evaluate their children accordingly.

3. The schedule for the admission process 2020-21 will be informed to the parents once the school resumes.
4. The preparatory class for students of class 10th has started from 15th of April through online platform – the school website and a WhatsApp group. Parents are requested help their children to cope with the preparatory activity.

Mona School also helped spread the awareness of the importance to stay in the home during the initial phase of the lockdown. One image that was posted on April 23, 2020, is that of several students holding up pages that collectively say “Let’s all stay at home and fight against the spread of coronavirus. So, let’s #stayhome #staysafe.” This post included hashtags which had been popularized in India to help spread awareness of the need to not leave the home during the lockdown.

Figure 64

Stay at home messaging early in the pandemic



Beyond these communications, most posts beyond April 2020 have exclusively focused on the work of the students at the school. Ranging from showcasing artistic creations, dance presentations, crafts related to lessons and holidays, as well as sports activities. It was obvious that the school's Facebook page was a place being used to highlight the activities of the students at home during the pandemic. In a way, the page became the space in which all could gather to be with one another and interact in a digital way. If not with the students, at least as a means of communicating with the parents about the nature of the activities their students were engaging in.

Highlighting Activities of the Students

The majority of posts that have been shared on Mona School's Facebook page since the pandemic began highlight various activities which the students at the school have undertaken. 88 of the 199 posts surveyed in this chapter dealt with activities of students. They consist of collective virtual events, photos of creative projects the students have done as part of a class, videos of dance activities, videos of short skits the students have performed to illustrate a virtue in action, physical education activities, and science experiments, to name a few.

"You know we used to have, before the pandemic, science and art exhibitions." Mr. Taghavi told me,

Every teacher [during the pandemic], they were doing in such a manner that they wanted excellence and to prove their ability and their best. They wanted to keep that joy of teaching alive and to reach the students, and to the eyes of the parents. They wanted to show they were doing their best.

Facebook became one way through which the teachers could showcase their love for teaching, and to keep the connection alive between both their students and their parents.

For example, on July 30 of 2021, the school held a virtual event *Fun with alphabets* which saw the students of the nursery level dressing up in a costume and then highlighting which letter their costume started with.

Figure 65

Virtual Event "Fun with Alphabets"



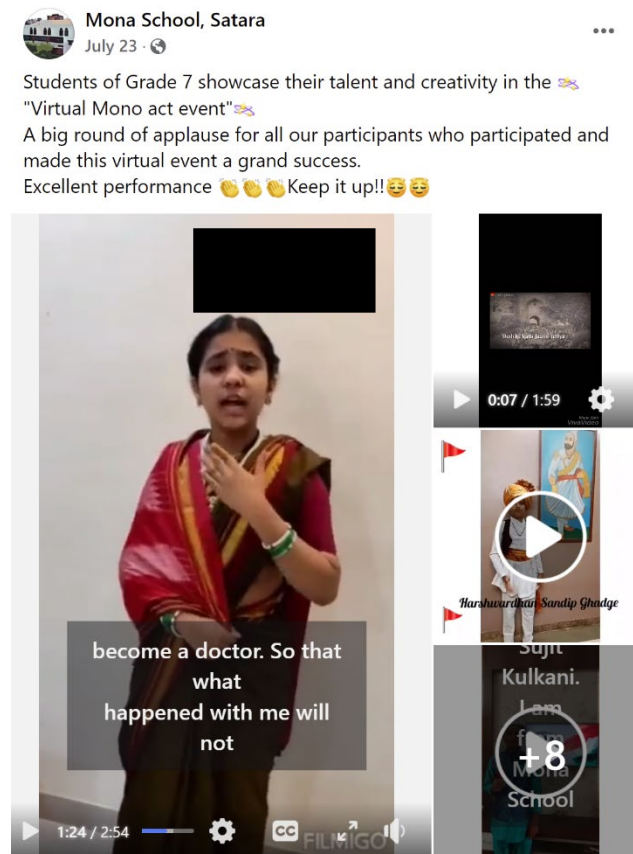
Another event on July 23, 2021, saw students of class seven performing a *virtual mono act*. A mono act being an event where a student takes on the personality of a well-known individual and performs a monologue about their history. In one video, a student begins by saying

What is the most important quality of women? To be a good housewife. But if they are educated, they will start working in the offices and that wouldn't be right for instant

family. But me and my husband proved it wrong, and I became the first woman doctor in India. So, did you recognize me? Who am I? Yes, you are right, I am Anandibai Gopalrao Joshi...

Figure 66

Virtual Mono Act Event



Mona School also conducted a workshop on January 12, 2021, dealing with home remedies for simple illnesses. Common household items such as ginger, garlic, turmeric, cinnamon, and the antiseptic Dettol were explored, and students were shown how to employ them in response to a need they may have.

Figure 67

First Aid Online Workshop

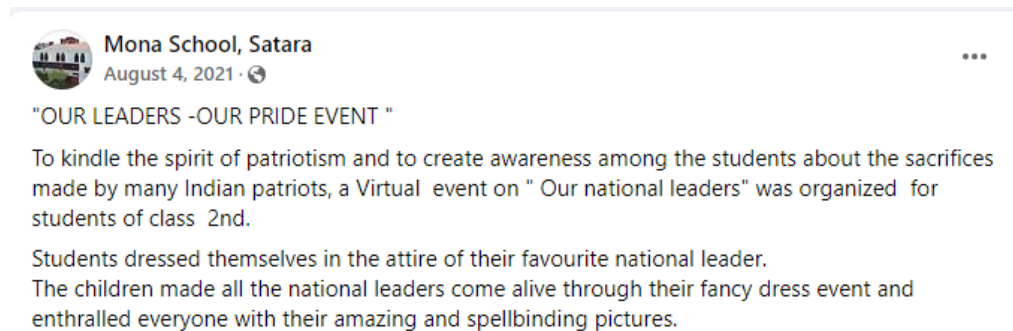


One type of event, which saw many variations, was an activity which saw students role play through dressing up in costume. They could be representing various cultures or individuals of historical or contemporary importance or prominence. As I was browsing these types of posts, I was unprepared to see multiple photos of children posing with weapons. This was particularly jarring for me coming from a culture where it is unfortunately quite common for children to bring weapons to school and use them to perpetuate horrible violence upon their teachers and

fellow students. For example, in the *Our Leaders, Our Pride* role play event held in August of 2021, students were asked to dress in costume which would “kindle the spirit of patriotism.”

Figure 68

Description of the "Our Leaders, Our Pride" Role Play event



As I scrolled through multiple children dressed as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and well-known Indian poet Sarojini Naidu, I was shocked to see that many children chose to dress as Bhagat Singh, a well-known Indian revolutionary figure during the struggle for Independence. Singh is most well-known for the participation in the killing of a British police officer (Moffat, 2019 p. 78). His execution at the age of 23 turned him into a kind of folk hero and martyr in the eyes of many Indians. As I came across these images, it was shocking to see seven-year-old children dressed as this revolutionary figure, complete with a gun (figure 69).

Figure 69

Children of the second standard posing as Singh, complete with gun



This was not the only child to dress up as Singh either, multiple children dressed as the revolutionary figure, although more than one child did so without including a gun (figure 70), one even including a saying attributed to Singh “Bombs and pistols do not make a revolution. The sword of revolution is sharpened on the whetting-stone of ideas.”

Figure 70

Children posing as Singh without a weapon



I found myself reflecting on these images, especially because they are placed on the public Facebook page of a school which is very vocally committed to ideals of peace, unity, and non-violence. I asked Royia about these images, having expressed the surprise I experienced when I first came across them, and explained that because of the unfortunate proliferation of school shootings in the United States, (a) images of children with toy guns are extremely rare, and (b) are increasingly socially condemned. She told me that in India “the culture is very different.” She

said these toy guns and weapons are given to kids to role play their heroes. “Bhagat Sing is considered a very prominent figure here. To show his bravery they use the weapon, but the kids use it only to depict the role they are playing.” She also told me about the culture that exists around the use of cap guns during the celebration of Diwali. “During Diwali celebration one of the main parts of fireworks for kids is fire guns [cap guns], but they are innocent.”

Royia’s use of the word innocent caused me to pause and reflect. I had spent countless hours as a child with my friends playing with cap guns. I even remembered a special trip with my friends to Walmart when I was in the third or fourth grade for my birthday specifically to obtain cap guns to play with in the street and yard outside of our home. We would shoot at each other and fall to the ground pretending to be hit. Was that innocent behavior? It was great fun to play with the cap guns when I was small, although I would never give such a toy to my own child. I feel it normalizes and desensitizes the violent reality of what guns truly are. And while in today’s United States toy guns are becoming increasingly rare – retailers around the United States, including Walmart have stopped selling many toy guns (Chumley, 2018; Brait, 2015) – at one point in American history, they were big business and a very common toy to give, and to covet, as gifts (Witkowski, 2020), similar to how they are popular in India today. In contrast to the United States, School shootings are extremely rare in India (Biswas, 2007; Sengupta S., 2007; Reilly, 2020), and guns are tightly controlled and difficult to procure (Affairs, 2016). However, the same cultural shift in the United States which has seen the use of toy guns decrease and their depiction on social media become socially inappropriate apparently has not yet swept through India.

Other events saw children dressed as members of the army military, complete with camouflage and rifles. Still other children had dressed at different times as Shivaji Maharaj – the celebrated

King – holding sword and shield. These figures were obvious signs of national pride for the children, and it is difficult to say how much thought was given to the implications of including a gun or weapon in the pose. Perhaps it *was* just included as *part of the uniform*, or just to complete the role that was being played. However, the conscious decision by multiple children and their parents to not include a weapon in their presentation of Singh, one even highlighting a quote taking the focus away from weapons, shows that this was at least a thought in the mind of some. At any rate, I found it difficult to reconcile the posting of these photos with the values expressed by the school.

Sharing the Achievements of the School and Students

Mona School also uses their Facebook page to highlight academic achievement of its students both individually and collectively. For example, in July of 2021, Mona School posted on its Facebook the results of the tenth standard exam. The tenth standard, equivalent to the tenth grade in the United States, is an extremely important year in the Indian School system; students take an exam that has great influence on their future. “The board exam and the papers are set by the third agency, it is not set by the schoolteachers” Chitra, herself a teacher of the tenth standard, told me. She continued

10th standard is the class where children should prove their ability. You know, in Maharashtra no one asks how much did you score in ninth grade or how much did you score in eighth grade, they ask how much did you score in tenth. So, we give more importance because tenth is a turning point, it is the first turning point in their life.

The students also feel the importance of this year. Janki, herself in the tenth standard, told me

According to my thinking, 10th standard is a crucial year. The mindset of people in India is like 10th standard decides your future. Like, we have our board [exams], so the

percentage of the board decides which college we go. And, like, that decides if our future is good or no.

Lalit also stated that the 10th standard examinations act as a proof of age, as “after our college, when we have to verify our birth dates and all, it gets verified from there [the certificate of the tenth standard], so it is a proof of our age also.”

The school, perhaps in anticipation that the end of year exams for tenth standard would once again be cancelled for academic year 2020-2021 as they had been in 2019-2020, had conducted two preliminary examinations for 10th standard in the months of January and February 2021. One test was designed and conducted in-house by Mona School itself, the second was conducted by an outside institution. These tests were simulations of the formal examinations which have great influence on the future educational possibilities of the students who take them. This was a prescient move, as the end of the year exams *were* indeed cancelled. The school was able to point to the student results of these preliminary exams as a means by which to justify their students’ future educational placement. As the end of the year exams were once again cancelled, the government allowed students to pass based on two criteria, (1) the marks that the students had received on their 9th standard end of year exams, and (2) internal assessments made by schools of the current 10th standard class (Post, 2021).

“We are one of, if I say, we are the only school in Satara that we have conducted two preliminary exams” Mr. Taghavi said. “This preliminary exam was conducted after the completion of the whole syllabus and prepared the students as per the pattern of the board exam.” This preparation allowed Mona School to submit these internal examinations as credentials to the Ministry of Education in Maharashtra for the passing of their tenth standard students. The news of the results was posted on their Facebook page and noted that for the 23rd year in a row 100% of their tenth

standard students had passed the exam. They also noted which students had scored the highest marks, with one nearly scoring a perfect 100 (99.2%).

Figure 71

Post Highlighting Student Achievement

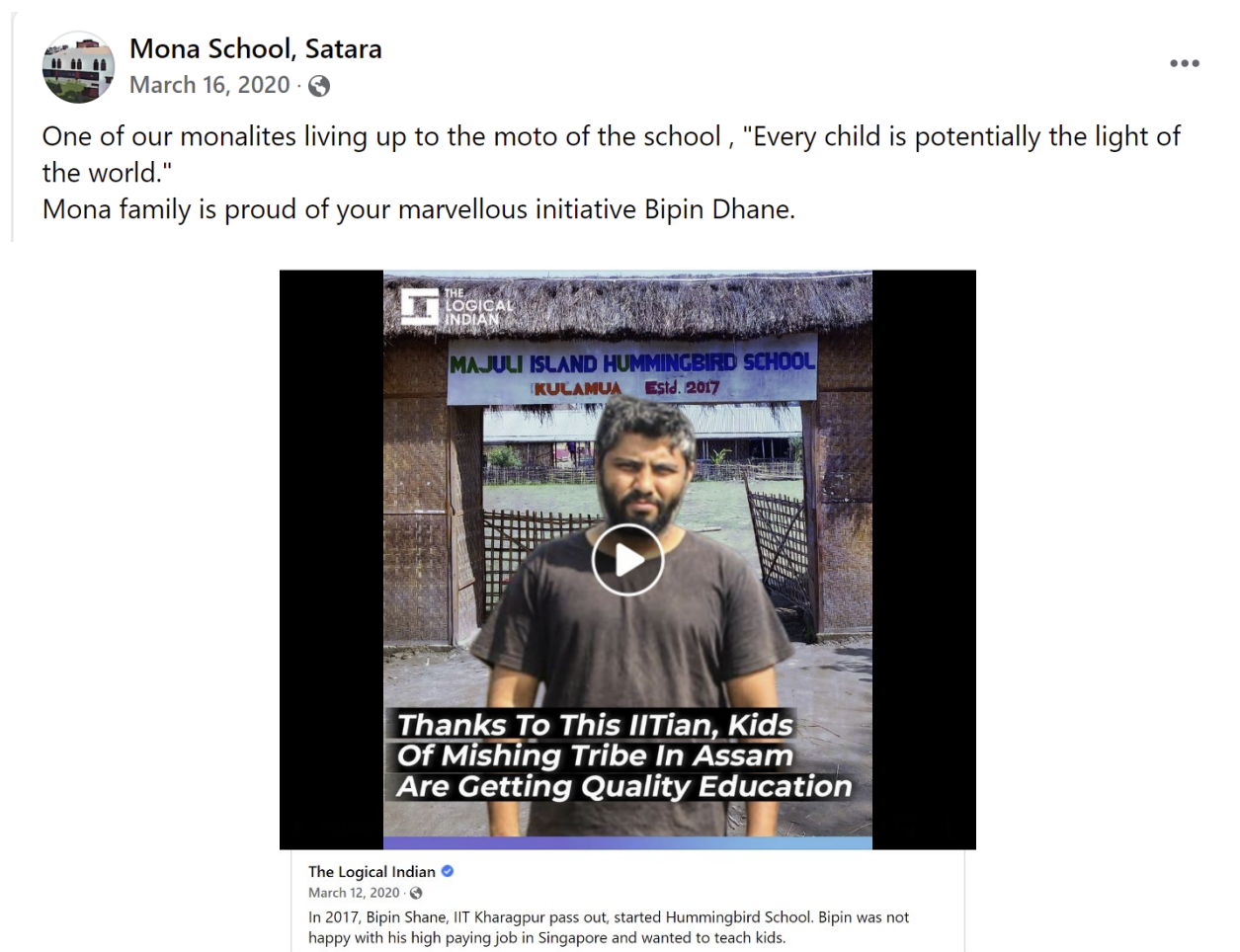


MonA School not only highlighted the achievements of current students, but also the achievements of previous graduates of the school. A post from March 16, 2020, shared an article from the Indian news site, *The Logical Indian* regarding a previous graduate of MonA School, Bipin Shane. Bipin had graduated from the prestigious India Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur, the first IIT campus established in India shortly after its independence. He had

gained a high earning job in Singapore but had felt a calling to begin a school to serve the Mising tribe in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. He quit his job in Singapore and in 2017 opened a school located in Majuli district, which at 352 square kilometers is the largest river island in the world (Gautam, 2020).

Figure 72

Post highlighting former student achievement



Celebration of Days

Figure 73

Example of a post celebrating Republic Day

National flag - Our pride and honour🇮🇳

Tiny tots of Nursery had a workshop on "National Flag Making" to learn in a creative way about the National Flag of India.

They learnt about :

- ✦ Colours of the National Flag.
- ✦ The Significance of Flag colours.
- ✦ National animal of India.
- ✦ National bird of India.

It was indeed a workshop of immense learning. Our tiny tots were very enthusiastic during the activity session.



Mona School utilized their Facebook to

draw attention to various days

throughout the year that hold

significance for various reasons.

