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# Coping with Lost Time

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*All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Azim Premji University.*

# FROM THE EDITOR



Time and tide wait for no one, as the old adage goes, and of no one is this truer than of children. Every minute of their day is devoted to making sense of the world around them and in this adventure, there are certain aspects which help in the organisation of the information that children are bombarded with: parents, of course, then teachers and the great edifice called school. All this was taken for granted till COVID-19 spread its tentacles around the globe, changing all known occupations, ways of life, life itself, and organisations, such as educational institutions. In the resultant wild scramble to stay safe, schools were among the first to close down in March 2020, so that the infection could be contained. No one could have known that this maelstrom was to last for nearly two years, wiping out thousands in its wake. Not only that, the fear, trauma and life-altering changes, (such as death, migration, loss of livelihoods), in the lives of parents, teachers and students, still haunt many.

At a practical level, teachers and students alike had to re-organise themselves; teachers in their pedagogical methodologies, students in their learning capabilities. Overnight, everyone went digital – smartphones, computers and TV screens became the printed page and everyone learned as they went along. However, in our country, the digital divide is too wide to ignore and after some months, it became clear that there had to be some face-to-face engagements, so mohalla schools, personal delivery of worksheets bridged some of the gaps though it became abundantly clear with every passing month that these efforts could never replace physical school, with all its interactions at so many different levels.

With schools having reopened for higher classes, we have now reached a position of cautious optimism. For primary school children, two vital years of schooling and gaining basic language and mathematical skills have gone under the bridge. A large proportion has

probably forgotten what they knew, pre-COVID. How have teachers and heads prepared for the resumption of academics, while supporting the children to ease back into the rhythm of normalcy? This issue of the Learning Curve is devoted to the questions everyone is asking : what can we do to mitigate the difficulties of adjustment that primary school children will undoubtedly face on their return to school?

We have articles which emphasise the place of the arts and music in healing, some with ‘ordinary’ activities like storytelling to create a warm atmosphere of participation which can include everyone within the fold of friendship and belonging. We have an expert opinion on the role of nutrition to help stave off infection and keep children healthy. Another one tells us of the extreme importance of remaining vigilant and observing necessary health protocols once schools reopen. One of the focus articles gives an overview of what the pandemic did to society in non-medical ways by bringing existing divides into greater relief. As always, the *Voices* section is accounts of personal experiences and plans for re-entry into the classroom. We have also included a *Resources* page with specially-curated information for teachers’ and parents’.

What is most heartening is that the terrifying virus, which has wrought so much destruction the world over, has not been able to crush the human spirit, which everywhere, in this issue, displays resilience, innovativeness and the capacity to fight back and restore order in the lives of our children through their development and progress, first by adapting to school closure and now by welcoming them back, in both scientific and humanistic ways.

Please write to us with your comments and views.

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# Defining the New Normal

Hridaykant Dewan

It is important, first, to consider if one should talk at all about the 'new normal'. We may be justified in thinking that the COVID-19 situation, though long-drawn-out, is yet temporary and would eventually subside and schools can go back to being what they were. That response fails to take into account the intense experiences of the last one-and-a-half years and the conversations that they have triggered, pulling both, schools and education, in new directions. There are suggestions about the greater use of technology and the change to a more technology-linked educational system. There are suggestions about separating those attempting advanced learning and those who would be satisfied with some basic elements of learning, the minimum essential required. These and other factors are the reasons that we must talk about the new normal, so as to be aware of the drift, the shift and the struggle to ensure constitutional commitments and processes that are needed to sustain them. The reason we must think about the new normal also arises from the pressures we seem to be feeling as a society and the growing difficulty with the rising inequities and the non-sustainability of the ways in which we have been living and using resources. And we may realise that the basics of the new normal have been a part of public discourse for a long time and there are only some fundamental principles that are being restated in the context of the present times.

The experience of COVID-19 has been shattering in many different ways. It has not yet gone, and it is not clear when we might be rid of it fully, if at all. As it recedes, there is always the fear that it might come back again. This fear has changed us in some unrecognisable ways. While we continue to view social, cultural and religious gatherings as being inevitable, the opening of schools has taken a back seat. Children have started venturing out a bit more in many places and you may see some grounds full of children and youth playing. But a large number of people do not have that opportunity and are constrained to stay put inside their homes with very little outside interaction. In the context of children

and their education, we are confronted with many questions and few choices and options. The last year-and-a-half has been a different experience and children have had to cope with tensions, many also with extreme scarcity, displacement and worse: sickness and even death in the family. It is not clear what impressions the last year has left on them and what lies ahead till a hopeful semblance of normalcy returns. It is also not clear what the lasting effect of this pandemic will be on the large number of children whose families have always been struggling.

It is with this understanding that we must think of a way forward for the development of the next generation that will populate and manage the future. It has to be about their education, helping them rediscover their childhood, reduce the sense of anxiety and also help them build their cognitive abilities and their knowledge base so as to deal with their lives and be empowered in such a way that it benefits everyone, including the environment and the planet.

## Living with the pandemic

There were many efforts of different kinds being made during the pandemic to reach and engage with children. This wide spectrum of programmes had different foci with respect to the children that they attempted to, and could, reach and the manner and content of what they reached out to them with. As we hope to slowly return to a state where the fear of COVID-19 is somewhat or largely mitigated and think about the world we would construct, we need to keep in mind the children and the pledges that we have made in the Preamble to the Constitution. It would be so easy to forget both as the challenges of livelihoods and persistent concerns about health continue to haunt us. It is safe to anticipate that the world would, at least in the medium- to short-run (still a couple of generations away) perhaps not go back to the pre-first wave days. So new norms and new ways of adjustment would evolve. What should the elements of this normal be and what should it include for the children and their lives and not just their education?

There is, of course, the realisation that children who have missed school in the last year and more (and this period could increase), have forgotten even what they knew. There are studies showing that during the pandemic, children have actually slipped in significant ways from their levels of learning of what is considered relevant and important in school. Given the way the school dealt with learning, merely as transfer of chunks of information mistakenly labelled as 'knowledge', there is a need to be clear about how we want to respond to this apparent falling behind from whatever levels the students had reached.

Among the many attempts to engage students during this time was one using technology as a principal vehicle. The efforts to start *mohalla* classes and reach children who could not access technology were sporadic and largely led by a few non-government educational institutions. The larger focus was on the technology-driven programmes and multiple channels blossomed as did many organisations preparing software for children. These, being market-driven, were obviously targeted at the elite and reflected their interests and experiences.

### **Background**

The haunting images of the children walking huge distances have already been forgotten. In the larger discourse, there is no cognisance of the fact that many children would take a long time to come out of the traumas they have been through. There are many who would have to be located and rescued to be brought back to the school. There is now occasional talk of schools, children and their learning. The main concern in reopening seems to be the fact that children have not learnt enough and that there needs to be some way of covering what had to be done in a shorter time and in a hurry. However, even before we think of the mathematics, science, social studies, reading and writing that students have missed from their textbooks, we have to remember that they have missed many more important things. They may have lost many things and gained intense experiences. The question is: what is society and the school going to do about that? With livelihoods not improving and the pandemic persisting, many realities for children have changed for the worse. What existed earlier was not acceptable and it put students from economically and socially weak sections at not just a disadvantage but even at the risk of falling off, which almost all of them did at some stage of their

education. We need to consider that even those possibilities would now not be available to many families and children. The exercise of thinking about the future of education after the pandemic needs to consider these concerns.

This analysis of the education experience during the pandemic should therefore help us think about what the new normal should be. The education system has been plagued by extreme inequity and lopsided priorities. The culture and direction of the system are controlled by the anxiety of a set of over-concerned parents putting pressure on the system and their children, urging the children to compete, providing them with all the materials and means to learn and excel, and expecting them to show faster and larger output with noteworthy results. They are able to muster all the resources for expectations that are difficult to attain for most others. The diverse range of facilities available to different children in the extremely stratified school system makes the chances of their learning very different. Children with limited means feel overpowered by the handicap with which they begin. In most cases, their parents do not have the time, resources, will or confidence that their children can overcome the handicap they have in learning or make use of their education.

The reality of the schools is that instead of bringing children from different backgrounds to interact and learn about one another's lives so as to be able to empathise with the situations some live in, we have stratified schools, many of which are becoming more and more ghettoised. There is another kind of segregation emerging in schools, fuelled by the desire in the system to classify and categorise children as capable of developing higher-order thinking skills from the rest. Children categorised in this manner will be offered different curricula and hence, many can only have limited aspirations. This is, in one sense, a formal confirmation of the intent of the system (already on the ground) and means that now children could be segregated even in upper-primary as those who study a 'lighter' curriculum to branch off into practical vocations and programmes of skill development and others who will follow the 'academic' curriculum for attempting higher studies. With no revision in the way work with hands is compensated and this being identified as 'menial' labour, the consequences of this segregation are easy to imagine.

While the pandemic brought to the forefront staggering disparities, for a brief while, it also showed the importance of co-existence and compassion rather than competition. The extreme disdain and disregard for the suffering of those who are considered to be 'the other', and therefore unequal, were mixed with a concern for their wellbeing and some community systems of support and collective action were set up. There was also, albeit briefly, a realisation of the importance and essentiality of the so-called 'menial work'. The challenge for us is to make this a lesson that education instils as a common sensibility. The key to the new normal, therefore, has to lie in setting up processes of education that are more equitable, more inclusive, more participative and focus on developing persons with kindness and humanity, imbued with the values of the Constitution. The stark disparity that the pandemic has exposed between the affluent and the deprived is likely to get legitimised and cemented, as the options for the deprived to educate themselves get diminished further due to reduced access to resources and possibilities. There is already an ever-increasing emphasis on performance as essential for opportunities for 'academic education' from an early stage. This would not only restrict the possible openings into the economy but also into idea-forming analyses and literature. The process of sorting would be considered fair and just as it would be based on the present notion of what is perceived as merit. The hype over medals and lucrative opportunities in sports could lead to similar processes that benefit the capable elite. The new normal can thus slip into being the reification of this or emerge as a clear attempt towards equitable possibilities. The consciousness of this possibility requires us to make a choice about the new normal.