Children's day, Indian Republic Day,

India's Independence Day, Teacher's

Day etc.... Mona School uses these days

to organize activities for the students at

the school to engage in. One of these

days which Mona School highlighted in

2020 was the celebration of Diwali and

the Maharashtrian tradition of building

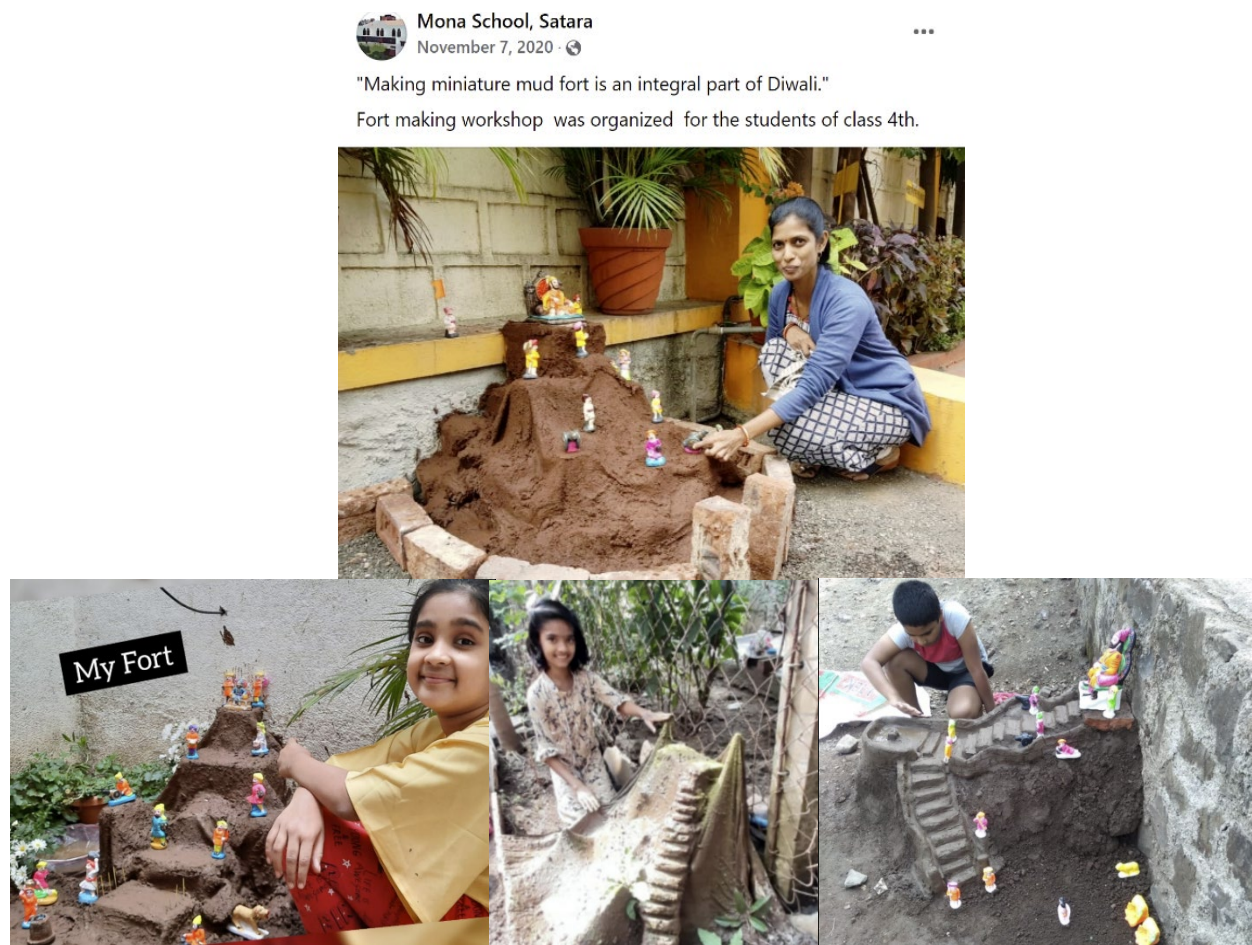
killies – forts – out of mud (figure 74). This mud fort building tradition stems from the forts that are scattered all throughout the state of Maharashtra built by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the infamous historical figure who in the 17th century led a series of successful military escapades to liberate a large portion of the Indian sub-continent from Mughal rule. These forts represented safety and protection to Maharashtrian citizens (Patil, 2015). The building of small mud replicas of Shivaji's forts during the festival of Diwali gradually became tradition throughout Maharashtra, and Mona School led a mud fort-building activity for its students in November of 2020.

This activity was led by Mona's art and drawing teacher Vaishali. Vaishali told me that one of the things that she admired about Mona School was how it gave equal importance to a variety of subjects, including drawing and art.

Our principal sir, he's giving all subjects equal importance. Not only [the main subjects] English, Hindi, Maths, [no] PE, even drawing also he is giving more importance...other schools are not thinking about this drawing, because they think it is only a time pass. But Mona School is not thinking that way.

Figure 74

The building of mud killes – forts – in celebration of Diwali



Vaishali described an orientation that Mona School took towards the arts which saw it as a means by which the students could further develop as humans. This importance that Mona School places on the arts came through in many places during my research, one of the most prominent being on the activities it chose to highlight through its Facebook page, including the building of mud forts for Diwali.

Figure 75

Drawings on importance of saving water



Early in the pandemic, on June 30 of 2020 Mona School highlighted a series of drawings done by the students of 4th standard. The theme was on saving water.

In keeping with Mona School's motto "one world one people," several of the posts on Mona School's Facebook celebrate diversity, focusing on the diversity of cultures found in the Indian sub-continent. For example, on August 14, 2021, in celebration of India's independence on August 15th, Mona School hosted a "fancy dress virtual event" on the theme "India-My Pride"

which had students in the first standard dressing up and showcasing elements of the various cultures around India.

Figure 76

Post highlighting "Unity in Diversity"



Continuing Education

Mona School also used its Facebook page to highlight initiatives undertaken for continuing education of its teachers. These posts were infrequent, with the school only posting three times about this during the period surveyed. One such workshop held in late May of 2021 was highlighted. These workshops were organized after it had been decided that the academic school year of 2021-2022 would continue online, and once again the students would be kept away from the physical classroom. This deeply impacted what Mr. Taghavi called the “zeal” and enthusiasm of the teachers, as there had been great hope that the new school year would see both the children

and the teachers back in the classroom. “From tomorrow, we are starting with some of the workshops that can help the teachers, uplift them. You know, [help] that zeal come back to them” Mr. Taghavi told me. He described that although teachers had zeal and enthusiasm to teach, “it was very very difficult for them to be away from the class and still have the spirit of the classroom. That was a great challenge for them.” Mr. Taghavi then described a series of workshops that had been held early on for the teachers which helped train them in the use of Zoom and other technologies that the school employed to provide online education for the students. He directly connected these workshops with the desired purpose to both have the teachers’ feel that their work was being appreciated, as well as motivate them to continue with enthusiasm.

I asked Mr. Taghavi to describe a bit more about zeal and what he meant by it, and what he saw that led him to feel that the teachers were being challenged by a lack of zeal. “You know, that

Figure 77

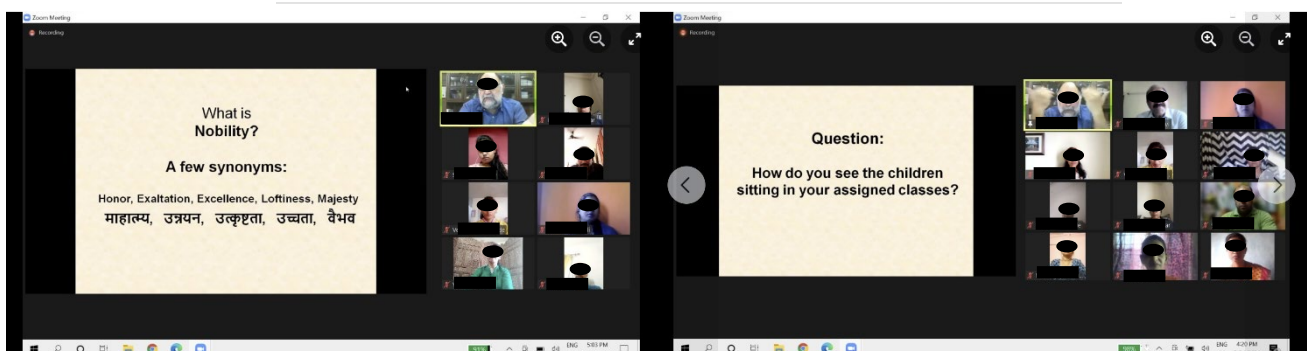
Post highlighting continuing education of teachers

Mona School was privileged to have a 3 day Teacher training workshop from 24th May to 26th May, conducted by eminent educationalist [REDACTED] International School, Pune.

The 3 day workshop sessions was focused on :

- Human Reality
- School Education and the accomplished teacher
- Meeting the challenges of online learning.

The central idea of the workshop was students should be looked upon as Noble beings. Indeed the workshop was a great source of joy, learning and motivation for the team of the teachers of Mona school.



zeal of teaching in the classroom is different with that zeal of being online” Mr. Taghavi replied, “they were finding the moment that they’re spending in the class with the students, it is the real time of the teaching.” He went on to describe the joy the teachers gained from being in the physical presence of the children in the classroom.

Some of them [the teachers] are depressed you know when they hear that the school is going to remain like this [online] for maybe another six months more, or it is not certain for how much time more. So, they’re very upset. So, the first aim we are having [with these workshops] is just to motivate them and to give – to strengthen the zeal and bring that, you know, spirit in them. To make them understand that what you are doing is great, and there is no difference between the online teaching and the physical presence in the class. This is one challenge we were facing in the beginning, in a very large scale. And gradually many of them they have habituated with the new normal, but still, some of them they wish, and they are dreaming that tomorrow, or as soon as possible, the classroom will start, and they will have the joy of teaching in the class

Many teachers in their interviews with me spoke of their fondness of the physical classroom, and how much they missed it. For example, Jagruti, a teacher of kindergarten expressed eloquently the subtleties between the online and offline classroom experience.

Whatever we used to do in [physical] class we are doing, but the physical appearance, physically seeing them, touching them, being with them doing many activities in the class, that is missing, that part is missing. I want my children to be in front of me so that I can see each and every thing minutely, what they are doing, how they’re holding [their] crayon, how they’re reacting to things, sharing things, ‘ok are you sharing with your friends’? Things like that, how they are with each other. [If a child says] ‘this is my

friend I want to sit with her, [I'll say] 'no all are your friends you should sit with everyone' [or] 'you should hold each other's hands'. So, things like that, minute, minute, small, small things that we can teach them here. What you're teaching [online] is good, but that physical appearance it matters more for me. I like being with them. I like enjoying with them. I like laughing with them. I like doing everything with them. Saying bye bye, holding their hands and everything. Here [online] we cannot do. Here [in the physical classroom] they can be emotionally attached with us; they can see their teachers. This was more effective, I think.

Creating Trust as Students Prepare to Return to Physical School

As the cases of COVID in Satara began to fall, the government of Maharashtra began preparing for students of the higher standards to be able to return to physical classrooms. This return, which began with the 10th standard, was dependent on parental consent. The school first communicated their intention to have students return to the school in a WhatsApp communication on the 16th of December 2020:

Dear Parents,

We wish to inform you that the portion of class 10th has been completed well in time and we will be starting with the revision and paper solving.

The students of class Xth will be having their 1st prelim in the month of January.

To enhance their understanding and for better practice, we will be having online as well as offline paper solving.

The students who wish to solve the paper online can do so in the allotted time and submit the paper to the school after completion. While the students who wish to come to school physically should submit the consent letter to school.

We are sharing the Consent letter for those parents who wish to send their ward physically to school which will be the sole responsibility of the parents with their consent. Either of the parents can submit the same to the school office tomorrow, 17th December before 1pm.

From among those who went back to school, it was mentioned more than once that the trust in the school taking the proper precautions to mitigate exposure to the virus had been a factor. The first standard to come back had been 10th standard in the first week of January 2021 and their return – complete with masking, social distancing, and proper sanitization – had been broadcast on the school’s main outlet to the public – their Facebook page. The strategic use of social media in helping to send specific messages was not lost on the Mona school administration, especially in sending a very visible message to the families of Mona School students that the school was very serious about maintaining the proper protocols when it came to the pandemic.

As the school was preparing to welcome students from the lower standards back to the school as well, they turned to Facebook to show what precautions they had taken to ensure the safety of the students.

Mr. Taghavi told me that “It was the only way which we could convince the parents [that] in school there won’t be any harm [to] your children. Send them. Silently it was an advertisement for the children to come to school.” Photos of the arrival of the students of 10th standard were posted on January 5th, the same day they returned. They show clearly students having their temperatures taken upon entering school grounds; having their hands sanitized; sitting in a socially distanced manner in the classroom; maintaining social distance while having role taken and moving throughout the building. They also show Mona school staff disinfecting the school and wiping high touch surfaces throughout the campus. These photos were posted not only as a

celebration of the students coming back to school, but also served to build trust among the parents that their children would be safe in coming back to school.

Figure 78

Photos posted on Mona School's Facebook page



Note. Top Right: Students sitting in a socially distanced manner; Top left: Mona School staff wiping high contact surfaces; Bottom left: Mona School staff disinfecting high contact surfaces; Bottom Right: Taking the temperature of a student.

Of course, the cultivation over years of a reputation of discipline undoubtedly helped parents to trust the school with the return of their students. Ekta, in eighth standard noted this trust:

Me: Would you describe. For me, the conversation in your family, when you were discussing whether to go back to school or not.

Ekta: Sir My parents were of two options [sic] [opinions], my mother think that I should go. But my father was not that supportive of the idea.

Me: [so] your parents were of two opinions.

Ekta: Yes sir, they were of different opinions but finally decided that I'll go back to school because my parents trusted the authorities of the school and them for my safety.

Second Return

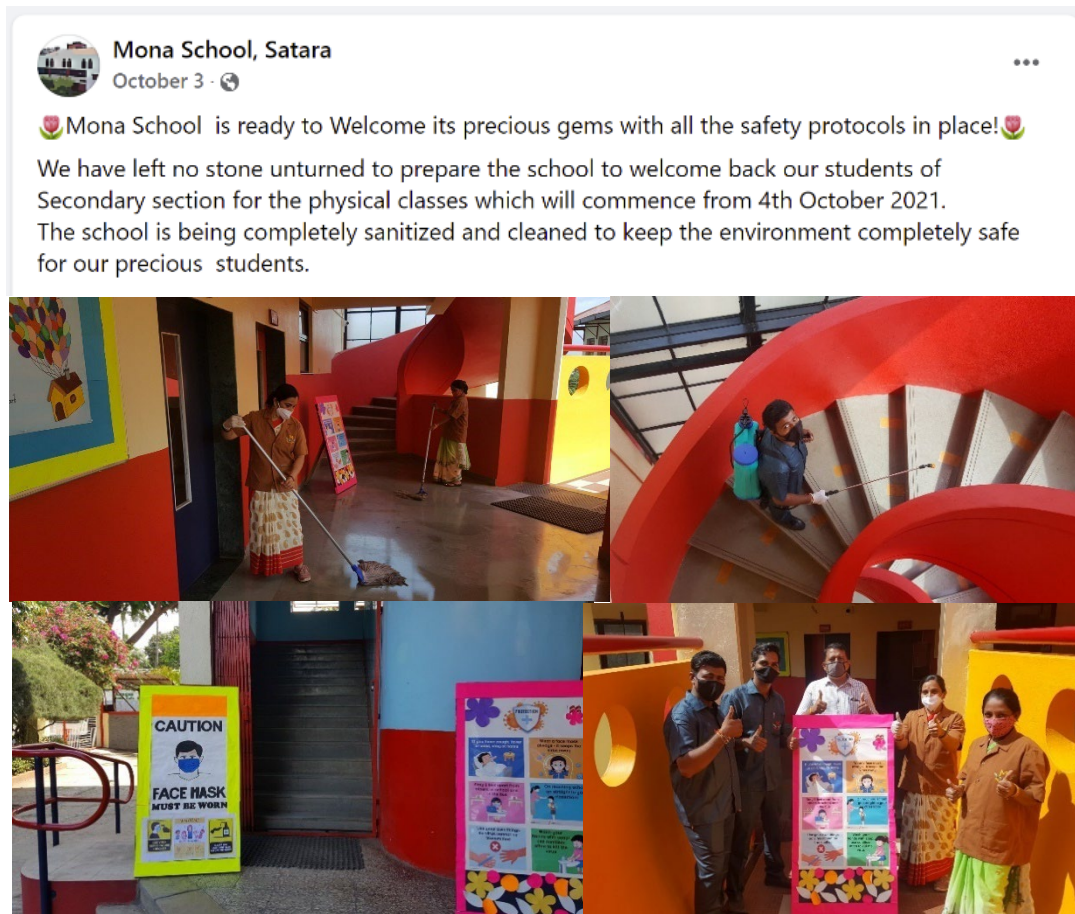
After being forced to return to online classes in March of 2021, the school once again returned to physical classes among the tenth standard in October of 2021. As a precursor to this return, the school once again utilized its Facebook account to post pictures of the preparation of the school. On October 3rd, 2021, the school posted this message:

Mona School is ready to Welcome its precious gems with all the safety protocols in place! We have left no stone unturned to prepare the school to welcome back our students of Secondary section for the physical classes which will commence from 4th October 2021. The school is being completely sanitized and cleaned to keep the environment completely safe for our precious students.

The post (figure 78) was accompanied by photos the staff cleaning and disinfecting the campus, as well as shots of signage posted on the grounds to maintain a clean environment and outlining proper protocols of cleanliness to be maintained due to the pandemic.

Figure 79

Photos posted on Mona School's Facebook page



Note. Top Right: Staff disinfecting staircase; Top left: Mona School staff disinfecting floors; Bottom left: signage reminding that masks are to be always worn, and the proper safety protocols to be followed.

This post was followed by one the next day showing the students having arrived (figure 81)

Figure 80

October 4, 2021, post of Mona School welcoming higher standards back to school for a second time



Pictures of students socially distanced from one another in their hybrid classrooms were also posted, as well as students around the campus showing their enthusiasm for being, once again, back on the Mona School campus (figure 81).

Conclusion

Around the world, social media, including Facebook and WhatsApp, during the pandemic was thought of largely in relation to the spread of information, and disinformation, about the pandemic, coronavirus, vaccination efforts, and public safety (Limaye, et al., 2020; Depoux, et al., 2020; Sengupta, 2020). Above, however, we have seen the use of both Facebook and WhatsApp as a tool through which a school could regain elements which were lost because of the physical locust of activity no longer being available. WhatsApp became a channel through

which the school could maintain contact with the students and their parents, while simultaneously allowing the teachers to connect with one another and provide support as they learned how to transition education to online platforms. WhatsApp was the conduit through which the activities of the school could be maintained and transmitted to all the students. We also see the school use their Facebook page to a greater degree than they had ever before as a means by which they could showcase to the public all the activities the school was engaging in with their students. Not only did it become the new social commons of the school, allowing a space to showcase the various educational and artistic activities which the students engaged in, it also served a much broader function of helping to promote hope and offer a sense of forward progress during a time when many were feeling hopeless or unsure about the future. Mona School's Facebook page became a depository showcasing the creative energy of an educational institution operating in a mode of learning. We see the use of social media not to spread disinformation, but rather as a space in which the spirit of children learning how to come together, despite the distance, could shine through.

Figure 81

Right: Students in a social distanced, hybrid classroom; Left: Students in the yard of the school showing their enthusiasm for being back at the physical classroom



CHAPTER 7: The Return to Physical School, Twice

From the first moment of the initial lockdown in March of 2020, students, admins, and teachers alike around India were awaiting the day when government policy would allow the return to the physical premise of the school. This chapter begins with an exploration of the changing policy landscape both nationally in India, as well as within Maharashtra. It then explores the specific example of how Mona School acted to bring students back to the physical school in early 2021 as government policy allowed. This return, however, was short lived and the students once again had to return to their online classes. The winter of 2021 once again saw students be able to return to the school, this is also explored. As of this writing, in spring of 2022, students once again have moved to online classes, due to a small outbreak of COVID infections among the student population.

Shifting Government Policy

On September 30, 2020, the Ministry of the Home Affairs (MoHA) of the Government of India released order number 40-3/2020-DM-I(A). This order outlined the method by which schools would be able to reopen around the country beginning October 1st, 2020. It gave states around India the authority to prepare their own standard operating procedures (SOP) in relation to the reopening of schools within their jurisdiction. It also noted that the Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL) of the Government of India would be released its own SOP which would serve as the standard by which all state SOPs should be modeled; state SOPs could not contradict this document. The order also noted that online methods of education would continue, in all cases, to be the preferred mode of teaching and should be encouraged across the country (Government of India, 2020).