Another important concern about the new normal is about adjusting the focus of the cognitive aspect of education as well. In the last 20 years, concern continued to be expressed about the content covered in the syllabus and the ability of the learners to perform as per the syllabus. The advocacy for the need to develop *abilities*, rather than be a store of information, has been on the back-burner of all conversations, with assessments and performance-tracking of elaborately defined outcomes taking centre stage. Assessment is an attempt to measure the learner against some ideally-defined expectations that have strangely

come to be accepted as standard and appropriate for an age, in spite of the reality that a majority of the children are not able to acquire those abilities and perform as per the expected learning stages. And when the schools open, let us not rush to have the students complete all that they would have done in the period when the schools were closed. Students not only have not been able to add to what they knew and could do, but they have also forgotten a lot of what they did know.

### **Technology in education**

The issue of the use of technology in education has to be considered carefully in the present situation, where society is stratified. If resources are not a concern, then the question becomes: are there enough grounds to suggest that technology substantially helps in learning? Is it the direction to move towards as better supplementary support? This argument is different from the view that, given the reality that the pandemic is not going away and more such crises may get generated, it is appropriate to move towards more and more technology-focused teaching and learning processes. Such processes are also better monitored and central guidance has been available to teachers and, more importantly, to the children themselves.

There is already a growing clamour for more technology and development of software as well as increased access. We need to consider the question of the use of technology and the kind of directions it would inadvertently promote. We know the children have almost universally disapproved of online classes and have shown keenness to return to schools. We have seen with the increased use of technology, the increased fragmentation of people and the spread of misinformation including ideas that are divisive and socially harmful. As human interactions and experiences of mixing keep getting reduced, the dangers of segregation and the spread of distrust would keep increasing. Any new norm that for some reason brings in less human contact as a basic practice is not a good option. There is no harm in using technology in an equitable way, but it has to be in addition to the school as we knew it, albeit more collaborative and fostering cooperative learning and reduced competition and pressure. The educational system cannot reduce the stakes and pressures unless the options available are more equitable and the process of filtration does not start early.

The question is: do we strengthen the technological devices aimed at tracking centrally-defined learning

outcomes and standards to continuously compare children or do we move towards community- and teacher-led processes of setting expectations? Given the urge to use technology to replace human interaction, it would be essential to recognise the importance of human interaction and make it possible. It would be so easy to slip into excessive use of technology which could, after substantial investments, be better than what exists today. There has been considerable investment in online learning in the last 20 years and the pandemic has increased this manifold. The concerns of the children from deprived backgrounds going to schools run by the government are very different from the concerns of the parents of the children from high-end private schools. Children from economically weak backgrounds would like the schools to open early and continue working regularly. While the elite would be looking towards a blended mode, leaning towards technology-supported individual learning, the interests of the rural poor children are in the opening of schools. Even for children from the slums, there is no alternative to having some form of a regularly run *basti* school with full precautions. The solutions we look for in the short term are linked to long-term concerns and our views on how education needs to be structured.

### To summarise

The task of rebuilding the education of children after the pandemic abates is fraught with challenges. There is a serious risk of a large number of children

being further marginalised and completely excluded from certain opportunities of education and thereby, possibilities of obtaining certain roles and positions in society. The promise of inclusion of all children into an equitable education system as a means of building a democratic and level playing field with equal economic opportunities, leading to gradual social mixing and fraternity has to be fulfilled. This can be done only if there is an unqualified attempt to ensure that children from the deprived backgrounds get all the extra facilities that are needed to compensate for the huge handicap they face in resources and scaffolding in their struggle to keep pace with the children from socially and economically well-endowed backgrounds.

The reconstruction of education must recognise that, at best, technology is a supportive element, and the larger part is achieved through human interaction with the teachers and peers, using reading materials including textbooks and other resources. The 'new normal' must be chosen, only if we get to work towards it constructively, by ensuring that it does not exacerbate the existing disparities in the opportunity of getting an education and choosing social and economic roles. These require totally changed assumptions and beliefs and cannot happen quickly. But the effort has to consciously move towards this goal, rather than slip into accepting and supporting increased stratification and ever-widening gaps.



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# A Holistic Approach to Learning as Children Return to School

Jane Sahi

This article looks back at a few of the things that were done in the immediacy of the crisis of lockdowns and upheavals and considers how we might best respond to children's needs as they begin to return to school, particularly the younger children.

With the first onslaught of COVID-19 and its devastating effects on people who worked within the unorganised labour force, there was an emergency where many lacked food, shelter and healthcare. Many children were exposed to hardships, neglect and deprivation and fear of what might happen to them as they watched the news or overheard conversations about the dangers and risks of the pandemic.

Over the past year, many organisations, schools, libraries and individual teachers and volunteers actively responded to children's physical needs and also tried to reach out creatively to engage them through craft activities, stories or close observations of their natural surroundings. Publishers, storytellers, library educators, illustrators and authors made a concerted effort to make stories available online and many volunteers read stories to children on mobile phones or provided families with 'book bags'. *Story Weaver*, set up by Pratham Books, provided free access to a wide selection of books online in more than 26 languages.

Among the books published by Story Weaver some related directly to the pandemic. These targeted different age groups and presented particular but very relevant perspectives. One such book is *Coronavirus: We can Stay Safe*.<sup>i</sup> This book helps children see some of the reasons things happened the way they did, in ways that even the youngest children can have a role in protecting themselves and others from the virus. *Superheroes*<sup>ii</sup>, another book, highlights our interdependence in times of crisis and how each one can have a positive response in taking responsibility.