The SOP issued by the DoSEL came simultaneously with the order from the MoHA. At 54 pages, it is a detailed document covering a wide range of topics related to the running of physical classrooms during a pandemic. It covers health, hygiene and safety protocols for both before and after the reopening of schools; protocols for the serving of meals in school; how to rethink assessment due to the limitations placed on learning by the pandemic; thoughts on how to transition students back into a physical classroom after having been learning at home for an extended period of time; how to support the emotional well-being of students and teachers; how the education departments of the states can help support this process; and includes a checklist for a safe school environment.

Some of the conditions which the SOP outlined as necessary to be followed for schools to reopen included the emphasis placed on online education as the preferred mode of education, a mode which was to continue to be encouraged by both schools and governments alike. There was to be no coercion in the return to physical schools, and return to a physical classroom by any student was dependent on the consent of the parents, which would be given in written form to the school. Echoing the MoHA order, it gave individual states the flexibility to develop their own SOPs for the reopening of schools within their own jurisdiction, granted that those SOPs did not contradict the procedures outlined in the national SOP document. It also noted that due to many schools around the country being used as centers for quarantine, it was of particular importance to properly sanitize and deep clean these spaces before they would be reopened to students (Literacy, 2020).

Although officially schools were allowed to open beginning October 1st, very few schools around India chose to. The state of Haryana, which did choose to open its schools in November, quickly shut them down again after only two weeks as more than 180 students and 110 teachers tested

positive for the coronavirus (Rohtak, 2020). Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra also decided to open their schools in the months following October, in compliance with the protocols spelled out in the SOP from the DoSEL. States varied in the ages which were allowed to opt back into coming to physical schooling, Assam for example allowing standards six through twelve to come back, while Maharashtra limited the return of students to those in standards nine through twelve (Sharma & Agrawal, 2020).

The minister of education for the state of Maharashtra, Varsha Gaikwad, announced on November sixth that she had proposed to the state government that schools be able to reopen on November 23rd allowing standards nine through twelve to return to physical classes, dependent on parental consent (International, 2020; Team, 2020; Bhaduri, 2020). Gaikwad's request was approved by the central government on November 10th which then issued its SOP describing how schools would reopen within Maharashtra (Department, G.o. 2020). At nine pages, it is significantly shorter than the national MoHA text, but mirrors concisely the recommendations contained in the larger document. It had ten recommendations for schools in order to reopen during COVID. These range from how to maintain proper hygiene and disinfection of the school to how the space in the school should be arranged to maintain social distancing. It required the testing of teachers and all non-teaching staff of the school for COVID-19 one to six days before the school would start on November 23rd. The document again mentions that students coming to physical school would be strictly based on written parental consent. On November 23rd, it was reported that 9,127 of 25,866 schools in the state had reopened, roughly 35%. Only 5% of the students in the state had attended (Goradia, 2020).

The Decision to Return to School

Mona School throughout the shifting policy landscape staid abreast of the requirements laid out by the government as it pertained to the reopening of the school. Mr. Taghavi told me that the SOP “comes as a notification by the collector’s office, and it is to the notice of everyone. It appears in all the newspapers, and it gets circulated in social media. Immediately in an hour, once that notification comes from the office, everybody’s aware.” Once the school received notice of a new SOP, they would review their policies and be sure to remain in compliance with the requests of the government. They would then make sure their students and parents were aware of the new requirements and how the school was reacting to them. “We take that SOP, we put it in all the groups, and we explain to the parents ‘because of such decision and directive from the government, we are stopping this, or we are starting this, or we are doing this,’” Mr. Taghavi told me.

Once the SOP outlining how schools were to reopen was received, Mona School immediately began to set out and plan on how to reopen. Even before the SOP was issued by the Maharashtra government, the school as early as 26th of June 2020 was putting policy into place which would facilitate the return of the students. In minutes from a parent teacher association (PTA) meeting from that date, the school outlined how they would proceed with opening the school. Standards would come back in a staggered manner, beginning with the ninth and tenth standard, followed by the sixth to eighth, then the third to fifth and finally the first and second. They would split each standard into two groups with each group coming on alternate days to allow the seating arrangement to facilitate social distancing of at least one meter apart. Plans were in place to regularly clean and disinfect the school, and that would require the parents to

drop and pick up their students from the school, not allowing for mass transport of students via mini-bus or auto-rickshaw as had been common before the beginning of the pandemic.

The PTA had thought ahead, thinking about what they would have to do to come back to physical classes, however at the same meeting it was decided to not resume in person classes until a later time when conditions were more favorable. This decision was made both because of the professional advice of members of the PTA, one whom was a professor at a local university, and one whom was a doctor, and because of the high number of calls the school had received from parents stating that if the school was physically reopened, they would not send their students as they felt it was still unsafe.

The release of the SOP on November 10th, 2020, caused another conversation to be initiated with the PTA of Mona School. “We had a long discussion,” Chitra, a teacher of the tenth standard, told me, “We had a PTA meeting...and this meeting was arranged specially to discuss the views related to the physical presence of the students at the school, especially for ninth and tenth standards.” In the meeting there was a long discussion with the parents about how the experience with online schooling over past several months. “I should tell you,” Chitra said, “that the parents, they were quite contented. They were quite satisfied with the online sessions...moreover the parents appreciated the efforts of the teachers [and] the activities of the school.” At the time of this discussion, towards the end of November, the parents of students in ninth and tenth standards were still hesitant to send their children to school and suggested that the school continue with online delivery of the classes. “In the meeting we concluded with the decision to continue online classes,” Chitra told me, “And at that time we postponed the physical presence of the students in the school.”

As the condition of the pandemic in Maharashtra continued to improve in late 2020, seeing its lowest daily case load since the beginning of the pandemic – 2,834 on December 21 as compared to 37,548 at the peak on September 15, 2020 (Data, 2021) – the general mood in Maharashtra, and all of India, regarding the pandemic was one of positivity. This led to the prime minister stating on January 28th, 2021, that India had beat the COVID-19 crisis (Desk, 2021). This general mood of positivity in relation to the pandemic led to Mona School making the decision to restart the physical school with the tenth standard. “Initially they [the parents] were not ready, so we postponed it,” Chitra told me,

Then afterwards again we had the meeting where unanimously the parents they agreed because this time, the end of December, the situation was well in control. I think the situation was quite favorable for the students to come to school, and then we took the decision of having [the] offline session.

In addition to the positive mood in relation to the pandemic, Royia also mentioned that there were other motivations involved for the return of tenth standards students. Tenth standard, as noted elsewhere in this document³⁸ is a highly significant year in the Indian school system, having great weight on the future educational opportunities of students, based on their exam results. “If they get good grades,” Royia told me, “Then when they go to the university, they can get into whatever [one] they want.” As the school year grew closer to the time when the students would be required to take their exam, Royia told me that the interest of the parents to send their children back to a physical classroom also increased. “They know...the kid has to anyways go out there and give their exam in a place that’s a public place, not at their home,” Royia described, “so that’s why they are more open and they’re sending their kids out there.”

³⁸ See chapter six for more on the importance of tenth standard.

Considering that return to physical classes would be dependent on parental consent, a communication was made via WhatsApp on December 16th to all the students in tenth standard noting that they would have the option to come back to school in January dependent on consent:

Dear Parents,

We wish to inform you that the portion of class 10th has been completed well in time and we will be starting with the revision and paper solving.

The students of class Xth will be having their 1st prelim in the month of January.

To enhance their understanding and for better practice, we will be having online as well as offline paper solving.

The students who wish to solve the paper online can do so in the allotted time and submit the paper to the school after completion. While the students who wish to come to school physically should submit the consent letter to school.

We are sharing the Consent letter for those parents who wish to send their ward physically to school which will be the sole responsibility of the parents with their consent. Either of the parents can submit the same to the school office tomorrow, 17th December before 1pm.

“We started our offline session, that is students coming physically to school, from month of January, that is from fifth of January we started,” Chitra told me. As they had envisioned in June of 2020, they split the tenth standard into two halves, with 27 students in each, and had them come on alternate days – designating them group A and group B. Chitra noted that out of all the students in the tenth standard, only one or two did not come to the online sessions. This was a significant change from just a month prior when most parents had not been comfortable with sending their students to school. Chitra noted a cooperation between the school and parents when

it came to the tenth standard returning to school. “Consent of the parents means it is the sole responsibility of the parents,” Chitra told me in relation to the decision to return to the school. “Of course, once the student or the child enters the school campus, it is the sole responsibility of the school,” she continued, “We are following all the norms, we are maintaining social distance, mask is must, we have told the students to bring sanitizer.” Per the SOP of the government, the teachers, and admins also all had COVID tests before the arrival of the students on campus. All tests came back negative.

Mona School was obviously aware of the requirements for reopening the school as outlined in the government’s SOP and had prepared accordingly. They had set up signs all throughout the school reminding the students to always wear a mask, keep distance from their peers, and to engage in regular handwashing. They also did not return for a full eight-hour school day, rather they kept the initial sessions at three hours in length, without any break. “There is no break time, because many times what happens during the break time [is] they mingle with each other, they share the tiffins with each other. So, we have avoided all such things,” Chitra told me. Mona School had designed the school day in such a way that a minimum amount of movement would be necessary, as to reduce the chances for social mingling outside of the classroom. Chitra praised the disciplined nature of the students on their first few days of schooling and noted how not one removed their mask. “They followed whatever instructions were given to them, they were having their own sanitizer, they were sitting in their own place,” Chitra told me, “And of course they were very attentive, very focused because they know the importance of this year,” she said in relation to the students of tenth standard; “They have become more serious.” Because of the truncated nature of the school day with the intention of preventing as much necessary social interaction as possible, the school was reduced to a bare state in which priority

was based on what was *essential* for students to learn. In the case of the tenth standard, the *essential* aspect of their education was what would be on their exams as set by outside institutions. The school did not attempt to restart its assembly, or its moral education classes, but rather focused on those subjects that were core to advancement as defined by outside institutions. The call for the tenth standard students to return caused much discussion in the families. Lalit, a student in the tenth standard, told me “We actually took some time to take this decision.” He described that the hesitation to return was not due to concerns around health or the danger of the pandemic, rather “it was like...if I could learn better at home or is it more necessary to go to school.” His family discussed it for a while and ultimately came to a unanimous conclusion that he should return to the physical classes. Khushi, another student in the tenth standard told me the joy she felt when a letter had been received from the school that with parental consent, they would be able to return, noting that her mother saw it as a chance to get away from the electronic devices. “My mother saw it [the letter] and asked me if I wanted to go,” she told me, “I was really happy that at last we can go physically to school.” She said that her mother told her that now at least she could be free from her phone and laptop. “It was really positive,” she said of the support she received from her family to return to school, “everyone was willing to send me to school. No one was scared because [the] school takes lots of [precautions], means sanitizers and everything.”

Janki, another student in the tenth standard noted the tension that she and her family felt surrounding the decision to return. She and a few members of her family had previously contracted the coronavirus, so they knew first-hand the experience of being ill. “Actually, some of my family members were like against me going to school, because obviously we had COVID over here and the cases were increasing,” she told me. “I was one of the COVID survivors, so

like, uh, my family was already scared,” she described. When she, her mother and sister all had COVID, she had missed her online classes for about a month due to the illness. As they discussed further, they began to reflect on the importance of the tenth standard school year. “My father said that it’s a crucial year, it’s your tenth standard, you cannot miss this because physical classes are more effective than online classes,” Janki related. “So, like, uh yeah, we had much debating on that, but I went to school after.”

Hemakshi, a teacher of the tenth standard, told me how there were two minds among parents in whether they would send their children to school. There were those parents who were not willing to take the risk of possible exposure to the coronavirus. Parents told her that they had had family members who had gotten sick from COVID-19 and were unwilling to send their children for this reason. Other parents wanted their children to have the physical attention of their teachers, they noted that their children were getting bored sitting in one room, going “from [the] bed to [the] dinner table, or from [the] dinner table to bed, only this movement was there in the house. That is why students were feeling bored, and they wanted to come to school.”

The first day of the students coming back to the school was on the fifth of January 2020. The first standard to come back was the tenth standard and their return – complete with masking, social distancing, and proper sanitization – was broadcasted on the school’s main outlet to the public – their Facebook page. The strategic use of social media in helping to send specific messages was not lost on the Mona school administration, especially in sending a very visible message to the families of Mona School students that the school was very serious about maintaining the proper protocols when it came to the pandemic, in accordance with the protocols listed in the SOP of the state government.³⁹

³⁹ For more on this, see chapter 5

Figure 82

Examples of photos posted on Mona School's Facebook page highlighting the return of the students of the tenth standard on January 5, 2021



The first day of school for the tenth standard was accompanied with great joy and anticipation among both the students and the teachers. Aarushi, one of the teachers of tenth standard, told me “Personally, I was very happy to see them all, because though I was seeing them every day two or three times, I was very happy to see them in person, and I was happier to teach them in person.” “We addressed them,” Mr. Taghavi told me in relation to the students of tenth standard who had returned, “we welcomed them, and during the welcome [I] told to them that now the life has come back to the school...that is what the heart of every teacher was telling.” Mr. Taghavi told the students that the school had lost its life, and that now the life had come back. “We were lifeless, now the school [was] becoming full of life,” Mr. Taghavi said of the day the students returned. Soon after the return of the tenth standard, more life would come back to school with the return of standards five through nine.

Government Calls Standards Five Through Nine Back to School

The minister of education for the government of Maharashtra announced the return of standards fifth – eight on January 15th, 2021, via twitter: “The Chief Minister has given approval to start classes from fifth to eighth standard in schools in the state,” the message began, “These classes

will be opened from January 27 with all the precautions related to corona. He assures the parents that there will be no fault in the health and safety of the students” (Gaikwad, 2021a). The official government order came three days later on January 18th. At two pages, it amounts to not much more an announcement that standards five through eight will be able to come back to school and the announced date (Department, G.o. 2021a). It points schools towards the procedures outlined in the previous SOPs.

Ninth standard had already been cleared in the previous SOP to be able to return to school, although Mona School had chosen to start strictly with the tenth standard. As a response to the government’s approval for the return of standards five through eight, Mona School prepared by gathering the consent of the parents for these standards. The students of these standards came back on staggered days on February 6th and 8th, 2021. The students were welcomed back with the same celebratory nature as that of the tenth standard, with the distribution of sweets and a general tone of excitement.

Figure 83

Photos posted on Facebook showing the return of fifth - ninth standards



Note. Left: Students receiving sweets in celebration of their return. Right: Students highlighting the socially distanced classroom with empty benches and only one student sitting per bench.

While the tenth standard students had the motivation of an extremely important external board exam to return to physical classes, this was not the case with the return of the lower standards, and it showed in the attendance numbers. “As the grades came down, like as it went class nine, eight, seven, the response became more weak,” Royia told me. The primary reason was the concern of the parents for the safety of their children from the coronavirus. “[Currently] nothing is stable,” Royia told me in early 2021 in relation to the state of the coronavirus in Satara, “just recently [in] Satara, two of the schools are closed down, they had 200 cases, 200 kids that were affected. So, the parents, like, they say, ‘if there is online why should we send our kids there and, like, risk their life?’” The second reason that Royia told me was preventing enrolment numbers from being as high in the lower standards was that the students and parents had grown comfortable with online education, causing a kind of complacency. “Most of them are, they are now happy and habitual with online,” Royia said, “there’s not much pressure like for their exams, or completion of assignments or any punishment work. So, they [the parents] prefer the kid to be at home and be under less stress.” She told me that this was especially the case in relation to the students of the ninth standard. “They know that school is very strict when it comes to year nine because they are going to enter year ten, so they prefer their kids to be at home and away from stress.” Royia told me that one result of online education is that it had caused students to become lazy. She was worried what that would mean once the school would call both teachers and students back to a standard full-length school day.

One thing that we are seeing is laziness, like just to put it out there in that term, laziness.

For sure we see that. That self-motivated feeling has reduced a lot, and then as time passes, they are more happy with less work when it comes to the kids as well as the staff. [coming back for a full day] is going to affect them a lot, a lot. You know like, if you

sleep ten hours and suddenly you have to sleep for five, how does it affect you mentally?

That is how it is affecting [us] here...

The attendance significantly dropped in the lower standards which returned. “So, like class fifth, we have hardly twelve kids out of maybe 52,” Royia said, “[The] majority, say 75%, are attending online sessions from class fifth through eighth.” Royia also noted how in early 2021, more and more of the parents who had originally turned in written consent forms for their children to attend physical classes, were coming to the school to take them back. Fifth standard, which originally had 18 students, had been reduced to 12, “every day we have parents who are coming and taking back the consent letter,” Royia said.

As a Body Without a Soul: Student Return Likened to the Soul of the School

A metaphor that came up multiple times in my discussion with the children, teachers, and admins about the time around when the children came back to school was that of a body without a soul. Children were likened to the soul, and the school building as the body. If you remove the children, the soul is removed from the school. This metaphor worked on many levels, as it first showed how the school conceptualized the children and their relationship to the school. On another level it defers importance from the teachers and administrators towards the student population. The school didn’t describe the teachers or administrators as the soul of the school, but rather the children. A soul is something that a body cannot live without, it is the animating force behind a physical apparatus. To say the children were the soul removed from the body implies a certain type of *death* which the school had experienced, and that *life* had returned with the children.

This characterization also takes on increased meaning when the moral component of Mona School was taken into consideration. The Bahá’í conception of the soul sees it as the source of all

potential moral capability. All the potential for moral action stems from latent capacities of the soul which require discovery and development to become manifest. On an individual level then, each student was characterized as that source of moral expression, an individual soul which could develop their capacity towards moral action in the world. However, on a collective level this characterization also describes the student population as the source of all moral capability which the school potentially could possess. Thus, if the *body* of the school would hope to engage in social action or engage within the wider society – itself conceived as moral behavior – it would have to depend on the development of the capabilities of its soul. The school was literally powerless to do any good in the society in which it existed without the resource of the students. “School without children is body without soul” Chitra, one of the tenth standard teachers told me, “And the soul has started coming back to the school,” she stated with enthusiasm as she described to me what it was like to have the students come back. “We were so excited, we were so overwhelmed, and so was the reaction of the students,” she said. “[The] students were also eagerly waiting for the school to reopen, because you know school days are really golden days,” Chitra continued. “I was too excited to see my children back after so many months.” Mr. Taghavi described for me that day: “For almost about a year we didn’t hear the school bell...for the last many months no bell was there, no announcement on the mic,” now once again the neighbors around the school had to get used to the ringing of the bell, as it had gone silent for most of the previous year.

Saurabh, a student in the sixth standard, was extremely excited to return. When he found out he was going back to school, he immediately bought a new school uniform and backpack. “I was early to school” he told me. He was excited to see how the school looked now, which classroom would be his. “I was very curious to see the school. I was very excited to meet the students also,”

he told me. He also noticed the excitement of the teachers to have the students back in school. “The teachers were also very excited to see us.” I asked him why he thought they were excited. “Because they love students, our teachers love students,” was his reply, “all the years they have been with us, and suddenly [with] this online, they were not able to meet us.” He mentioned that it was more difficult to talk with his friends than it had been before. Not only because of the discouragement from the teachers to talk socially with one another, but also because of the mask and social distancing requirements. “Like one student would sit here, and I would sit here [motions a long distance between] and from far we have to talk.”

“I was much excited,” Deepti explained about the day she returned to school. On the day before school was set to begin, she could barely wait for the next day. “Our school started at two o’clock in the afternoon, so when I stepped into the school at two o’clock, I was like ‘yes, after eleven months, finally I came to the school and now I’m going to enter into my class.’” Deepti then went on to explain about the steps the school took to show how much they cared about their students. They had their temperatures taken at the gate, and their hands and feet sanitized. “I saw that the school is taking much precautions for us...when we [went] into the class [and] the school gave us chocolate and biscuits.” Deepti highlighted the celebratory nature of the return, how the teachers were excited to see them and told them how she was so glad to see her children back in the school. “[The] principal said that ‘the school was dead without the children, now it is half alive that fifth to tenth standard have come.’”

“Yes, it was really like a celebration,” Esha, one of the teachers, told me. “We could see from everyone, our principal sir, our teachers, even our students, everyone was happy to see [each other] after a long, long time.” Esha mentioned a sentiment that was echoed by others in that it felt like a brand-new experience, as if it was the first time the children had ever attended the

school. She mentioned that it had a different feel than it had during the previous school days prior to the pandemic, it felt new as if “this is the first time when they are coming to school.” Lalit, a student in the tenth standard also noted that coming back to school felt like “it was a completely new thing, though I’m not new to the school, but there [at the school] things were very different.” Chitra, one of the teachers, also noted this reaction from the students. “[It was] as if they entered a very new surrounding, [a] new campus area, so serious they were.” Janki, another student in the tenth standard, also noted this feeling of coming to school being a new experience. “Like, when we walked into school, it just felt like a different place, like, I don’t know why, but it just felt like a different place, a different atmosphere,” Janki told me, “Because this whole year, we were at a house in our comfort zones.” She mentioned that when she saw her friends she spoke with them, “but not as we used to speak earlier...we spoke very, like as if we were new students to our school, like it was a very new experience.” I asked Janki to further explain why she felt like a new student, she told me

Like because I guess because we had everything from the comfort of our home, unlike at [the school]. This year we went to school with our masks on, we had ourselves sanitized, checked at the...entrance, we were sanitized at our classroom door...we had separate tables so like, usually we have one bench and on one bench two students sit, but this time we had separate tables in our big hall so like it was just a very different experience for us. Because of the protocols related to COVID-19, the school was unable to give anything to eat that was non-packaged, so they decided to hand out packaged treats to the students. “You know, they love very much Cadbury chocolate, which usually we distribute to the children during a function,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “And in a very proper manner...to every student who [was] coming to school, that [chocolate] was being presented to them.”

Figure 84

Sanitizing of hands and handing out of chocolate and biscuits to welcome back students to the physical school



When asked how she felt coming back to school, Ekta simply said “Sir, I felt very refreshed going back to school, it felt that I had come home from a very long trip.” Likening the return to school as a return to home was not unique to Ekta, Garima also mentioned this:

Me: And tell me how you felt when you walked in the school for first time after almost one year.

Garima: Yes, I was like, thank God I came to this place again! I missed my second home so much that I was full of happiness, and I was full of joy when I saw, met all my teachers and dear principal sir.

Although Garima was excited to be back in school, she also expressed that she had felt a little afraid to meet her teachers after such a long time:

Garima: I was a bit afraid, like, what is gonna happen, but at the same time I was very happy that I met them after a very long time and it was like, we met our parents, our second parents, after a very long time.

Me: So, when you say you were afraid what do you mean...why?

Garima: I was afraid because my books were a bit incomplete. And I was like, okay, what will happen if the teacher checks my book...

Me: Did they check your book?

Garima: They did check my book, but they understood that on online classes, no one might be taking things seriously, so everyone would be in the atmosphere of mischief.

Garima concluded by saying the teachers understood that there were various issues that could have prevented them from completing their workbooks, such as network outages due to power cuts, and that they were able to complete what they were missing in the physical classes.

Khushi noted the happiness that she felt when she learned she would be able to attend at least a portion of her 10th standard year in the physical school:

I felt really good after seeing the school. Because, as it is my last year in the school I was, at first, I was very kind of sad that I would not be able to attend school because 10th standard is the last year of my schooling so I would miss it. But after I got to know that yes, at last, I will go to school, physically, so when I first saw, means when I entered school, I felt relief. And it was really positivity in my heart.

Deepti also noted the happiness she felt upon returning:

First when the lockdown happened the school was not started till the next year...means like, it was all stopped so we were missing the school much because I like to go to school...because the school is an exciting place to learn, means it is like the heaven of learnings. So, when the lockdown had started at that time, we were feeling lonely at home because we were not going at school, we were not meeting our friends, teachers, and now as school has started physically...at that time we are meeting our friends, it is happy. We are not talking with each other much because of this...wearing mask...but yet we can see

each other's faces and we can interact with the teachers physically. It is much better than online.

Complementing the celebratory atmosphere of the return, there was also a noticeable dampening of temperament. Students and teachers alike contrasted the previous atmosphere at school, which had a certain sense of freedom of movement and social interaction, with the more serious, somber, and restricted atmosphere which existed in the school due to the COVID protocols. In addition to the effect that the COVID protocols had on the atmosphere, the online experience also had interesting residual effects on the educational experience as the students and teachers resumed an in-person experience. “The first time when I entered the class,” Aarushi, a teacher of the tenth standard, told me “They were sitting really very quietly. So, I thought as if I have muted them all.” Aarushi told me she felt as if the students had somehow internalized the modes of behavior which they used in the online classroom, and now were exhibiting it in the physical classroom.

I mean the students, they were away from the school for such a long period of time...initially they were a little hesitant to answer the questions, and they were, I think they were [a] little not acquainted to this new atmosphere, this new ambience of the school, because everyone was sitting very quietly, everyone was wearing masks. But within just a few minutes they got used to this physical teaching, and it was just like the old days.

You Don't Know What You Have Until it's gone

The experience of having an extended period away from the physical school resulted in many being able to place into perspective what they had been missing. It seemed to cause a greater appreciation among both students and teachers for physical schooling. Aarushi related to me a

conversation she had with her students upon coming back to the school, “Actually, when the students came for the class and when I was with them for the first time, I spoke with them.” She asked them how they were feeling being back in the classroom after being away for such a long period of time. “They felt, and they are still feeling that offline classes – physical classes – are much more better than online classes,” Aarushi told me. “They are happy to be back with their teachers, and even we are feeling better to have them in front of us. It is a really good thing that the children are coming to school, it’s really a great thing.”

One of the students who chose to come back, Saurabh, told me that when he first learned he would be able to go back to school he thought that it would be boring. “But the school was [actually] very exciting!” he told me, “It taught us many things.” He contrasted this with his experience on Zoom, which he decided was the *actual* boring experience. “[On Zoom] it was like getting up every day, sitting on that laptop, and I was *actually* bored.” I asked him to explain this boredom a bit more, he told me

because we can’t meet our friends, and we can’t, because like when eating tiffin [lunch box] every day we share everything with our friends and [on Zoom] it doesn’t happen.

We have to just sit on the laptop and hear [the] teacher’s voice. We can’t meet there [on Zoom] friends and talk with them. The school is very different from Zoom.

Lalit, a student in the tenth standard, also noted how the absence from the physical school helped to appreciate the institution even more. I asked him what it was like to see his teachers again. “I was actually very excited to see them after a year almost,” he told me “So I actually felt how it was totally different from attending the [online] classes. I actually learned about [the] importance of going to school, and how important it is in our daily life.”

Figure 85

Picture of Saurabh with classmates on their day of returning to school (personal communication)



Lata, one of the teachers, also spoke of the joy which was felt by herself and the students upon returning, a re-discovery of sorts about the joys of sharing a physical space together. “We were happy to see [the students] in front of us, and to be face to face talking [in] conversation with them,” she told me that after having the students back in front of her that she realized the online teaching experience was “not comparable” with being in a physical space. “They were also missing the school,” Lata went on to explain, “when they come [physically] they [are] also assured that whatever doubt they are having, or whatever difficulties they are having in studies, now these doubts [and] difficulties will clear in the classroom with the teachers.” Lata was reinforcing what many teachers described in chapter five about the physical classroom being more conducive to participating and learning.

Boosting

“To have students physically in the school makes a lot of difference,” Chitra told me. She especially noted a difference in the students who “need that boosting, students that need someone very close to them [to] tell them, motivate them, encourage them which was all missing during the pandemic.” I asked Chitra to explain more about this concept of boosting. “Many children, you know, they are unaware about their hidden potentialities,” Chitra explained, “they *can* do it, but it is because no one has observed, or no one has given them proper guidance, or no one has encouraged them, that they never felt [able] to improve.” As Chitra reflected on her experience with teaching online considering the recent return of the students and once again being active in the physical classroom, she described further the ability a teacher has in a physical classroom that is hampered online:

During [an] online session what happens, as a teacher, I keep on interacting with the students, and many students they do answer, but there are so many students who are reserved, they’re hesitant to speak. And during this pandemic, especially during these virtual classrooms, we cannot interact with all the students at that time, so that was missing. But when the students physically come to school, what happens we personally pay attention to their activities, and we keep telling them ‘You are capable, you can do it’. You know when we give that, [it] brings about the positivity in them, they get boosted, they feel that ‘yes we can do it’.

Chitra went on to tell me that she felt you could help *boost* a student in an online environment, she had experimented with it herself. It was important to pay attention to those students who were not as active as the others and find ways in which she could include them in the activities of the class. Boosting could occur online or in the classroom, but the distinction as Chitra described

was the ease with which it can happen in classroom, vs. the extra effort that one must put into going about it online.

Of course, those children who really are very good and study, they do on their own, and they do the best whether be it offline or be it online, they're very attentive and they do their best. But there are some students who [we] really need to push them always. And in online, it was difficult [to know] whether really that student is coping up or not, whether really that student has understood that concept or not.

It wasn't until the students came back to the physical school that Chitra could interact with the students she was having concerns about. She was able to ask certain questions to those students, and at that time really understand at what level of comprehension that student was at, and in turn understand which concepts or topics she would need to make extra clear. "In online, we cannot have that surety whether students have really understood very well with 100%, or not," Chitra told me "But offline, we get to know through their writing, through their activity, through their evaluation test." She described that they also give evaluation tests online, but there was a question always about what means they were using to write the exam. This question was removed when the students were physically present in front of them writing their papers.

Dual Syllabus and Moving Back Online

Mona School chose to maintain a robust syllabus for students whether they chose to come back to the school or remain at home online. "It was very difficult for us...but we welcomed [it] for the sake of the students who are coming to the school," Mr. Taghavi told me, "We had another program for them, another timetable for them and for those who were sitting at home and were not coming, they should not be deprived." The school maintained two separate programs for those who were coming to school and those who were at home. Essentially the teachers were

teaching the same subjects twice in one day, having the online session in the morning, and repeating that same session in the afternoon at the actual physical school. At times it was difficult for the teachers to maintain continuity between the two different sessions, as many of the teachers told Mr. Taghavi that the same amount of material they could get through in a few hours of the physical teaching, would take several more sessions for teaching online.

Students whose parents had not given consent to come back to physical school noted various reasons. Udai in the seventh standard for example, noted that their reason not to go back was due to having elderly relatives living at home with them:

I chose online because, because my grandmother and my grandfather lives with me and there they have a chance of, like, getting the virus. That's why I, my, my parents have not allowed me to [long pause for thinking] The thing was, I had given the consent letter of going to physical school, but then the day before going to physical school it was, it was Sunday. Then, we, we have, we had a talk like a family talk. And then we decided not to go like, there is a chance of getting the virus to my grandfather and my grandmother. That's why I didn't go. In my next day my father took the consent letter from the office...I hope, like, I hope I can go tomorrow but I can't go because of the pandemic...the good thing is that like, my family is safe. [That is] the only reason I'm not going to [school] physically.

Another reason given by a few students regarding their decision to not re-join the physical sessions was related to transportation. Vans and rickshaws which previously had transported many children to school were no longer in use due to the recommendations by the government. Many children had relied on such services to be brought to school. Bhagyashri noted:

I don't have anyone actually to drop [me], and to pick [up] because my brother is also leaving Satara for his future studies, and even my mother she cannot drive car. She because – due to her health issues and my father has a shop so he has to be there, and only private vehicles are allowed. And I live much far from the school, and it is [not] possible for me to go even with cycle. So, because of this. I choose to be online.

Transportation was also an issue that came up when I asked Saurabh in the 6th standard why he thought not all their peers had come back to online classes:

... many students are coming from the buses and the vans, and many students are living far from here so they can't. They can't come to school every day so they, they may not choose that.⁴⁰

Harpreet in the ninth standard noted the hesitancy to return due to the fluidity of the COVID situation. In hindsight of course we know that only a few weeks after we spoke, the schools in India were closed once again as the number of cases grew in a furious uproar. The number of students who had returned to physical classes was always in flux and some who had initially turned in consent letters, took them back, whereas others who were hesitant to join at first, joined later. She was already beginning to observe that many of the students at Mona school were beginning to move back to the online platform:

...others are shifting to online...from our school also [in] my class, students have shifted to online because [of] the COVID cases that are all increasing now again. So...I have no idea about what decision will be made by our school, but the students are shifting towards online sessions again. So, I, it's pretty funny, because last week though, I talked to my mother about if I should go to school with the whole precaution taking. And my mom

⁴⁰ The administration wondered how often this was being offered as an excuse vis-à-vis a legitimate reason.

said yes, surprisingly. And I even started [preparing] the school uniform, the shoes that I needed, and everything was done. But then again, the government said that maybe you have to stop. Again, I [changed my mind], I said that okay now I'll just continue with the online sessions.

Lata, one of the teachers, said that she felt students had chosen to return to the physical classes because the atmosphere of learning that is felt in the school is not present at home. "They know that the atmosphere is not there [at home] as it is in the classroom, some come because they want to be in the school and be with the teachers."

Chitra, offered her own thoughts on why some of the children had decided to come back or not. "We cannot force the students to come to school," she said, "it is entirely the wish and desire of the parents." She mentioned that only one or two students from the tenth standard had chosen not to come, and that was because of parents who had been reluctant to send them. "Because one of the parents, she was COVID positive, and maybe for the protection and for the safety of her daughter she's not sending her," Chitra pondered, "Maybe because they have undergone this bitter experience."

Short Lived

In March of 2021 COVID-19 daily infections began to sharply rise, and Mona School, along with schools across the nation, once again went online. "When the students were coming physically, we were happy," Hemakshi, one of the teachers, told me, "When students went back online, again we became very sad. We were having a good time with them, [as] for so many days we had not seen them. Children are like the soul of a school, and without them, nothing, it's no use." Hemakshi also mentioned the difficulty felt by the children who had returned physically to the school, only to be told after such a short time that they would have to move online once

again. Some of the students, Hemakshi related, had gone through extreme hardship to make sure to arrive at school every day. This hardship was caused by the requirement of the school that the student be dropped and picked up at the school by the parents. Many parents had work hours that made this difficult, or even in some cases they were not in possession of a means of transportation by which the students could be dropped. Nonetheless, several students despite these hardships made a supreme effort to come to the physical classes. Hemakshi said that these students were particularly affected by the transition back to online education.

One by one, districts around the state of Maharashtra began closing their schools due to the sharp increases in COVID-19 cases. Pune announced the closure of its schools on February 20th, 2021 (Shaurya, 2021), and Satara, the district where Mona School is located, closed its schools – except for tenth standard, on March 3rd, 2021 (TNN, 2021). Although tenth standard was allowed to continue coming to school initially, ultimately the pandemic would cause end of year exams for all standards throughout the state, for a second year in a row, to be cancelled, and for all students to be promoted based on other means of evaluation.⁴¹ The cancellation of examinations for standards nine and eleven was announced on April 8th, 2021 (Department, G.o., 2021b), while the cancellation of the exams for tenth standard was announced on April 20, 2021 (Gaikwad, 2021b).

Mona School once again, for the second year in a row, finished the school year by promoting students to the next standard without any formal, standard examinations and was forced to begin a new, second, school year online. And although by this time the teachers and students were quite used to the online system – removing much of the difficulties that had accompanied the school in 2020 as they learned how to conduct education online, the uncertainty around when the

⁴¹ For more information on how Mona School conducted preliminary examinations in anticipation of the possibility of the end of year examinations being cancelled, please see chapter six.

school would be able to once again operate in-person weighed on the minds of all – teachers, students, and administrators alike. This reversal back to online was made even more difficult for the teachers by the fact that they *had* invited students back into the classroom for a fleeting two months, they had felt once again what education *could* be. “They were finding, you know, the moment that they’re spending in the class with the students, it is the real time of the teaching” Mr. Taghavi told me regarding the time that the teachers had once again been able to be in the same classroom with their students, “some of them are depressed...when they hear that the school is going to remain like this [online] for maybe another six months more...so they’re very upset.”⁴²

The resurgence in India of the coronavirus in spring of 2021 erased completely the mood of positivity which had been widespread just a few months before. The closing of Mona School for a second time was accompanied by a widespread sense of uncertainty which accompanied the wider community. This uncertainty caused Mona School to decide what until this time it had been able to avoid; the reduction of the salary of the teachers.⁴³ This decision ended up only lasting for three months, and by the beginning of the next school year, the school was once again able to raise the salary of the teachers to their full levels.

Return Again

On September 24, 2021, the government of Maharashtra released an order stating that classes could once again be restarted in person beginning October 4th, 2021; standards five – twelve in rural areas, and standards eight – twelve in urban settings (Government of Maharashtra, 2021). Many of its conditions mirrored the SOP released in late 2020 preceding the first physical return. It included a few new guidelines, including that all homework should be submitted online, so

⁴² For more about how Mona School dealt with this deflation of the teachers’ zeal, please see chapter six.