In addition to focusing on telling and reading stories, some organisations also encouraged children to generate their own stories, images and journals.

Initially, this was specifically in relation to the children's experience of the pandemic. Following are two examples of how professionals sought ways to connect to children. One such organisation in Bengaluru is *Buguri*, working with the waste-picker community. They succeeded in setting up a radio station to share stories, news and information. This included a talking-tree puppet that answered children's questions about the pandemic. *Buguri* encouraged children to draw pictures and comic strips to express their understanding of the virus and their feelings about its effects.

Sharon English School in Mumbai reached out to children in a variety of ways. They encouraged them to think through metaphors to identify their changing emotions, the sense of isolation and frustration at the physical restrictions that were enforced.<sup>iii</sup> One girl wrote, 'Life is a butterfly stuck in a web, who wants to fly but can't. We also want to go out.' One boy said that life under lockdown was like a car without a key because 'we had legs to move about but no permission to go out'. Others described their experience as being like a lion in a cage or a person under house arrest.

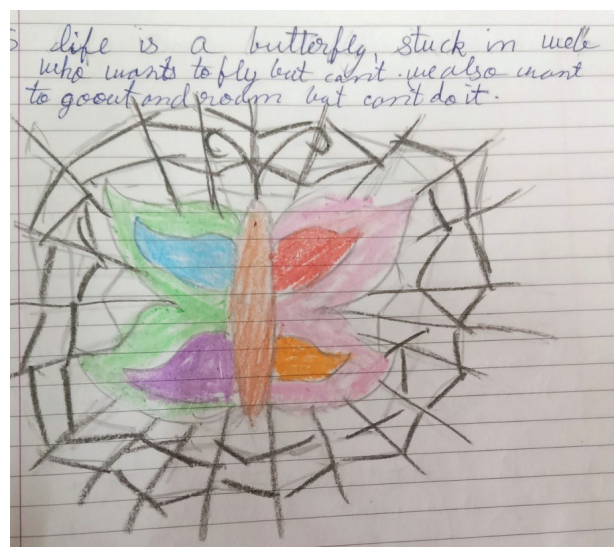
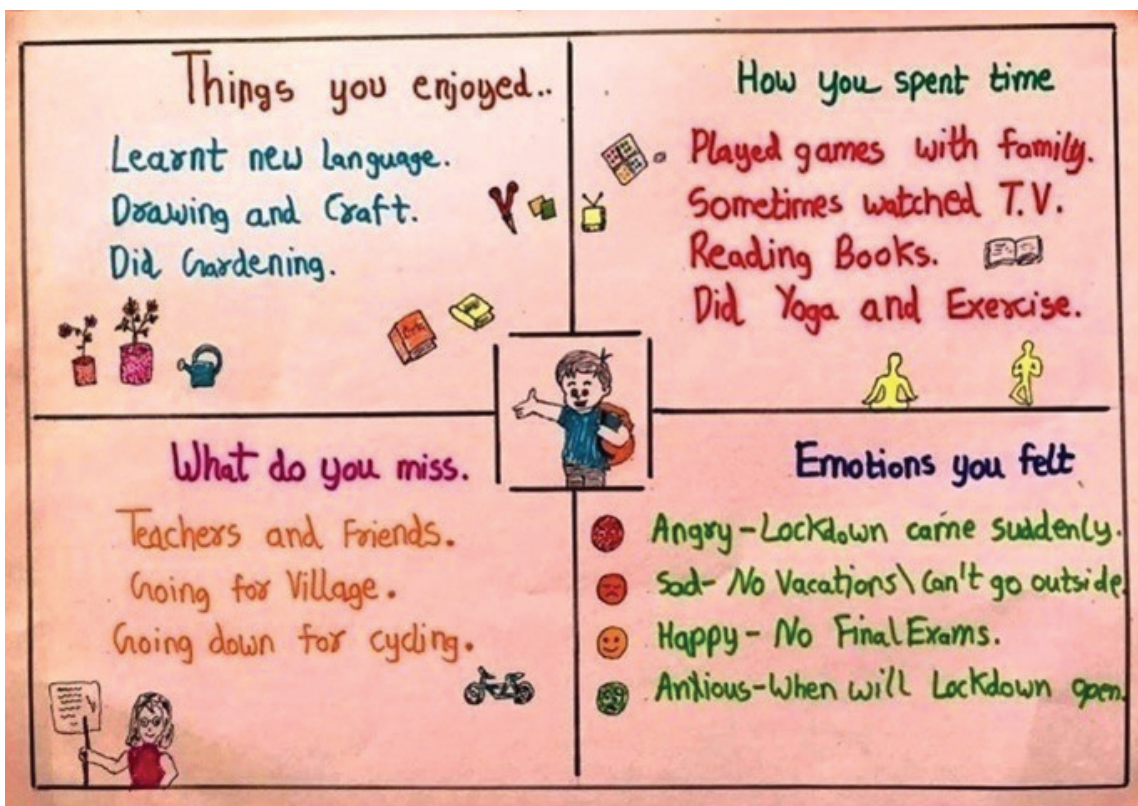