⁴³ For more on this see chapter eight.

that students will not have to exchange physical notebooks or papers with each other or the teacher. It also called upon the teacher to screen students physically for signs of illness, such as fever, nausea, shortness of breath, scratches on the body, red eyes, red swollen lips, swollen fingers hands and joints, vomiting or diarrhea, or abdominal pain. If any of these conditions were noticed the teacher was to arrange as soon as possible for the student to visit a doctor, who would then decide if continued attendance in the class was advisable or not. The document also called upon parents to make masks for their children who were attending school, and to ensure these masks were being washed daily. It also asked that parents made sure that as soon as students arrived home from school, they were first to proceed directly to the bathroom, take a bath and wear a fresh clean pair of clothes. There was also guidance in relation to the mental health of the children returning to school. For example, the guidelines stated that the first one or two weeks should not have any emphasis on direct education, but rather serve as a re-acclimation period for the children to get used to being in a physical environment again; they would be learning a new series of behaviors in relation to the pandemic. It also stated that students who had had family members pass away due to COVID-19 should be treated normally as any other student would. The document also stated that teachers should encourage, when able, children to walk to school. If they did use transportation, students were allowed to use transport to arrive at school other than the parent, it requested that it should be ensured that only one student should be in the vehicle being transported. This was a significant shift in how students would arrive at school. The SOP accompanying the previous return to physical classes in late 2020 had required parents to drop their children to school using their own private modes of transportation. As seen above several of the students who had chosen not to return to school mentioned this as the main reason why they hadn't come back to school. This was the case with Bhagyashri who told me that

because of the requirements to be dropped to school by a private vehicle, she was unable to come to school. Her brother was studying in another town, her mother for health reasons could not drive, and her father was required to be in the shop that he ran. The distance she lived from the school made it impractical to walk or ride a bicycle. Because of all these reasons, she had chosen to remain online. Chandini also noted this as a reason for not coming back to physical classes in early 2021. “My school is very far from where I live,” she told me, “My father also works, so he’s not able to drop me to school and pick up.” It would take her around thirty minutes to walk by foot one way, so she had chosen to remain online.

“Previously [before the pandemic] how the kids would come to school, they would just get an autorickshaw,” Royia told me, “And maybe six or seven kids would sit in it and come to school.” Obviously to have so many children that close together in one space would be unsafe during the pandemic, leading to the government’s policy on requiring parents to drop their children to school via private means. “If one has the virus, obviously the entire group in the auto rickshaw will get it,” Royia said. Others hired a minibus to pick up several children to come to school. “There’s no social distancing in the bus,” Royia again described. “Hardly there are four or five seats,” Royia mentioned in relation to the minibus, “again it’s going to be like everyone together. So that’s why it’s a government rule, and most of the kids, yes parents are working, it’s difficult for them at that particular time to come and drop the kids, and there’s nobody else at home to drop.”

Royia also noted however that she was unsure of how true this was for every student. “A lot of times in India there has been bandh [strike]...for all the auto rickshaws and public vehicles,” Royia described, “on those days the parents would drop them. But now when it has come to this point, they’re coming up with these reasons, so we are not sure how true it is.” She said that they

could ride a bicycle, or their grandfather, uncle or neighbor could drop them. “They could hire one rickshaw and come to the school, but they wanted to be in groups so it will be budget friendly for the parents.” At any rate, with the new government regulations for the schools to reopen in October of 2021, students were now allowed to come via any means available, as long as there was only one student in the vehicle.

Mona School had experience with preparing to go back to school, and once again sanitized the campus and arranged for the school to comply with all the protocols of the various SOPs the government had generated since the beginning of the pandemic. The school began to employ a hybrid system of learning, where there was no longer a separate session for those who chose to remain online, and those who chose to come to school.

Figure 86

Photos posted on Facebook page of the return to school on October 4, 2021.



Note. Left: Hybrid classroom. Right: Welcome line for students to receive their chocolates

The Maharashtra government announced on November 25th, 2021, that schools could restart physical classes for standards one through four on December 1st (PTI, 2021). A SOP followed the announcement on November 29th with updated procedures (Department, G.o., 2021c) for dealing with these younger students in the classroom, most of which had not been in a physical

classroom for nearly two years. In addition to prior protocols, the government now required the vaccination of all teachers and non-teaching staff before welcoming these students back into the classroom. Parents would not be allowed on school premises, and a limit was placed on the school day at not more than three or four hours of instruction. In response to this new SOP, Mona School welcomed the third and fourth standards back to school on December 6th, 2021. First and second standards returned on December 13th.

Figure 87

Return of third and fourth standards to physical classes on December 6th, 2021



Conclusion

Although the school saw the return of standards one through ten by the end of December 2021, the pre-primary students had yet to return to the school. “They have missed this,” Esha told me about her pre-primary students. Especially the nursery students whom for which it would be their first year of schooling in which they would establish an emotional bond with their teacher. “We have that attachment and personal connection with the students, and [the] small ones are, like, really angels.” She spoke of them missing the experience of coming to the physical class, and how she wished they could also have been there for a physical return. “A very different connection is created when they are coming to school” she told me. A connection that for most

students at Mona School had been restored, at least momentarily; as of early 2022, the school had once again been forced to move all its education online.

Figure 88

The return of first and second standards on December 13, 2021



CHAPTER 8: Fees: Mona School's Attempt to Preserve the Dignity of the Parents

As schools in India, and indeed around the world, transitioned to online education, a tension began spreading throughout the country between fee paying parents and their children's schools. As parents saw their economic livelihoods interrupted, school fees became an increasingly volatile topic (Dutt, 2020; Service 2021). School directors and representatives argued that they required fees to continue paying their staff. Parents on the other hand, often asserted that schools were raising fees and not being transparent about the actual costs of running the schools after shifting education online (Thomas 2020). Throughout India, various manifestations of this tension arose. Parents in Gurugram, a city just outside New Delhi, marched in protest about school fees (Jha 2020), while students in Bengaluru were being named and shamed by teachers who would read out names of those who had not yet paid their fees in front of the class (Kulkarni 2021). This pressure surrounding the inability to pay fees resulted in some truly tragic events, including the attempted suicide of a 14-year-old girl in Tamil Nadu who was unable to pay her school fees by her school's deadline (Service, E.N. 2020). A 15-year-old boy in the state of Madhya Pradesh allegedly committed suicide after facing pressure from his school to pay fees that his family could not afford (Abraham, 2020).

The Indian Supreme Court has consistently defended the right of private schools to both charge and set fees. This right is tied to Article 19.1.g and Article 30 of the Indian Constitution. Article 19.1.g states that "all citizens shall have the right to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business." This statement is used to defend the right of schools to charge fees for their services, as education is viewed as a profession or occupation. Article 30 which more explicitly relates to education, establishes the "right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions." The court has taken the position that a private institution has

a right to determine what fees to charge, while also granting that the state has a right to intervene to prevent commercialization and profiteering of the private educational institution, and to promote the spread of education, not of profit-taking (Indian School, Jodhpur & Anr. Vs. State of Rajasthan & Ors. 2021).

The conditions caused by the lockdown affected all aspects of life and put financial pressures on educational institutions, families, and the state. It tested the right of educational institutions to set fees, the right of the state to intervene, and the right of the parents to not be taken commercial advantage of.

The lockdown issued by the Indian Government led to financial chaos and mass insecurity. Under pressure from parents and political parties alike, the government of Maharashtra issued a resolution on May 8th of 2020 (Maharashtra, 2020) stating that:

1. Instead of requiring parents to pay annual fees, as was the custom, an option was to be given to parents to be able to pay in monthly or quarterly installments.
2. Schools should not increase fees for the 2020-2021 academic year.
3. If the cost of running your school has decreased due to the pandemic, the fees should also be reduced accordingly.
4. An online option to pay fees should be provided to parents for convenience.

The above stipulations applied to classes from pre-primary through Grade 12. This resolution was immediately challenged as unconstitutional by a group of petitioners including the Association of Indian Schools, Kasegaon Education Society, Global Education Foundation and Sant Dnyaneshwar Mauli Sanstha; all groups who work with private educational institutions. This challenge in the Bombay high court led to the May 8th government resolution being put on pause in late June of 2020. This once again allowed private schools to have more autonomy over

the fees they would be allowed to charge for the 2020-2021 school year, and in what form to accept the payments. In August of 2020, a group of parents filed an intervention with the Bombay High Court asking them to reinstate the May 8, 2020, government resolution stating that “the pandemic has acted as a final onslaught on the mental and economic condition of parents. Parents are the ultimate sufferers in this whole situation” (Deshpande 2020).

State governments around India, because of pressure by parents, began introducing resolutions, or enforcing laws that had already been enacted, that greatly curtailed the ability of private schools to collect fees. An especially high-profile case was in the state of Rajasthan, where the government had requested private schools to reduce fees up to 70% due to the pandemic. Private schools in Rajasthan quickly filed a court case protesting this government order.

As parent associations and private schools pushed back and forth throughout India over the issue of fees, the case brought against the government by private schools in Rajasthan rose quickly to the Supreme Court of India in *Indian School, Jodhpur & Anr. Versus State of Rajasthan & Ors.* The decision of the court, issued in May of 2021, did its best to balance between both sides. The Supreme Court upheld the right of private schools to set their own fees, free from state intervention, but noted that private schools were compelled to offer a 15% reduction of fees for the 2021-2022 school year. Parents would be responsible to pay this reduced fee. “It is one thing to say that the State may regulate the fee structure of private unaided schools to ensure that the school management does not indulge in profiteering and commercialisation,” (page 128 of the judgement), “but in the guise of exercise of that power, it cannot transcend the line of regulation and impinge upon the autonomy of the school to fix and collect ‘just’ and ‘permissible’ school fees from its students” (Indian School, Jodhpur & Anr. Vs. State of Rajasthan & Ors. 2021).

The court further ordered that schools should allow parents to pay in installments comfortable to the parents (Indian School, Jodhpur & Anr. Vs. State of Rajasthan & Ors. 2021). Many of the features of the Supreme Court order had been already incorporated in various state governments, including that of Maharashtra. In perhaps the court's most cogent wording of the spirit in which school fees were to be determined was the following statement from the ruling:

...though the fee can be fixed by the educational institutions and it may vary from institution to institution depending upon the quality of education provided by each of such institutions, commercialisation [sic] is not permissible; and in order to ensure that the educational institutions are not indulging in commercialization and exploitation, the Government is equipped with necessary powers to take regulatory measures and to ensure that the private unaided schools keep playing a vital and pivotal role to spread education and not to make money... (Indian School, Jodhpur & Anr. Vs. State of Rajasthan & Ors. 2021 p. 17).

State Regulation of Private School Fees in India

The relationship between private schools, fees and parents had a history well before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The raising of fees and the following voices of parents opposing such raise had previously occurred various places around India and resulted in governments enacting laws to outline the proper ways in which private schools could structure their fees (Service, 2018). In 2017, parents in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh had spoken out against the nearly doubling of the cost of the private educational institutions that their children attended. The state of Gujarat passed the *Gujarat Self-Financed Schools (Regulation of Fees) Act* in 2017. This act created a series of fee regulatory committees throughout the state which would oversee the determining of "the fee for any standard or course of study in self finance schools"

(Gujarat Self-Financed Schools [Regulation of Fees] Act, 2017). Many other states throughout India have their own version of an act which regulates the fees that private schools charge for their education, as seen in table 11.

Table 12

Indian State Private School Fee Regulation Acts

Indian State Fee Regulation Acts	
State Act	Key Features
Bihar Private Schools (Fee Regulation) Act, 2019	• The creation of nine Fee Regulatory Committees created throughout the state • Private Schools Set the Fees • Schools are allowed to increase fees by 7% annually. • Any increase above 7% needs to be approved by the Fee Regulatory Committee

Table 12 (cont.)

Gujarat Self-Financed Schools (Regulation of Fees) Act, 2017	• The Creation of 33 District Fee Regulatory Committees throughout the state • Schools submit proposed fee structure to the Regulatory Committee of their District • The Committee approves, or determines, the fee which can be charged by the school
Maharashtra Educational Institutions (Regulation of Fee) Act, 2011	• Parent Teacher Association formed at every private school, Executive Committee consisting of Principal, teachers and parents is formed • Administration submits proposed fee to PTA executive committee • Executive committee approves or amends school fees • Fee Structure is binding for two years
Rajasthan Schools (Regulation of Fee) Act, 2016	• Parent Teacher Association formed at every private school, School Level Fee Committee consisting of

Table 12 (cont.)

	management, principal, teachers, and parents • School management submits fee proposal • School Level Fee Committee approves or amends the proposed fees • Fee structure is binding for three years
U.P. Self-Financed Independent Schools (Fee Regulation) Act, 2018	• School determines its own fees • Fees can be raised annually but should not exceed the yearly percentage increase in the consumer price index + 5%. • In the event of extraordinary conditions, like epidemics, natural calamities, wars or revolutions, civil commotions, floods etc.... the state government may by order regulate the fees charged by the schools for both existing students and newly admitted students until the previously mentioned phenomena no longer exist.

Table 12 (cont.)

Delhi School Education Act and Rules, 1973 (Society 2019)	• Schools submit a detailed annual fee statement to the Delhi Department of Education • Management committee is formed at each school with administrators and one parent • School submits fee hike proposal to management committee for approval • School management can raise fees without approval 10% every year.
Andhra Pradesh School Education Regulatory and Monitoring Commission Act, 2019	• Creation of the Andhra Pradesh School Education Regulatory and Monitoring Commission • The Commission has the power to monitor and regulate fees for all private schools in the state • Has the power to develop the fee parameters and structures of private schools in the state
The Tamil Nadu Schools (Regulation of Collection of Fee) Rules, 2009	• Creation of 38 District Committees consisting of educational officers,

Table 12 (cont.)

	principals, and headmasters in each district • Schools determine their own fee in relation to a series of factors. • Schools must submit their fees that have been collected from students on an annual basis to the district committee.
PROPOSED Himachal Pradesh Private Schools (Regulation of Fee and Other Related Matters) Bill, 2021 (As introduced in the Legislative Assembly)	• Private schools determine their own fee structures commensurate with their operating expenses. • Each private school submits their full statement of the fee structure with one of 12 district committees. • The district committee must approve any increase in school fees for a given year. A maximum of 6% increase year-on-year is allowed.

The state of Maharashtra – where Mona School is located – had passed the *Maharashtra Educational Institutions (Regulation of Fee) Act* in 2011 which stipulated the process by which fees for unaided private schools in Maharashtra would be developed. Each private school was to

establish a parent teacher association in which all parents of children in the school would be members. From among the members, an executive committee was to be created which would consist of a chairperson, who would be the principal or headmaster of the school; a vice-chairperson, chosen from among the parents; a secretary, chosen from among the teachers; two joint-secretaries, both chosen from among the parents; and members that would consist of one teacher and parents from each standard (grade) in the school. The management of the school would submit a proposed fee to the executive committee six months before the commencement of the next academic year. The executive committee had the power to approve the fee as proposed, or to alter it. Once the fee was approved by the committee, it was to be publicly displayed on the school grounds and on the school's website, if one existed, and would be in effect for two academic years.

The act also stipulates what factors should be taken into consideration when considering what fee to charge. They contain such items such as: (a) the location of the school, (b) the infrastructure and facilities provided to the students, (c) the educational standard of the school, (d) how much the school spends on maintenance of grounds and cost of administration, how much charity the school receives either from non-resident Indians or by the Indian government via schemes for the inclusion of students from the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, vimukta jatis, and nomadic tribes, (f) qualified teaching and non-teaching staff, (g) the amount of yearly salary increased, (h) the amount spent per students vs. the surplus of what the school receives, and (i) any other factor which the committee deems relevant to the school (Maharashtra Educational Institutions (Regulation of Fee) Act, 2011, 2014). Despite this attempt by the Maharashtrian government to establish a process of stipulation private school fees which would allow a transparent fair deliberation relative to the needs and requirements of each school, conflicts had erupted in

various places in Maharashtra due to the issue of fees prior to, and because of, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fees and Mona School

Mona School was not immune from the tensions around fees. The pandemic swept through Satara and the school was shut down. When the new school year began online it became clear that many parents were not paying. Even though the school was continuing to educate their children, as well as paying their teachers their full salaries, many parents felt that since their students were not going to an actual physical school building, they need not pay the fees. Mr. Taghavi described the issue at its heart as one of perception. “Parents and some association[s]...[thought] the schools are not doing anything, and [because] our children are not going to school, why should we pay for the school fees?” Mr. Taghavi continued, “Many schools across India, they suffered from it. And still the matter is going on. The financial problem is a great worry for every management.” Royia also mentioned this point

...the school administration becomes very difficult. We have to be reminding the parents because they believe everything is taking place [only] on zoom. [They ask,] ‘What are the teachers doing? Our child is not learning anything. Why should we pay?’ The parents have totally given up on paying school fees... If kids come [to the physical school] that’s when the parents pay the fees. So, the kids are not coming, the parents are not ready to pay the fees. So that’s something very difficult, you know, for schools to just solve this issue.

In October of 2020, 450 students, 60% of the student population at Mona School, had requested exemptions from paying fees. The lack of tuition fees paid by families resulted in a budget shortfall at Mona School of \$192,172. This is despite the administration announcing at a parent-

teacher association meeting in April 2021, that the school had “paid full salary to all the staff” and had not “compromised” the quality of the school’s initiatives (notes from the meeting).

Fees in Light of the School’s Ethical Principles

The school administration was initially uncertain on how to move forward. The inclination was to be as helpful as they could to the parents, many of whom were suffering economically due to the lockdown caused by the pandemic. This inclination had been with Mona school since its founding, as Mrs. Taghavi related in an interview. “When we started this school, actually, because of Mona Mahmudnizhad, we [said] that who[ever] wants to study in a Bahá’í school should have no problem of money. We said that cannot be a problem.” Since its founding, Mona school has given concessions to children who were unable to afford the school fees. These concessions eventually turned into scholarships. The school had in many cases also paid the fees of children whose parents had passed away. Mrs. Taghavi related:

[Mona] School was saying [to the children whose parents had passed away] that this is the second home, and all the education, everything of your child will be from school. We had many children that even while they went to college, the school continued to take care of their fees and everything. So, for us, for Mona School, this was not a new thing that we give concessions. We considered it right from the start.

Although the school needed fees to continue, the administration also acutely recognized the reality of the parents, and how the pandemic was affecting their lives. Mr. Taghavi explained, “Now many of the parents, they were agitated, they were very, you know, hopeless. They [didn’t know] what’s going to happen in the next two months, or what will happen in the whole year.” The school consciously chose to be patient and considerate with the parents and saw their role as

that of offering hope. “We tr[ied] to welcome them, we tr[ied] to give them hope, and we accompan[ied] them the best that we could do.”

This posture of understanding which Mona School adopted, had the dual effect of both causing parents to come to the school to explain their situation and why they could not pay, and reaching the ears of many who were outside of the school community.

They know that you know they have not paid. And they have come. And when they see us, their hands are joined, and they have a tear in their eyes and some say that ‘you know we have not paid, please bear, you have taken care of us so much and we need a few months more, or few weeks more to pay’.

Mrs. Taghavi related the experience of one of the parents who had lost their job due to the pandemic and had found himself/herself in the difficult position of not being able to pay the fees:

We have a parent whose job was making garlands, selling flowers for marriage and for Mandir [temple] and all. But now, it’s not allowed to bring [flowers to these places] and their shop is totally closed so they have not paid anything to [the] school. So Feriedon (Mr. Taghavi) told them don’t worry, whenever you have [the money] you can come and give.

Although Mona School had always included concessions of the fees as part of the structure of the school, the amount requested by parents during the pandemic was unprecedented in the school’s history. “You know, in the beginning [of the pandemic] it was a question for us. If we take care of all, then what will happen,” Mr. Taghavi told me. He noted that the school also needed the financial sustenance that the fees supplied, and which allowed the school to sustain its activities, but that ultimately the school “wanted to capture the heart of the parents, and at this time be a relaxation for them, a relief for them and not to be a burden.” Thus, the school made the decision

to offer any concession that parents requested in relation to relief from fees. These concessions were made alongside gentle reminders to the parents that the school too needed the fees to sustain their work – if they could be afforded by the parents.

Mr. Taghavi described this decision as a way that the school could simultaneously touch the hearts, and preserve the dignity of, the parents. He went on to describe the common practice in other schools:

In the beginning of every session of other schools, the teachers...announced so and so has to pay the fees. Mrs. so and so, Mr. so and so please go to school or pay the fees, or this is the list of the students. It was a type of...humiliation. Never were we engaged [in this practice], even once. Also, no teachers have been asked to do this. Never. They've been kept away from that.

One of the teachers described how they never had prevented a child from coming to class because of non-payment of fees:

...we are not letting any kid out of the session; we are not putting them out...due to they have not paid fees. We have not stopped their education. We are still teaching them. We have not made... [the fees] compulsory in this time, or that time, we have not made any compulsion for that...

Rather, Mr. Taghavi has stories of parents who had not been able to pay fees for the past two years:

When they had a chance to come to school and I met them, they themselves said that [the] school has done a lot for us, please bear with us, we are unable to pay because of the pandemic problem...and we said absolutely fine.

A Complaint

In May of 2020 the school received a phone call that a formal complaint had been registered against the school and the local district education officer was coming to the school to discuss it. Once they arrived at the school it became clear that somebody had complained that the school was asking the parents with force to pay the fees. An article had been published anonymously in a local Marathi newspaper stating the same story. “India is a free country” Mrs. Taghavi said, “Anyone anytime can do anything. For example, anyone can go against any doctor, or any teacher, or any principal and complain without giving a name...they keep themselves, you know, in a safe place.” Mrs. Taghavi was highlighting the injustice of the situation. The individual making the complaint could remain anonymous, while Mona School was being named, and shamed, in a public space.

This incident, of an individual registering a complaint about Mona School about its request from parents to pay school fees, was not unique to Mona School. As early as April 17th, 2020, Varsha Gaikwad, the minister of education for the state of Maharashtra, was publicly announcing on her twitter that parents could message any complaints of schools demanding fees to their local district education officers (Bhatkhande, 2020; Gaikwad, 2020b). The department of education released a list of these officers and their phone numbers in May to help facilitate these complaints (Education, 2020; Borwankar, 2020) and by the end of June 2020 complaints had formally been lodged against at least 37 schools in Pune, a large population center just a few hours from Satara (Staff, 2020).

For an entire week, individuals were coming daily to the school to discuss this matter. At the center of the complaint was a WhatsApp communication that had been sent out addressing the parents about the upcoming school year. The message explained the new government regulation

that had been announced on May 8th that had given the parents a choice on when to pay the fees; quarterly, every six months, or even monthly. The message then went on to state that parents could pay online through bank transactions and that there would be no increase in the fees. The complaint accused Mona School of engaging in an act of coercion against the parents. In response, Mona School called a meeting of its Parent Teacher Association – consisting of some 40 parents of children in the school – regarding this incident. The official minutes of the meeting state:

This communication of the school was misinterpreted and with many irrelevant and baseless points the newspaper...has tried to spoil the name of the school and poison the mind of the people....All the members mentioned that there was no problem in the communication from the school to the parents, all the rules are followed and that many parents' request for a delay in the payment of fees are honoured and their request accepted by the school as always.

Eventually the individuals who had made the complaint and placed it in the newspaper also came to the school. Once they learned that the school was granting concessions as requested by any parent and following the directives of the government, the complaints were dropped. "They wanted this news to be given in all the newspapers," Mrs. Taghavi said,

but it came only [in] I think one or two local newspapers [in] Marathi language...they wanted to make something big out of it and give it to all the newspapers against the school and against him [Mr. Taghavi] ...those who were responsible, [that] wrote that in the newspaper they came [to Mona School] and they solved the problem.

Within the social climate surrounding school tuition at the beginning of the lockdown in India, any mention of fees became a sensitive point which could draw the ire of parents. Mona School

had sent a message to raise awareness about the new flexibility they were giving to parents in relation to the payment of fees, a flexibility which was made in relation to a government directive. Yet even such a seemingly innocuous message aroused strong sentiment, leading to the complaint raised against the school. From the initial visit of the officer of the local education district, it took a week to resolve the confusion that had been caused due to the complaint. The sensitivity of the topic fees and the pressure placed on schools in Maharashtra, and nationwide, would only continue to increase as the pandemic drew on.

In Maharashtra, one group which for years had been agitating around the issue of school fees was Shiv Sena, as well as its youth branch Yuva Sena (Patil, 2018; Shivadekar, 2018; Age, 2017; Kaka, 2014), a nationalist, right wing political party which draws strength from a form of identity politics in which they promote Marathi culture, language and rights, often through violent and threatening means (Banerjee, 2000; Canada, 2011). Protests against fee hikes at schools around the state for years had been instigated and supported by Shiv Sena prior to the pandemic. Now with the heightened sensitivity of fees charged by schools due to the pandemic, members of the political party once again mobilized around the issue and placed themselves on the front lines. One tactic used by the party was to strong-arm their way into schools and put pressure on the administration to not accept fees from parents. In late 2020, representatives from the party came to Mona School.

An Unexpected Visit

One day in early October of 2020, a couple of youth – members of Shiv Sena’s youth branch Yuva Sena – roughly pushed through the school’s security and entered the school’s office, where Mr. Taghavi, his daughter Royia, and son Sana were working. “A group of these extremists, they dashed to his school,” Mr. Taghavi told me. Royia, caught off guard and frightened as to the

intent of the visitors began recording the interaction on her mobile phone, to which the youth replied “you are taking our video? Go ahead, we are not afraid of anything.” This influential political party within Maharashtra, had taken up the school fee case within the state and were putting pressure both on the government institutions as well as schools to reduce, or even waive, school fees due to the financial hardships many families were seeing in relation to the pandemic. Members of this party had been visiting many schools throughout Maharashtra, including those in Satara. They came to Mona School that day with a particular message: do not collect fees, and return any fees that had already been collected.

Shiv Sena’s rationalization for their behavior, Mr. Taghavi explained, was basically this: people are dying, they don’t have money to eat so schools shouldn’t charge them for their education. They also propagated the idea that since the children are at home, the teachers are not doing anything, and that the responsibility of work falls on the parents. Mr. Taghavi went on to further explain their position:

They’re saying that, you know, your teachers are not taking a lot of trouble and when the children are not coming to this school, we have to attend to our children at home. I have to look after the child, I have to see he should write the homework, he should do the class. You know, he has to write, and I have to correct his answer. So, what are you teachers doing?

Mr. Taghavi explained that the effect of this type of argument, which was being popularized and spread throughout all of India, was that even among those whose economic situation was ok or had significantly improved – as it had for many in the fall of 2020 – there was a reluctance to come forward and pay the fees of the schools which their children were attending. As a result, schools were forced to cut wages to their teachers by 40-60% and it became quite burdensome

for schools to operate. Mona School had been able to avert this wage cut in part by having the administrators pay their own salaries into a savings account and using the interest which accrued to pay both bills and the salaries of the teachers – but this was a temporary solution and not sustainable.

Royia Taghavi said that the decision to keep the teachers' salary at 100% despite the financial hardship, and the fact that nearly all schools around them were cutting teachers' salaries, was based on a sense of justice for the teachers. "If you want the online education to move ahead with a good kind of, you know, zeal from the teacher, enthusiasm...the school has to be able to pay them," she told me. She also pointed out that there was a certain irony in the fact that while the school was still providing all the required textbooks and stationery to the students, a cost directly born by the school, there was a general sentiment among parents not to pay the tuition. "Many schools ask[ed] many teachers to leave the school because they could not adjust and manage with their salary" Mr. Taghavi said, "but we didn't ask any teacher, or any staff of the school to leave."

[In the beginning of the pandemic] teachers were sitting at home and there was no movement in the town. There were online classes, and they were receiving [their salary]. Even some of them had problems with going to the bank, because [the] ATM also was closed. We used to make the arrangement, put [the money] in the envelope and send it to their house.

The relationship between parents and schools as it related to fees was often portrayed in the media and other social spaces as one of mutual disinterest and conflict. Mona school, however, did not view this situation as a conflict, but rather viewed the relationship between the school and parents as one which was mutually intertwined, almost symbiotic. Mr. Taghavi explained

that when parents saw that the teachers were putting in the effort to effectively teach their children, they became more motivated to pay the fees, which allowed the school to maintain their full salary which in turn motivated the teachers to continue. “This is also a learning for us...a great work is happening and many of the parents, when they see the work of the teachers and how much the teachers are working, their heart is melted, and they pay” Mr. Taghavi told me. The issue, as Mr. Taghavi explained it, had unfortunately become highly politicized as various political organizations could gain support among constituents by being seen to have taken up an issue that was affecting the masses of society. Rather than looking at how the whole was being affected – teachers, students, schools, and parents – the cause of the largest group by number, the parents, was being championed. This being the case even though the courts, including both the Indian Supreme court and the Bombay High Court, had upheld the right for schools to collect fees from parents, with the above-mentioned caveats.

An Unexpected Visit – Continued

Mr. Taghavi told me that he invited the youth who had pushed their way into his office to sit down and to talk about fees, parents, Mona School and generally the cause which their group had taken up. “I spoke to them at length” Mr. Taghavi told me. After explaining to them that Mona School was following the government directives not to raise fees and to allow parents to pay in installments, one of the youths replied, “we know what the government says, but what we say, that has to be followed.” Mr. Taghavi responded by showing the communication between the parents and the school regarding fees. Of 750 students enrolled in Mona school, the parents of 450 of them had requested some form of concession in relation to fees, whether it be a postponement of when they were due, a reduction or them being waived altogether.

I showed them 450 people's mail, we have received many of them. Those who have lost their father, or economically they are not in good condition. We have given the exemption. We have considered them exempted from the fees. Never has the school removed any student from the online classes for the reason that they have not paid. He told them that the school had not thought about how it should benefit from fees during the pandemic, but rather was keeping in mind both the desire of the government to (a) not increase fees, and (b) allow for fees to be paid in installments convenient to the parents, as well as their own desire to think of "what to give to parents, to children and [how to] make the condition of each home a happier place." "They were very much touched" Mr. Taghavi said about the youth after he described how Mona School had dealt with the parents and fees.

They came, you know, like wild animals and they went out very timid. It was a great thing. And then at the end, when he was going, he gave his card and he said that this is my number, anytime you need our help, you call. All schools are not like you.

The youth then went on to show Mr. Taghavi a video on his phone of another school that they had recently visited. The focus of the video was on school's public notice boards with the names of parents who had not yet paid their fees. They were at risk of having their children removed from the online sessions because of this non-payment. These same youth who had just offered Mr. Taghavi their future help, had bashed those notice boards to pieces. This violence shown to schools by Yuva Sena was not unprecedented, an all-girls Catholic school in the city of Kolhapur had been vandalized in 2019 (AsiaNews, 2019; Rodrigues, 2019), and in January, 2020 a court in Thane ordered police to investigate charges of vandalism and threats against two members of Shiv Sena, who had allegedly forced their way into a school and threatened the administration to reduce school fees (Vidya, 2020). The alleged act occurred in July of 2018.

The youth told Mr. Taghavi that the schools had been very harsh on the children of the families who had not paid the fees. They did not even allow them to access their teachers. This prompted Mr. Taghavi to show them the records of students who, from the beginning of the pandemic, had yet to pay any fees. Despite this, Mona School had not bothered them; there was trust that the parents one day would come and pay the fees as and when they were able. Mr. Taghavi went on to tell the youth:

We are assured of that [that the parents will pay], and now our good work is happening because of the support of a group of parents which have paid the full fee. We were able to support our Mona family, which consists of the staff and the teachers of the school. We are paying [their salaries in] full to them and taking care of them.

As Mr. Taghavi explained to them the pains, they had taken to make sure that both the needs of the teachers and parents were taken care of, the youth arrived at a moment of “great understanding.” Mr. Taghavi told me that he noticed a change in their behavior, their hearts had been affected. When they first had arrived at his office “they were very aggressive,” but because of this conversation that aggression had been abated.

Extremes

The examples presented here reflect two ends of the spectrum about how schools and people dealt with fees during the pandemic. On one end of the spectrum were the schools that did not take into consideration the extreme economic hardships of families who were unable to pay fees. Schools were removing children from online classes. Often this was done through public announcement either in the form of a notice board, or teachers reading the names of students who had not paid fees in front of the entire class. This was a form of public humiliation, with the obvious intention of shaming the student and their families into paying the tuition. At the

opposite end of the spectrum were political parties, parental groups, and other organizations who without regard to the needs of the schools were pressuring parents to not pay any fees – even if they could afford them. They put equal pressure on the schools to not accept the payment of any fees – even those fees which parents were willing to offer. Neither of these two positions were helpful, as they remained blind to the reality of the entire situation. Many parents were indeed under financial hardship that prevented them from being able to pay fees, and schools were under their own hardship of trying to figure out how to function with a severe budget shortfall because fees were not being paid. Schools needed fees to be able to continue their educating function, and parents needed schools who could understand the realities of their economic situation.

Mona School found a way to navigate between those two extremes. The school made decisions and navigated this difficult issue based on the principles of fairness and justice. They prioritized to *preserve the dignity* of parents and to not reduce the pay of their teachers. They were willing to adjust themselves to the situation of each family and viewed their role as one of givers of solace; not thinking of what they were entitled to take, but rather what they could offer. Of course, this did not mean that they made no effort to collect fees, rather that they were sensitive and understanding in how they went about their approach.

Mona School understood that there was a connection between the public perception of the work of school and the payment – or non-payment – of fees. As the school fell further and further behind in their budget due to non-payment, they experimented with different strategies of how to let the parents see just how hard they were working for their children. A decision was made after the visit of these youth to no longer make any appeals to the parents to pay the fees, however gentle and subtle, but rather to create opportunities for the parents to see the school in action.

The Twenty Fiver Percenters

In addition to the salaries of the staff and teachers and the bills which the school had to pay, the school was under the pressure of another financial burden, one that had affected some 8,000 schools in the state of Maharashtra (TNN 2020b). The government of India passed the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009. The Maharashtra version of the RTE contained a clause which required private unaided schools in the state to reserve 25% of their seats for “children belonging to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups...and provide them free and compulsory elementary education till its completion” (Directorate of Primary Education, 2010). It also contains a clause that allows for any school providing this free and compulsory education to these children, will be reimbursed as outlined in the National Right to Education act. The RTE act includes private unaided schools under its definition of schools that may be reimbursed by the state for the “extent of per-child-expenditure” (The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009).

Mona School had been receiving students who filled the 25% quota stipulated by the government in the RTE act for years, however it had also been years since they – and around 8000 other educational institutions in Maharashtra – had received any reimbursement from the government for the free education they had offered to these students. “They never stopped sending new students” Royia told me, “But the money, they haven’t paid it.” By some estimates, the Maharashtra government owes some ₹7 crore, or over 94 million dollars, to educational institutions in the state in the form of reimbursement for them offering free education to these 25 percenters (TNN 2020b). This difficulty of reimbursement has not been limited to only Maharashtra. Schools in Delhi and Karnataka also have had difficulty receiving reimbursements

from their respective governments (Mehendale, Mukhopadhyay and Namala, 2015). As of March 2022, Mona School still had lakhs of rupees pending with the government.

“The underprivileged students, they apply to the portal of the government for admission,” Mr.

Taghavi explained to me,

for the last four or five years the amount of the fees which the schools they have to receive, it has been seized by the government, and the government has not given any type of assistance...it becomes [an] additional load on the school.

As the Pandemic unfolded and private schools found themselves under greater pressure financially due to the non-payment of fees, many schools raised the issue of this non-reimbursement from the government of fees due to private schools because of the right to education act. They saw this as a possible source of revenue that could help them weather the pandemic storm. However, payments remained delayed and eventually the government cut the amount each school's disbursement per student from 17,670 (\$237) rupees per student annually, to 8,000 (\$107) rupees per student annually. The pandemic was putting economic pressures on the state in ways that further delayed reimbursements (Choudhari 2021). In addition to the government not reimbursing Mona School for the 25 percenters that had been admitted to the school, now because of the pandemic, parents were no longer paying fees either.

How the Work of the Teachers at Mona School was Perceived

Even though the school had been physically closed, the costs were not significantly reduced. Mrs. Taghavi likened the frequency of bills to that of running water. And while they had been able to reduce costs a bit regarding security and maintenance of the building by having the cleaning staff of the building also double as security guards, the salaries of all the staff still

needed to be paid. “All of our workers that are working, we cannot reduce their money and we cannot tell them ‘Don’t come for work,’” Mrs. Taghavi told me.

The school recognized that key to having parents pay the fees was to help the parents understand that the teachers were indeed still working, in fact they were working in many ways harder than they had before the pandemic. The teachers had spent much of their time during the first few months of the pandemic learning how to transition their school online, using various software applications that many of them had never used before. With the decentralization of school from the physical building to the homes of the teachers and students, the line between work and home life had become significantly blurred.

Mona school employed several strategies to combat the perception of the parents that the teachers and staff were somehow working less. The use of social media, in particular Facebook, was used to showcase various artistic projects the students had undertaken under guidance from their teachers. Also, various workshops which the teachers held for the students were also showcased. However, the major innovation which the school undertook to allow the parents of the students to come closer to the reality of how hard the teachers were still working was the call for parents to bring the physical workbooks of the children to the school to be checked by the teachers. This decision occurred in fall of 2020 and was made in relation to the upcoming exams. The teachers wanted to make sure the students had come along in relation the content of their syllabus, and this physical checking of the actual workbooks was one way in which that could happen. It would also draw the parents to the physical campus of Mona School and, hopefully, serve as a reminder to the parents that the teachers were indeed still hard at work.

It was decided that the parents would drop their children’s books off to the school, allow several days for them to be graded, and then have the parents come back again to pick up the books. This

would be a simple operation in a non-pandemic time, but the context of the pandemic meant that this decision was accompanied by some risk and engendered a sense of anxiety among the teachers. In addition to making sure the work of the students was going on adequately at home, this endeavor was undertaken with the intention of letting the parents “see that everyone here is working,” as Mrs. Taghavi told me.