Image and description of life in lockdown by a student of class VIII

The same school asked children to describe through word and image what they enjoyed, how they

spent their time, the things they missed, and the emotions that they felt. The responses were very

varied and below are two examples:



Nevertheless, the vast majority of children were left with their anxieties unspoken and unheard. In addition to the physical and academic challenges, many children have not had the opportunity to express their experiences of relocation, death in the family, conflict at home, loneliness or acute shortages. These, of course, would have impacted children differently according to their age, temperament and circumstances. But even for children who were not directly affected, many would have been exposed to media coverage of the chaos and panic. Not all children have suffered or been traumatised, but children's lives have certainly changed and been disrupted. For many, there has been a kind of vacuum with little to stimulate them. A number of children living in rural areas have at least had the advantage of open space and the company of each other and some would have even benefited from the relaxed and unmonitored time; but for children in urban areas, life has been more restricted.

### **Different perspectives on priorities**

As children begin to return to the classroom, there may be a tendency to 'move on' and try to forget the problems that many may have faced. Children's powers of resilience have often been commented upon, but these very survival strategies sometimes bear long-term consequences as children struggle to adapt or adjust to the stress of difficult situations. If these disruptions in their lives are not addressed, children's readiness for learning might well be hampered.

The discussions around the effects of the pandemic on children have mainly been seen in terms of loss, or what has been termed as 'learning regression'. For many children, their literacy and numeracy skills have been severely affected by the lack of resources and stimuli. One particular concern has been for migrant children whose home language is different from the medium of instruction at school and who now face learning in a half-forgotten language. However, perhaps the greatest loss for offline students has been a shift away from a positive learning environment where interaction was encouraged. The school offers the potential of a learning community where there are expectations and responsibilities on both, the students as well as the teachers. It is a context where students also support and learn from each other. The apathy of

most state governments to provide these children with any incentive or support for nearly over 17 months has been alarming. Jean Drèze writes how the system dropped 'offline children' like 'hot potatoes' (The Hindu, August 15, 2021).

Most teachers working with children who had no access to the internet felt they had nothing to offer without the framework of classroom structures, a fixed syllabus and assessment systems. It has become clear that the over-centralised system has deprived not only children, but also their teachers, of autonomy. A headline in the newspaper asks the rhetorical question, 'What can children learn without textbooks?' This seems to suggest that learning and textbooks are synonymous! In Karnataka, there has been a belated effort to hand out worksheets for children to complete, but this is hardly an adequate response to children's real needs.

### **Meaning-making through stories**

The urgent challenge is how we can best support children going back to school, especially those who have not had support from home or school. The priority would seem to be to make up for lost time and accelerate children's mastery of literacy and numeracy skills, by first assessing children's learning levels and then by providing relevant remedial work for them. This would address the issue of the critical need for differentiated learning in the classroom. However, even this would only be a partial response to the more deeply-rooted problem of learning readiness. The danger is that we may be reducing language learning to the bare bones of acquiring decoding and encoding skills, and maths learning to drilling children in mechanical tasks. Further, other aspects of the curriculum, such as art, music, drama and practical work in environmental studies and the sciences will be sidelined. There are even suggestions that holidays should be cancelled! More than ever, at this particular time, children need a balanced, holistic approach to learning, and this must include some occasions of celebration.

I would suggest that a balanced approach to the present concerns of educating young learners would mean giving attention to basic skills in language and maths for individual learners, and also to include meeting children's needs to do things with their hands, relate to the immediate environment, and give space for imaginative, reflective and creative activities both individually and collaboratively.

Sharing stories is one way to engage children imaginatively and thoughtfully. Teachers, library educators and social workers can support children in listening and reading stories and further encourage them to tell and write their own stories.

Stories, like life itself, can be ambivalent and of mixed quality. Like food, they can be nourishing but they can also be indigestible and unpalatable when used instrumentally. Some stories help in the process of healing and consolation through humour or by evoking feelings of tenderness and compassion; however, children's responses cannot be predicted or manipulated. Stories work best when they are multi-layered and arouse curiosity and give space to children to respond in their own ways. Children need a wide variety of stories to choose from.<sup>iv</sup>

There are stories that deal with personal memories; there are others dealing with the everyday reality that may include elements of fantasy. Some books use a story framework to convey information. Beyond these stories, there are those that create alternative worlds of 'far away and down below'. Tales of magic and enchantment, for example, deal with an alternative reality; but these stories can provide a way of understanding or engaging with everyday predicaments and conflicts.

Some stories that do not deal explicitly with specific problems, work subliminally by giving a voice not only to fears and despair related to loss, risk and injustice, but also to hope. There are many stories that trace a protagonist's perilous journey through difficult, painful and even violent ordeals. In such stories, the hero – male or female – eventually triumphs by an inner steadfastness aided by benign forces at work in the world. Classical stories, such as that of *Uttanka*, as told in the Mahabharata, who is compelled to travel through the underworld on a quest that is not of his own choosing, or of *Dhruva* who searches for acceptance by facing the terrors of the forest alone, present pathways to resolution. A valuable source of stories of wit and magic is Sudha Murthy's *The Bird with Golden Wings* (2009, Puffin Books).