Mona School was quick to adopt proper protocols for virus mitigation within its walls as a school. Teachers were given the option as to where they would rather teach from. The lower grades mostly taught from the school, as all the props and materials they needed for crafts and instruction were found at the school, whereas the teachers of the higher grades largely taught from home. One teacher mentioned they preferred to teach from the school as they were free from the distractions that existed at home. As the operations of the school slowly began again after the initial lockdown, any teacher coming to the physical building was required to wear a mask and was disinfected – both hands and feet – by the school guard before being allowed to enter the premises. Ample hand sanitizer was provided throughout the school buildings, as were masks and gloves. The teachers themselves had their classrooms to themselves, so social distancing was easy to achieve among the staff. As Mrs. Taghavi put it “my husband is very careful, giving them gloves and hand wash, then masks...as many as they want.” The call of the students’ workbooks to the school however meant that teachers who had been used to working from home, had to come to the school once again physically.

The introduction of the foreign element of the student’s workbook into the school was seen as somewhat of a risk. The risk was highest at two contact points, the first being the handoff between the parents and the three to four teachers and managers who would stand out in front of the school to collect the books. The second was the physical contact with the books as the

teachers would turn the pages and mark the students' work. As the parents came to drop off the books, it did have the effect of inspiring several parents to pay the fees at the moment of exchange. One day, however, as the grading had commenced Mrs. Taghavi received a call from one of the teachers who had been coming to the school to help with the checking of the books. He told her that he had tested COVID positive, although the rest of his family had tested negative. This positive test caused a lot of worry among the teachers who asked "why should [we] put our life in danger? Why do we have to correct children's copies?" This led to the school administration calling a meeting with all the teachers to discuss the situation. In this meeting the teachers mentioned that they had been dependent on the teacher self-reporting a positive COVID test and if he had not reported, then how would they have known? In addition, how could they know who was positive outside of the school? If they went to the shop, how did they know that the shopkeeper didn't have COVID? Even the accuracy of the tests was brought up, noting the fact that someone can test negative while being positive. Ultimately one of the teachers in that meeting decided to resign from teaching at the school, as they had a small child at home and didn't want to risk contracting COVID.

It is of importance to point out that the fear and anxiety the teachers felt in relation to the Coronavirus was one founded on the experience of illness – and death – which the pandemic had brought to India, and which Mona School itself was not immune from. Two fathers who had children enrolled in Mona School had lost their lives due to COVID-19. One father had left three daughters behind, and another a son. In one heart-breaking communication to the school, the student's uncle had requested a letter of support for his nephew:

Dear sir/madam,

My name is ... uncle of ... studying in your school 9th standard. As you are aware my brother ... lost his life due to COVID-19 last month, as uncle, I need to take care of his further education and carrier [sic]. We are planning to continue his schooling with your reputed school.

Also in parallel, we are planning to put him in external classes (Allen) from this year (9th Standard – 4-year course) which can help him for preparing for the competitive and entrance exams such as JEE, CET, etc. which are required for further studies after 12th standard. Allen has recently started a scheme wherein if the student's earning parent is expired due to COVID then they are providing discount/free education to the affected bright students.

We have provided required documentation for the scheme to Allen but they need a letter from school...

The administration and teachers talked about the situation where they strove to find a solution. The books needed to be graded, and the teachers required an atmosphere in which they could feel protected against the virus. It was decided that the teachers would form groups, and the groups would not interact with the other groups, the thought being that the less contact between all of them the better. These groups themselves would arrange themselves in a socially distanced manner throughout the school as they graded the workbooks. The books themselves were placed into quarantine for two days before the teachers would grade them, and then again placed in a two-day isolation before being handed back to the parents. The grading of the workbooks took about 3 days. Mrs. Taghavi described this period as a “tension,” a tension that was released after the books had been graded and sent back.

Success Relatively

Regardless of the initial difficulties which the school saw in relation to the lack of parents who were willing to pay fees, the school's strategy appeared to achieve its intended effect. When the new school year had begun in the Summer of 2020, the school had been able to operate financially due to a small number of parents who came forward to pay the entire annual tuition fee in one lump sum, as had been the general custom before the government introduction of installments in May of 2020. In October of 2020, some 450 students, 60%, had requested exemptions from fees. That number had reduced to 120 students in April of 2021, and in May of 2021, 90% of the students had paid their fees, leaving only 75 students who had not paid their fees, a shortfall of roughly \$32,000.

Table 13

Chronological Payment of Fees

Approximate Budget Implications	October 2020	February, 2021	April, 2021	May, 2021
Number of Students Exempted	450	200	120	75
Dollar amount of fees not paid	\$192,172	\$85,412	\$51,246	\$32,028
Percentage of students who had paid	40%	73%	84%	90%

I remarked to Mr. Taghavi that it seemed rather astonishing that the school had 90% of the parents having paid the fees of their students. I asked him why he felt that so many parents had risen to pay their fees to the school despite the (a) financial hardships which the pandemic had

thrust upon them, and the (b) prevailing social condition in which it was, for lack of a better word, *en vogue* for parents *not* to pay fees, even if they could financially afford to, because of the political pressures against parents paying fees to schools. He proceeded to describe a process of parental involvement with Mona School that had its beginnings before the child was even enrolled. “We have a questionnaire when we are giving the admission form before the admission is given to them,” Mr. Taghavi explained. This questionnaire asks why the parents are choosing Mona School to education their child. He noted that common answers include that the parents want better education for their children, that the education the school provides will allow for a better future for their children and that they wish their children to have good discipline – something that Mona School has a reputation for in Satara.

They [the parents] understand that if their child is getting the proper education, they will have a bright future, or they have a good chance for a better future. That understanding is in the mind of all the parents, they want to see their child doing the best.

Mr. Taghavi described to me the great involvement of the parents in all the aspects of their child’s education pre-pandemic. Making arrangements for their children’s transportation to and from the physical school, looking after all their affairs, and their regular collection of the bi-monthly evaluations of their children.

We were finding that whenever [we] were calling for a parent teacher meeting, almost 100% they were attending the meetings. And those who are not coming, they were having a genuine reason. They were interested to know what is happening and what [the] school is asking them to do for their children. So, they have a great faith in their school. They have a great understanding with the teacher, and they know that whatever [the] school is doing for their children is beneficial and is gainful for them.

Also influencing their behavior towards the parents was the memory of how so many parents of the school had come forward and offered financial assistance to the school as it was building its new wing in 2003-2004. Mr. Taghavi went on to explain that during the pandemic, the school had witnessed that not only were the parents equally as involved in the school life of their children, but they also spent even more time than before in connection to their children's' education.

We were telling them also [that for the] last so many years the school has played the role of the parents in the school. Now you're playing the role of the teacher at home. And many of them are very happy with that because, actually they see their children. They take care of their studies. And each student is having an individual tutor at home, which is the mother or father.

Mr. Taghavi was describing to me a process into which the parents were woven from the very beginning. The parents were considered part of the Mona Family, and family members should take care of one another. The school had taken the financial reality of their students into consideration, trusted that the parents would eventually come forward to pay the fees when they could, and allowed anyone an exemption who required one. This act of understanding on the part of the school was then reciprocated by the parents who came forward one by one, often with great emotion, to pay the fees of their children. This financial transaction seemed to have risen above cold, rational economics, and became an exchange which served to strengthen the bonds between parent and school.

Reduction of Salary

By May of 2021, Mr. Taghavi explained that the financial resources of the school "were really exhausted" and not in a condition to be able to support 100% of the teacher's salary. "We had a

meeting with the teachers” Mr. Taghavi noted, “and wholeheartedly they all accepted [the reduction of salary].” This reduction was a step which the school had delayed as long as possible, and which was undertaken with extreme reluctance. Mr. Taghavi continued,

...they [the teachers] were very thankful that during the time when their school had to see to their needs and their requirements, it has been seen. And now the school is not able to collect the fees, they are bearing with us...”

This decision was made in part because of the above-mentioned deficit of ₹38 lakh (nearly \$51,000 in 2021 US dollars), and partly due to the mandate by the Indian Supreme Court in May of 2021 for schools that were offering online-only classes to reduce their fees by 15%. It remained unclear in May of 2021 when the conditions would allow students to come back to the school physically, and so the school realized that a reduction in salary would prolong the ability for the school to remain functional. Wages were reduced by 40% with the understanding that if and when the fees had been paid in full by the parents, the school would pay back the reduced amount in back wages to the teachers.

Table 14

Timeline of Salary

Timeline of Salary	
Full Salary	March 2020 – May 2021
Salary Reduced by 40%	June 2021 – August 2021
Salary Raised back to 100%	September 2021 - Present

At the same time the decision was made to reduce the teacher’s salary by 40%, there was continued pressure being put on schools to reduce – or waive entirely – the fees of students who

were attending online sessions. As the pandemic continued to rage throughout India, and schools began the new academic year once again online in fall 2021, the tension between schools, parents and the government once again came to the fore. One of the ways which this manifested itself in Satara was through the creation of an entity called the *parents committee*. This committee oversaw the fielding of complaints from parents towards the heads of the schools in Satara in relation to the fees. The pressure this committee received from the parents resulted in the calling of a meeting where the government collector, the member of parliament for the Satara region, members of the local department of education, hundreds of parents and all the heads of the schools in Satara were in attendance. “You [w]on’t believe that” Mr. Taghavi told me when explaining what occurred at the meeting:

We were called in a meeting, which hundreds of parents were having the problem with the school heads, and we were one of those which the government collector and the MP – member of parliament – has called us. And when in that meeting I spoke, what we have done, all were telling that ‘Your school is an ideal school’.

In front of the agitated parents at this meeting, the representatives from the parents committee – the committee in charge of fielding complaints from parents about schools – told Mr. Taghavi,

...we have invited all the parents of all the schools to bring their complaints so that we can help...but not one from your school has come with the complaint...please go and talk to the head of the other schools, and what you have done let them also do.

With the pressure slightly taken off of the school in relation to fees, due in part to the public support shown to the school by the parents committee, Mona School once again sent a communication to the parents at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic school year (figure 85), noting the school’s appreciation of the support of the parents and highlighting the co-

ordination between the parents and teachers which had a large part to play in the ability for the school to pass through the pandemic as smoothly as it did.

Figure 89

Letter to Parents Regarding Fees for Academic Year 2021 - 2022



MONA SCHOOL

EVERY CHILD IS POTENTIALLY THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Greetings from Mona School.

We take this opportunity to express our thanks and gratitude to all our dear parents who supported us during the uncertain and dark days of Pandemic and proved their solidarity and firmness towards the school and its staff.

It was the thoughtful act of conscious parents who made the school to run smoothly and made the students and the staff to be beneficiary of their act.

With the support of well-wishers and dear parents, the school could reach out to the students to its best and assist the students despite many odds faced during the Pandemic.

We believe, education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and it's the right of every child to receive the best education.

The smooth functioning and quality education delivered for the best of our students was possible with the kind support of the parents and the teachers. The co-ordination between the parents and the teachers proved to be a great boon for the students.

This academic year 2021-22, the school is determined to give its best to all its students and this will be possible with the kind support and understanding of all dear parents.

We would like to bring to your kind attention the following points for the academic year 2021-22:

- 1) Parents are requested to note, that there is no increment in the school fee for the academic year 2021-22.
- 2) Parents are requested to pay their ward's school fees for the year 2021-22 in any manner convenient to them, monthly, quarterly, half yearly or full yearly.
- 3) School has considered a 15 % discount in overall Annual school fees for the year 2021-22.
- 4) Parents may pay their wards fees either through cash / cheque/ NEFT as per their convenience.
- 5) Parents who deposit their wards fees through NEFT to school account are requested to share the deposit slip or payment confirmation to school whatsapp number [REDACTED], along with student's name and class.
- 6) Bank details:
Beneficiary Name : Mona Charitable Institution
Bank Name : [REDACTED]
Branch Name : [REDACTED]
IFSC CODE: [REDACTED]
↓
(ZERO)
Current A/c No.: [REDACTED]

By the beginning of the new school year, in August of 2021, enough parents had stepped forward to pay the tuition fees that the school could once again raise the salary of the teachers to a full 100%. Mr. Taghavi explained:

After we received the first admission for the academic year [2021-2022] we kindly requested – appealed – the parents. We have many good parents, also they started supporting. Very good support we received. So, immediately their [the teachers] salary went up.

Mona School only reduced the salary of its teachers for three months during the pandemic. And had planned that at the end of the 2022 academic year, to look at the surplus of funds in the bank's account. To the extent that the school would be able, they would then pay back the pay owed to the teachers in small increments. "It will compensate for the amount which they have not received...a person getting 20,000 [rupees] will get 30,000," Mr. Taghavi described. A few of the teachers had a special urgent need for funds were given their back pay already early in the 2021-2022 academic year. Mona School also bore the cost of COVID treatment for seven of their teachers who contracted COVID during the second wave of the pandemic in late spring of 2021. "Even the hospital fee also was very heavy for them" Mr. Taghavi explained. Any need the teachers had for COVID treatment was offered "to somebody 20,000, to somebody 30,000, to somebody 10,000, to somebody [who needed] remdesivir injection, to whosoever has come, or we were feeling that you know they were in need [we gave]."

The Mystical Connection to the Posture Taken in Relation to Fees

The school's decision to accommodate all requests from parents to make concessions about the fees appears to be a result of several factors. First, Mrs. Taghavi connected this action to "how Bahá'ís are" and that many will through this behavior "indirectly.... come to know about the

Bahá'ís.” Indeed, this behavior does seem to mirror the call in the sacred texts of the Bahá'í Faith to “enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute” (Abbas, 2006). Second, the Taghavi's also saw this action as a way of promoting good will towards the school among the population of parents and beyond. Mrs. Taghavi noted how “in the future we are going to have so many well-wishers” and described how this orientation towards fees “was like a publicity for the school, which it has reached to the ears of many others outside, and they have highly appreciated that.”

The third factor which played into this orientation was something that I describe as a deep mystical connection to the spirit of Mona Mahmudnizhad and the trust that she would take care of the needs of Mona School. Peppered throughout my conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Taghavi this *mystical trust* was offered as a way by which they would move forward with decisions. Mr. Taghavi noted that this trust pervaded all aspects of Mona School's functioning. “With the blessing of Baha'u'llah,” Mr. Taghavi told me, “Since this is a school in the name of Mona Mahmudnizhad, always we have a belief that you know, everything is taken care of by herself, and the blessing of Baha'u'llah is always showered upon us.” It was this trust that allowed them to make the decision to offer concessions to all, knowing that if they acted in a position of service to the parents, they would be aided. Whether others understood, or felt the same, was irrelevant to their position. This was a mechanism by which they could make decisions. This posture of the Taghavi's is deeply related to two other concepts in the Bahá'í Writings, concepts that the school also introduces to its students through the study of its moral curriculum: *confirmation* and what some scholars have called *normative realism* (Karlberg, 2020). Both concepts describe a world in which there are laws of behavior built into the fabric of reality, and

if humans strive to understand and obey these laws, it creates a social environment that is more conducive to human flourishing and justice and our actions will be successful and bear fruit. Recognition, or the ignoring, of these conventions has an effect that is as real as recognizing or ignoring laws that govern our physical existence. To the Taghavis, taking a posture towards the parents in which they wished to be of service, and to be some source of relief for them during this time was not just a *good* thing to do, it went much *deeper* than that. Their actions were made within a matrix of forces which they could encounter and utilize, both as principles which could help guide decision making, and as capacities inherent within themselves which could become manifest in action, affecting their social reality in a synergistic, aggregate fashion.

Conclusion

Mona School early in the pandemic found itself in a situation where because of the economic consequences of the lockdown, money was tight. Schools had bills and salaries to pay, while many parents found themselves economically crippled and were unable to pay the tuition fees to the school. As a result, many schools used coercive methods that either purposefully or not led to humiliation of the children and parents who could not pay. Many schools also turned away students from online sessions who were no longer able to pay. This caused the government in many places to step in to try to alleviate the pressure on both sides. States that had already enacted legislation that governed how private school fees were to be determined strove to enforce it, while many parent associations and political parties strove to put pressure on (a) schools to not accept fees and (b) parents not to pay the fees.

Mona School's approach was one which saw the situation holistically. They were aware that both the parents and the schools had needs. Their approach was one which saw at the heart an expression of a relationship of trust and respect which had been developed with the parents over

time. Mona School chose to give a concession to whomsoever requested, without question with the trust that the parents would be able to pay it back at some point in the future. They understood that many parents were undergoing financial hardship and steered clear of any behavior that would add a burden to the already burdened parents. They strove to maintain quality of their education and to find ways to allow the parents to see how hard they indeed were working for their children during the pandemic. The administration made sacrifices to allow their teachers and staff to both (a) remain complete, and (b) be paid their full salary at a time when many other schools were letting teachers go and reducing their salaries. They trusted their parents would pay when they could and saw the effects of their patience play out as 90% of parents had paid their fees by May of 2021.

Mona School framed their actions by the concepts of *preservation of dignity* and *justice*. They didn't want to embarrass the parents, and in fact wanted to do the best to accompany through this difficult time, and they also wanted to be just to their teachers and students by providing the salary that the teachers were due, and in turn the education that the students were due.

The response of Mona School to the pressures around fees can also be understood within the broader context of the values which guide its work. One of these principles is the desire to be of service to the wider community. The community that the school is most closely linked to is that of the parents and families of their students. In their time of need, this principle of being of service helped to guide their behavior. Mona School asked itself the question "how can we be of service to the community." It was this principle which allowed them to take the decision to accept any family who could not pay fees, although the ultimate result of this decision at the time was unknown.

CHAPTER 9: Concluding Reflections

Throughout the above text we have attempted to weave together data from a variety of sources to give an in-depth exploration of how Mona School responded to the challenges it faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the more mainstream or technical challenges which one may associate with a school during the pandemic, how to shift classes online, how to restructure curriculum for an online environment, communication with students and parents, logistical challenges, net infrastructure etc. Mona School had the additional challenge of learning how to continue its education for moral capabilities throughout the pandemic. Mona School was able to maintain the instruction of its entire curriculum – except for a slight reduction in the tenth standard material – in the academic year of 2020 – 2021. However, this related strictly to the core academic subjects: Science, English, Geography, History, Political Science, and Math. Its moral education component, which it considers central to its identity as a school inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith – and indeed was often highlighted in my interviews with teachers as one of the reasons why parents chose to send their children to the school – was challenged due to the pandemic. Some of the actions of the school, such as the visiting of the homes for the elderly or the *wall of kindness* – the event the school organized regularly to offer material goods to the poor – actions which themselves were inspired by the type of activities Mona Mahmudnizhad herself would engage in, had to be put on hold.

Mona School was caught unaware by the closing of the school in March of 2020. Even as the lockdown was announced in India, it was unclear how long it would last. A fair number at the school thought it would be short term and the school would quickly get back to business as usual. It took several weeks for the realization to settle in that alternative modes of delivery may need to be considered for education. What followed was a process by which the school entered a mode

of experimentation and learning. Once it became clear that education was in some form shifting to an online mode of delivery, several teachers decided to leave the school, rather than learn this new mode of operation.