There are contemporary writers who draw on the power and metaphorical language of traditional tales but reinvent them, such as Salman Rushdie in his children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The 'happy ending' exists as a vitally significant symbol to show that disaster is not the final state. Tove Jansson suggests that an alternative is 'a way left open for the child to spin the tale further.'<sup>v</sup>

Tales of wonder exist within a magical world where there is no clear line between the animate and the inanimate: rocks can talk, rivers can change direction and trees can walk. There is fluidity between living creatures where frogs can change to heroes; heroes can change to caged birds and birds to golden fish. The stories carry an underlying belief that life is connected and there is continuity in life, beyond breakdown and death. At first sight, these stories may appear just fantastical, but there is a subtle moral framework that undergirds the kind and good are eventually rewarded and the greedy, lazy and selfish are punished. Unlikely helpers – whether human or animal – aid those who are truthful and caring. Such stories have been criticised for their lack of realism; but it could be argued that les', as Italo Calvino calls them, confront the harsh reality of injustice, violence and death and act as our guides as we navigate our way through an ambiguous world which is both full of light and darkness.

When Janusz Korczak worked with children in the Warsaw Ghetto of the 1940s, he adapted Tagore's play *The Post Office* for dramatisation as a way of supporting children to meet the nightmares of the present, and the terrors of an uncertain future. The play is an allegory about life and death and yet has been described by W B Yeats as a story that conveys 'an emotion of gentleness and peace'.<sup>vi</sup>

Children need a wide variety of stories to choose from. The *Story Cards* offer a wonderful resource of stories for young readers across genres. They have been thoughtfully selected and include a wide range of stories on themes of discovery, friendship and empathy. These are carefully formatted to make them child-friendly and accessible for multiple uses in the classroom.

Stories are an organic way of trying to make meaning of the bewildering assortment of impressions and interactions that are encountered and nourish the imagination to think of 'possible worlds'. Children also need to live in the present moment by connecting to nature through sensory experiences and by being involved in doing, making and growing things.

Krishna Kumar wrote in the midst of the lockdown about the essential value of 'learning outdoors' and its rich potential in rural areas, 'The monsoon creates great opportunities for noticing, recording and examining nature. Egrets and other large birds tread at leisurely paces in wet paddy fields,

looking for food. They are a joy to watch and sketch in their different postures. Ants come out of their subterranean homes when the rainwater floods them. Butterflies migrate in this season. These are just examples; there are a hundred things to observe in plants and trees.<sup>vii</sup>

One of the most significant ways we all thrive is by being 'awake' to our surroundings whether in a city, peri-urban area or village.



Nature study: Children working in small groups

### Activities that connect children to their surroundings

Recently, two of the teachers from the Learning Centre in which I am involved shared a newly published book called *Pishi and Me*<sup>viii</sup> with a group of children from the nearby government primary school. It tells of a child's journey through suburban streets with an aunt. What makes this a story is that the child is allowed to stop and look, smell and touch things and to collect and treasure them.

The reading of the book in a local government primary school was followed by making origami boxes from waste. During the following session, the children returned to show the 'treasures' that they had collected. Many of them made lids for their boxes and some decorated their boxes with coloured paper and seeds. One child reported that he had shown his mother how to make a box. They collected a range of items to put in their boxes including stones, feathers, seedpods, shells and

flowers along with scraps of lace, *kappechippu* (seashells) and bits of string and thread.

Over the last few months, with the exception of the second lockdown in April, three team members from the Learning Centre, with the support of the Nature Conservation Foundation, have worked with children from the nearby village on library activities and nature study.

More recently, the children have been engaged in a project related to flowers and patterns.<sup>ix</sup> This has involved many practical activities such as drawing, making pop-ups, sharing stories, learning songs and poems about flowers, doing observation exercises that have helped children realise the complex network of links between soil, air and water and flora and fauna. They have also begun to understand how patterns of day and night and seasons affect the natural world.



Children engaged in creating a mobile display of flowers and patterns

Looking at flowers closely can give children a sense of a life cycle where decay and regeneration are an intrinsic part of life. Seeds, buds, flowers, fallen petals and fruits are all part of a single process moving from one seed to creating another seed, from life to new life.

Being in touch with nature makes us realise our fragility and resilience and our part in the wider world. Some may feel looking at butterflies and

flowers at this juncture is not very useful. However, the children's excitement and questions – 'Why do some flowers have more than one colour?' 'Why do some flowers bloom in the night?' 'Why does the hibiscus have long threads (referring to the stamens)? These questions seemed to show that this was one possibility of grounding children and fostering their imagination and a spirit of enquiry.

Books on the natural environment in English and in different regional languages have been published by Kalpavriksh.<sup>x</sup> These are an excellent source of information and are imaginatively and sensitively presented for children of different ages.

### Conclusion

This period of the pandemic has been disorienting for most people, whether children or adults. For many children, it has perhaps shaken a sense of confidence in the stability and health of the world.

The word 'catastrophe' comes from the Greek word meaning 'a turning point'; and although there is a tendency to want to return to familiar ways of doing things there is an awareness that a change in outlook is needed to meet the demands of the present and the future.

As children go back to school, the sense of emergency of the immediate situation does not mean only pressing forward to accelerated learning to catch up with what has been lost. There is also a need to pause in order to recover, refresh and acknowledge what is meaningful and substantive learning for growth. Sharing stories, noticing and being attentive to nature, practising skills that enrich others' lives and our own, making things and being sensitive to others' needs are some of the ways that will prepare teachers and children for a more life-giving future.

### Endnotes

- i *The Novel Coronavirus: We Can Stay Safe*, Pratham Books.
- ii *Everyday Superheroes*, Minakshi Diwan, Pratham Books.
- iii Maher M and J Thomas have kindly shared these photos and texts.
- iv Story Cards are a rich multilingual resource of stories for young readers across genres. They are published by Rajalakshmi Srinivasan Memorial Foundation. See <https://rajifoundation.in/storycards/about.html>
- v Quoted in Weinreich T. 2000. *Children's Literature – Art or Pedagogy?* Frederiksburg: Roskilde University Press. pp112.
- vi One adaptation of this story for children is *Amal and the Letter from the King*, retold by Chitra Gajadin and illustrated by Helen Ong. 1993. Rupa & Co.
- vii Krishna Kumar. *Schools Without Freedom*, The Hindu, August 20, 2020.
- viii Timira Gupta. *Pishi and Me*. Pratham Books.
- ix Roshan Sahi, Gousia Taj and Sarojini Ramachandra Hegde facilitated this project.
- x See <https://kalpavriksh.org/product-category/childrens-books/>

### Resources

For more games and activities, visit Nature Conservation Foundation website: <https://www.ncf-india.org/blog/hidden-housemates-part-1>



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# Remodelling School as a Social Space

Subir Shukla

## A school may not now be what we think it is

On a field trip to UP in 1995, I visited a school in a remote area. At the time it was being rumoured that a big World Bank scheme that had funded infrastructure development of schools was being discontinued. Everyone was worried, afraid that once the funds stopped flowing, the school's infrastructure would 'fall apart'. However, a teacher said something that completely changed my view on education. 'I'm not worried for my school at all,' he insisted, 'because my school is not in the building or the furniture or the supplies – it's in *what happens* between my children and me. People can come and remove the doors or even the bricks, but they can't destroy my school.'

Powerful perspective, isn't it?

It is worth asking ourselves: what exactly does happen in a school that makes it a school? Let us not just say 'learning' – think of all the verbs we can use: talk, play, work, write, listen, draw, experiment, connect, read, explain, ask, instruct, narrate, try, encourage, exchange, meet, discover, argue, care, make, create, conclude, agree, help, compete, explore, reflect, admire, give, lead, share, enjoy, dislike, bond and so on. And even the ones that appear to not involve others, (such as 'reflect') can be done with others or can be triggered because of what someone else said or did.

You can see that most of these 'verbs' involve other people: teachers, fellow students, school employees and community members. In fact, a school *is* in what happens between people – essentially a set of relationships, within which a set of processes take place to ensure the all-around development of students.

If you think back on your childhood, you will find yourself recalling being with your friends, what your parents did to help you get to school, how your teachers spoke to you, maybe the functions you attended with classmates. In fact, it is the connections, the relationships we had, that stay with us.

This is why it is a mistake to think of conducting learning assessments as soon as schools reopen. This assumes that a school is primarily an academic place where children go mainly to be able to pass examinations. It is equally, if not more, important to gauge what children have missed out in terms of their social relationships and the impact this has on their emotional development and mental health.

## Value of 'social spaces' and 'social role' of school

This is not to argue that these social interactions are important in themselves, or these are all that there is. To begin with, the academic learning we prize so much cannot really take place without considering the social aspect. Theorists, such as Vygotsky and Bruner, have repeatedly told us how the construction of knowledge is a social process, not only between the teacher and the student but among the students themselves. It involves the teacher in creating a classroom situation where children need to work and think together, with occasional support from the teacher. It is this bouncing of ideas off each other, sharing experiences and views, and reflecting with their peers that leads to a newer and richer understanding than before.

The teacher's 'scaffolding' role is a social role – instead of simply presenting what you know, the expectation is that you will observe children and respond to their actions by providing inputs as and where needed. For instance, you can say, 'Develop a plan for creating a children's park on the land near the school – make it as detailed as possible and try to work out its costing. Discuss this in your group and start by agreeing on *how* you will go about doing this.' You can imagine the steps that follow. Nothing prevents you from providing inputs on, say measuring perimeter and area, or ways of calculating costs or the kind of signage that would be required – but only when the children are at a point that they need it. This makes the teacher an observer, an occasional participant, a responsive

supporter. In other words, a *social* being who also happens to have an academic role. Can all this help us ‘complete our syllabus’? Short answer: yes, I have written about this in another article.<sup>1</sup>

However, in all this, children are also learning to become adept social beings. The interactions on the playground or on the road to school or inside the bus, during the mid-day meal or at the water tap, all add to a child’s development. (You can think back on your childhood and list for yourself all the things you learnt in these settings, including how your personality developed.) The kind of ‘social construction’ of knowledge mentioned earlier and the interactions children experience in school are valuable preparation for a future life, living and working with others. They also form the basis for children’s emotional development. Both Gandhi and Tagore talked of this education of the ‘mind, hand and heart’ (the ‘hand’ part involves children working with each other). Going beyond the individual, though, to the manner in which children learn to relate with each other ultimately forms the basis of a functional democratic society.