Mona School still finds itself buffeted by challenges, but as an institution has gained great capacity to deliver education to its students both in physical classroom, and online. This research has explored this process of learning and growth, providing insights into how one institution has navigated through the unknowns of maintaining a functioning educational institution during a global pandemic. Throughout my time with the school, it became clear that the activities, decisions, and posture of the school, and to some extent the students, were influenced by certain values which helped shape and guide the institution's response to the not only the pandemic but all aspects of the school.

Reflection On the Study

Of course, the generalizability of any ethnographic inquiry is limited. Thus, the points made here of some of the findings from this study may find purchase with experiences of other schools around the world, but we cannot claim that they will necessarily. Regardless of the transferability of the experiences and findings presented in the current study to other educational contexts, we can state with confidence that there is a validity of the findings found within this current study (Shadish, 1995). Following is a discussion of some of the major insights which the above study engendered.

The reductive nature of online education. Mona School's transition to online education had a reductive effect on its educational experience. We can see this reduction in the shortening of the number of hours in a day of instruction; the isolation of students and teachers from each other; the removal of components of collective social outreach; the lack of the ability to, with a glance

glean the general status of the learners in the classroom; students not being able to see their friends, to talk with them, or to share meals with them; the inability to find an effective means of continuing the all-school assemblies on a virtual platform; interruptions to instruction caused by intermittent internet connections; fatigue and difficulty in being mentally present caused by constantly being Zoom; the lack of an *atmosphere* for serious study that a school provides; the inability to practice and reinforce moral capabilities in a social setting; students not being able to gain confidence by performing dances, skits, poetry recitations etc. in front of a crowd of thousands of students and parents; and the loss of eye to eye contact. These were all elements mentioned or observed which reduced from the educative experience the school had prior to the pandemic conditions. They all acted to *lower the resolution* of the Mona School experience, to employ the metaphor used in the opening chapter of this study.

Although we are wary of the use of metaphors from science in realms outside of their own domain (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 6), I feel the use of the concept of *emergent properties* helps give insight into how a school, or at least in this case Mona School, becomes greater than the sum of its parts when it comes together in a physical location. The concept of *emergence* notes that an entity is dependent on many micro-entities that it is composed of. It is the combination of these micro-entities that give rise to properties which do not exist without them (Goldstein, 1999). However, if we study only the micro-entities, we cannot understand the greater entity. An example of this is if you analyze the components that make up a watch, one cannot ascertain anything about the watch working as a whole, you will only understand the qualities of the individual components under review. It is only when all of the components of the watch are studied in unison that the greater properties of the watch – to tell time, for example – *emerge*. The implication of course is that the qualities that we see in the entity cannot be found in

any one of the micro-entities (O'Connor, 2020). I posit that this concept can be of use in helping us understand why analyzing a school (entity) exclusively through its many different components (micro-entities) can cause us to miss the *properties that emerge* when all the various components of a school are working with each other. Similarly, when the various components of a school (micro-entities) are removed, erased, or isolated from one another, certain properties of the school (entity) no longer exist, or are extremely dampened, as they are dependent on the interaction of the component parts (micro-entities).

I feel that this is a useful insight into what was being described to me by those I interviewed. Certain components of the school remained, but it wasn't the school that had existed before. Words such as *atmosphere* and *energy* were used by students to explain something that was missing. Atmosphere and energy, then, are *emergent properties* that occurred in Mona School when all the components were working together in the physical school. Of course, due to the use of the metaphor outside of its realm of origin, it only can go so far in our case before it ceases to be useful. Nonetheless, I feel it is a useful way to think about the impact that the *reduction* of education had on the activities of the school.

Schooling is an aggregate of many experiences. The concept of the idea of the reductive nature of online education coupled with emergent properties is related to another observation made throughout the study. To those associated with Mona School, *school* was not just about going to classes, or the gaining of information, it was so much more. It consisted of what was mentioned above, it was an *aggregate* of all those experiences. "We are completing the syllabus," Lata, a teacher, told me, referring to the traditional subjects that a school would teach, "but more than that...we are giving them whatever qualities needed to be a good person." Teachers, students and

administrators all saw education as consisting of much more than just the traditional subjects found on a syllabus.

Zoom was a tool not a solution. Royia stated to me very clearly that she saw Zoom as a tool to reach the children when they were not allowed to be in physical contact with one another.

However, it was made clear to me, nearly universally, that while everyone was grateful Zoom existed to allow them to continue the educative process, they would prefer to be together physically, and not have to use a virtual platform. Zoom was always viewed as temporary and inferior. The same could be said for all of the technology employed by the school during the pandemic. It allowed for them to continue functioning, and it was a tool to allow them to do it. WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom, Kinemaster etc... were neither panacea nor patent medicine. They were tools the school employed that allowed them certain affordances, but also came with their own limitations.

Institutional capacity was gained that will strengthen Mona School for the future. Teachers spoke to me of their struggle to learn the technology which enabled them to deliver education remotely, and their pride at having gained a certain level of familiarity, comfort and even expertise with using this same technology. This is a capacity that will serve Mona School in the future and has already proven to be useful. For example, the school now has the institutional capacity to rapidly shift to an online mode of instruction. It has already shifted between online and in-person modes of instructions multiple times as the conditions of the pandemic have dictated. One can imagine using this capacity in response to conditions unrelated to the pandemic. The school has also decided to continue using the WhatsApp channels it has created for each standard as the main means of communication between teachers, students, and parents.

Online education suited some and was more difficult for others. One of the consequences of having all students at home, is that they couldn't benefit from the presence of the teacher encouraging them directly in the classroom. Chitra, a teacher of the tenth standard, used the word *boost* to describe this. She lamented the fact that she couldn't reach those children who needed encouragement the most. Certain students would do well under any circumstance, either online or in the classroom, but there were some who needed extra encouragement. Chitra feared that they were in danger of falling severely behind. Some students mentioned the mental challenge of being at home all the time, not having any variety of location, eating, studying, and sleeping in the same place.

Moral education was challenging to continue. Moral education is a key component to the identity of Mona School. The school is known in Satara for it, and the school prides itself on this aspect of its education. The main avenues by which Mona School encouraged the development of moral capabilities among the students – the all-school assembly, and the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme to name a few – were difficult to replicate in the online environment of Zoom. Limitations on the number of participants in Zoom rooms led Mona School to not attempt to recreate the all-school assembly virtually, and it took nearly nine months to get the junior youth programme started again. One reason why this was so difficult is because Mona School's conception of moral development is one that is tied directly to action. It is not enough to simply state what good moral behavior is, it requires the practicing of it within a social space to reinforce and strengthen the capability. The school was limited in how it could encourage and reinforce the development of these capabilities during the pandemic.

Mona School's moral commitments influence how it behaves as an institution. As seen in chapter eight, one of the most cogent ways in which the values that inspire the school was visible during

this period of research was the approach taken towards the issue of fees. We see Mona School's leadership adopting a posture seemingly inspired by the Bahá'í Writings which describe the highest station of a human is when they are in service of others. "Enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful," the Bahá'í Writings state, "Bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute!" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1972 p. 81).

The issue of fees may have offered the most prominent examples of how inspiration from the Bahá'í writings influenced institutional behavior, however there are other more subtle examples. The same attitude which the administration took towards the parents, to be a source of inspiration, hope and reassurance during a period of uncertainty, was also taken towards the teachers. The teachers spoke of the regular encouragement they would receive from both Mr. Taghavi and Royia in relation to the adoption of new methods of instruction.

Turning Outward

This study is of interest because of its ethnographic nature, in particular its sustained inquiry over a long period of time into the nature of a school during a global pandemic. The study reflects a period of continuous conversation with the school since October of 2020 through the time of writing in mid 2022. The most intense period of research came between October 2020 and May of 2021, however close and regular contact with the activities of the school was maintained through to the Spring of 2022. This allows for an exploration with a depth and breadth that very little of the literature currently undertakes.

Any study looking within the confines of a single institution, no matter how thorough, is still limited only to the findings of that institution. The nature of qualitative work generally does not allow one study to be widely generalizable to a larger population. Qualitative work instead can

help contribute towards an aggregate understanding over time. It is with this awareness that I claim this study can be of use. Researchers are now able to gain a more distanced perspective of the effect of COVID on institutions of education. Some experiences will be found to be common among large numbers of students around the world, while others will be unique to local circumstances and context.

For example, in chapter five we saw how the teachers at Mona School noted a profound qualitative difference in teaching on Zoom vs. teaching in the classroom, what I called *the power of a glance*. Cheung (2021) observed a similar experience among teachers of ESL in Hong Kong who were using Zoom to deliver their lessons, one teacher noting that “in face-to-face situations, I know what the students are doing and if they are off task. However, it is really hard to tell in Zoom” (p. 9); a similar sentiment shared by many teachers at Mona School. Other studies in Indonesia (Nashir & Laili, 2021; Laili & Nashir, 2020), Sri Lanka (Sriyalatha & Kumarasinghe, 2021), the Philippines (Lapitan Jr., Tiangco, Sumalinog, Sabarillo, & Diaz, 2021; Dabalos & Gameng, 2021), and Malaysia (Abdul-Hamid & Hamzah, 2020) found that intermittency of internet made online education difficult, a sentiment echoed by the findings presented in chapter five. Other experiences of Mona School have been echoed across the research. Students, for example, mentioned in their interviews how they missed being with their friends. This was also a finding of a study in Ireland which surveyed 233 students from across the country about their experience with schooling from home between the dates of May 19th, 2020, and June 8th, 2020 (n’Óg, 2020).

Mona School had a very active life in the community and, as we saw in chapter five, saw service to the community as an essential part of the school’s activity. However, it was impossible to continue these interventions in the local community during the pandemic in the same way.

Modifications were made, and exploration of how the school tried to make up for the loss of in-person activities was discussed in chapter six. Various studies show that the shifting of education from in-school to at-home has had negative effects on the social development of the children. One study among students in Delhi schools had 51.4% of respondents stating that they felt they had not properly utilized their time during the lockdown period, seeing their sleeping habits, daily fitness routines and social interaction significantly changed, affecting mental and physical health (Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma, & Singh, 2021). A study looking at the impact of COVID lockdowns on school children in Alberta Canada found parents anxious about the effects that the disruption of schooling will have on the social development of their young children (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). Future research will undoubtedly be done on the connections between the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of education and the social development of students.

Limitations

There is also a limit to which this study can be seen as representative of the experience of all students. I obviously could not be physically present in the school. My physical presence necessarily would have had a very different approach towards interviews. For this study I was dependent on the school arranging the interviews with the students, all of whom were selected for me. By Mona School's own description, they chose those students were the most engaged with the various activities of the school. I cannot claim that the experiences they shared with me are representative of anything more than fourteen students among nearly 750.

While I did interview nearly every teacher on Mona School's staff, there are also limitations on their experience. Interview data was skewed towards those teachers who had a greater command of the English language. I view this as my deficiency, and not of that of the teachers. I had no Hindi or Marathi language skills to use during the interviews, necessarily limiting the ability of

all the teachers to express themselves as fully as they could have if those languages would have been available to me. Many were apologetic to me about this point, and I always made the counterpoint that I also had a language deficiency. This helped to place us on a more even field, one that attempted to displace English as the assumed language that should be acquired. And while my interviews with those whose English was better were longer and typically comprised more of the data which ended up within the text of the research, I found myself often struck by the poignancy of certain statements made by those teachers whose English was less developed. This often made me wonder how much more insight I would have been able to gain with the addition of a language competency.

One of the affordances that performing research from a distance via the internet offered during this project was the window into the learning environment of the student. In Chapter five we were able to explore some issues surrounding the students as they studied from home. However, this was limited in the sense that I was relying on my own observations about the reality of these students. For example, in that same chapter I show several photos of the various environments in which the students were studying with the purpose of highlighting socioeconomic disparity. However, it was also told to me many times throughout the course of the study that many students at times would go to stay in their ancestral village during the pandemic either as a way of *escaping* the current wave of illness in the more urban setting of Satara, or as a mean of *quarantining* because either they or other members of their family had contracted the virus. While I assume that the locations the students were studying from were their permanent homes, that remains an assumption.

Conclusion

Throughout this text we have touched on many subjects: the 1979 Islamic Revolution which initially forced the Taghavi's to remain in India, making it their home and leading to them eventually becoming Indian citizens; the execution at the hands of the new Islamic Regime in Iran of a seventeen year old girl named Mona which became the inspiration behind the naming of Mona School; the framework of spiritual and moral development found in the Bahá'í Faith that influences the educational model at Mona School; the process of learning and consultation among the teachers and administrators of the school following the initial lockdown in India during the COVID-19 pandemic; how technology was utilized to both facilitate online learning and to replicate elements of the school which were removed as a result of the decentralization of educational processes; the challenges of schooling at home; dealing with pressures around fees; and the logistics around a return of the students physically to the school.

To the extent that Mona School's experience with education during the pandemic could be called a success is mostly related to the school's ability to transition to online education and maintain the delivery of courses to its some 750 students. But this study was never concerned whether Mona School was having success or not. To reduce the experience of Mona School to such a binary simplifies a necessarily complex experience, an experience which saw several successes, challenges and shortcomings occurring in parallel with one another in relation to the various initiatives and activities it underwent. At the heart of all of Mona School's efforts, according to Mr. Taghavi, was love. "This is not the practice maybe in other places," Mr. Taghavi told me regarding the efforts of the teachers during the pandemic and the attitude they had towards the school and students, "[but] they had a great love for the students, they wanted to reach them to their level best. So that was the thing, their love for the students."

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APPENDIX A: The Bhoomi Pujan and a Local Ally

A final incident which Mr. Taghavi described to me as a means by which to explain how they have felt confirmed repeatedly throughout the years of running the school is related to the challenge mentioned above – that the Taghavi’s are not *sons of the soil*. They have often been perceived as outsiders in a land that often prides itself on those markers of identity which come from the *homegrown*. Mona School has found a local champion of the school, one who carries with him lots of cultural clout. A few years after the school opened, due to its reputation it was common for individuals who wanted to enroll their children for the next academic school year to camp outside the doors of the school the night before enrollment would open. “We had a very great demand for the admission”, Mr. Taghavi told me, “In the evening, people used to gather here [and] sleep next to the door of the school [and] form a line for the next year’s admission”. For this reason, news of the school had spread far and wide throughout Satara district.

One day, a great crowd had gathered in the street outside of the school for an event unrelated to anything going on at the school. The city was installing a new water pipe underground, and an Indian custom known as a bhoomi pujan – a ritual performed before the undertaking of any construction project – was taking place to inaugurate the pipe’s installation. Leading the Bhoomi Pujan was Udayanraje Bhosale, also known as Udayan Maharaj. Bhosale is a descendant of the Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj⁴⁴, a highly revered figure in Hindu consciousness. Bhosale is the thirteenth holder of the title *Chhatrapati* – roughly equivalent to emperor and a title Shivaji himself established – and while this title no longer carries with it any formal kingly political authority, it carries heavy cultural weight among the population of the state of Maharashtra, and among many Indians nationwide (Phadke, 2021). Bhosale has held several

⁴⁴ For more on Shivaji, see Chapter 5

political positions in both the state government of Maharashtra, as well as the national government. He currently serves as the Maharashtrian representative from the Satara district in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the bicameral Parliament of India (Sabha, 2022), and is not without some controversy throughout his past (Correspondent, 2001; Service, 2017).

Mr. Taghavi had heard that Bhosale was going to be in attendance, and out of respect to the descendant of Shivaji also came out into the crowd to witness the event. “I didn’t know him, as a respect I also went and stood outside the school, outside of our home which is in front of the school”, Mr. Taghavi told me, “Then he was looking at the school, he was looking to our house, he was talking to the people [who] started pointing out me, like this [extends arm and points, as if to say] ‘he is there’”.

Then from far he called me...I was not in a position to go. I said ‘I’? [points to himself and mouths ‘I’]. He said, ‘yes come’. So, I went there, and these people are asking me to do the, you know, the bhoomi puja for the starting of the construction of the pipeline. He said [to me] ‘I don’t know what my great grandparents, my great [ancestors], what they have done which God has sent you here and you are [working] for the betterment of my people’. He put his hand on me for the first time...he put his hand on my shoulder and he said ‘any time, any difficulty, any problem, refer to me. You people, I have heard a lot [about] you and what the school is doing, I’m happy that I have seen you. This place should be inaugurated at your hand, not at my hand’. So, he stood aside, and he gave the coconut in my hand to break it.

The following day there was a picture in the local papers of Bhosale with Mr. Taghavi. “Again, a plan of God”, Mr. Taghavi told me, “People [were] thinking that he’s come here to do something for us”. This event introduced Mona School to an individual who would become a local

champion of the school, and also helped to influence perception of the school as one that was part of the community, rather than a foreign entity. The connection began that day has continued to grow throughout the years. “In many occasions, wherever he has seen me”, Mr. Taghavi explained,

Figure 90

Mona School Being Honored



Note. Udayanraje Bhosale [right in blue] honoring Mona School’s contributions in the field of education, August 2020. Receiving the award is Mr. Taghavi [left in black vest], principal of Mona School.

with full respect he has come forward and he has shown his respect. And the people they feel that, you know this is a very tiny school in front of the other schools, but the amount of respect this man...shows because of the good work of the school has spread Mr. Taghavi had not sought out this relationship specifically, but rather it organically materialized. Bhosale awarded Mona School with official recognition of its contribution to the

field of education in Satara in August of 2020. In the same gathering, Bhosale recognized the academic achievements of some of the students in Mona School (figure 90).

APPENDIX B: Coding System

Code System	Frequency
Code System	1647
Themes	0
Aha theme!	26
Use of Social Media	1
Challenges	97
Media Coverage	3
COVID	12
Abuse of Zoom	2
Retaining Teachers during the Pandemic	6
Teacher salary	9
Fee	17
Government Requirements	20
Zeal	2
Eagerness and Hope	4
Perfection, Excellence, Discipline	20
Preliminary examinations for 10th standard	4
Students mentioning discipline	0
Timeliness of interviewees, classes starting on time	0
School's love for students, student's love for school	10
Teacher and Admin comments about students	17
Comments on what it was like to return to the school	2
Student use of family metaphors	2
Posture of Learning	26
Readiness to accept constructive criticism	5
Consultative inquiry to solutions	11
Listening to the suggestions of the parents	12
Weekly Reflection	6
Accompaniment/Peer Mentoring	32
Motivation through praise	15
Encouragement and ongoing training through workshops	4
Zoom Training	18
Touching the Hearts and Preserving the Dignity of the Parents	14
Responding to every request regarding fees	7
Giving of Hope	5
Patience	4
Trust	9
Trust with parents	0
Trust in God	3
Return to School, 2nd closing (January 2021 - March 2021)	31
Consolidation (September 2020 - December, 2020)	16

Initial Lockdown (March 2020 - August, 2020	19
Student Interviews Mostly	717
Zoom	5
Zoom - First class	17
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