In the last two years, the pandemic has repeatedly shown how dependent we are on each other – to survive as well as to flourish. The impending climate change too requires that we go beyond our individual spheres to see how we affect each other, and the measures we need to take as a collective global society. Our future lies in cooperation and collaboration, in being on the same side of the problems we face and working with each other. From trying to succeed at the cost of others, we now have no option but to succeed together – and the school is the place where we need to enable this kind of learning, deliberately and by design, instead of leaving it to happen on its own.

So where do we go from here? How do we handle school reopening, especially for younger children? How do we move towards creating this new kind of social space that is needed in these times?

### **What we need to do in the coming months**

In the coming months, more and more schools will open. And there may be phases when they are closed again. It will help, therefore, to think of social interactions both in the immediate and the longer term. The long break caused by the pandemic also presents an opportunity to re-start and rebuild schools as a social space.

### *In the reopening phase*

During lockdowns and restrictions, we have depended on parents, volunteers and communities in order to reach children. It will be useful to build on this and work with them before the school reopens. Some steps here could include:

- Hold pre-opening meetings with the community to develop a re-opening plan, including working together to ensure that the hygiene and safety requirements are met.
- Share with the community your academic plan for the coming weeks – and what they would need to do.

Through all this, it is important to keep emphasising that the community has a future role as knowledge partners of the school and are not merely responsible for the logistical aspects involved.

On the reopening day and for the next few days, it is important to build enthusiasm and hope, through steps such as:

- A ‘reopening mela’, a celebration with parents and community, now that we are coming together again
- Have families narrate the experiences of the past two years
- Agree on the health and hygiene protocol to be followed (do not just impose it on the children)
- Give children time to be with their friends and play with them; keep the first few days somewhat unstructured
- Spend time listening to each child’s experiences, share your own too, discuss what all of us learnt through what we have been through, and how we would respond differently the next time
- Share how children’s role in learning is changing, how we will all support each other in the coming year, that their role will be to display initiative, cooperate with their friends, and keep track of their own and each other’s learning
- Discuss the areas they feel weak in, discuss your teaching-learning plans with them, agree on academic rules/protocols to be followed
- Take children into confidence and tell them that in order to get back to teaching-learning in full flow, you need to know where they are
- Finally, with their permission and willing participation, conduct your assessment

### **Towards the ‘re-modelled school’**

Now that you have got a solid start towards more

rooted and two-way relationships, how can you take this further? It might help to think in terms of the following stages.

*Stage 1 – Use the reopening to begin a new journey*

- Introduce textbooks and materials in an interesting way, for example, how about a quiz that encourages children to explore the textbook – which is the longest chapter, which word is more used ('force' or 'light', for instance), which is the longest question, and so on).
- Begin by making greater use of open-ended questions. (If you need, find out what these are, and how they apply to different subjects and classes).
- Ease step-by-step into a more 'social' teaching-learning process: start by encouraging more oral work to be done together, then move on to more reading-writing work done in groups and finally into using objects or equipment together. (For example, why this sequence? Take a guess!)
- Set goals with children – initiate 'learning recovery' process in partnership with them, working with groups at different levels as well as multilevel groups.
- Encourage children to set goals and ask for assessment to check themselves.
- Prepare children for self-learning – by enhancing creativity, reflection, analysis, decision-making, study skills and language for academic proficiency (you can look up activities for all these on the internet<sup>ii</sup>)

*Stage 2 – Towards autonomous but socially-connected learners*

- Create self-help groups among students for reading textbooks together (yes, they can do this on their own), collecting information and content, helping each other understand and explore, so that they can put together all they can. You can then play the role of helping them go beyond what they can do on their own, for example, asking them the question: what do you think the value of this will be?)
- Think over which decisions, responsibilities and roles you can hand over to the children and then, discuss these with them and run a class/school in which students play a crucial part
- Discuss student performance with students themselves, parents and fellow teachers – identify what everyone (including you) needs to do for this performance to improve. Your goal is

to find the answer to: How can the learning of all become the responsibility of all?

- Involve the community as a knowledge partner – so many community members have experiences and areas of knowledge that can be shared in the classroom (a truck driver knows the geography of India better than anyone, an ironsmith can separate impurities from metals, a weaver has a high-level understanding of coordinates). You are surrounded by rich resources

*Stage 3 – A new vision for your school*

Now that you have taken all the initial steps, it makes sense to move forward with the participation of all. So, work towards involving parents, the School Management Committee (SMC), the community and students themselves to create a long-term vision for your school. Ask yourself questions, such as the following:

- What are the key problems in the school that are within your reach to handle? (For example, some children do not participate as much as they could, or do not learn as much as they could; some teachers are reluctant to take up new initiatives, some parents may not be as supportive and so on. What will be some of the biggest changes in your school if these are actually solved?)
- As a result, five years from now, what will be happening in your school that does not happen today? (For example, reports in the primary school will be replaced by conversations with parents.)
- What will you hear different people saying that they do not today?
- What qualities will your children have? How will they be different as a group?
- What skills and capabilities will teachers and the school head have? How will they be different as a group?
- What will change in the role of the community? What will tell us that it is a productive relationship?
- What barriers will you overcome? With whose help? How?
- What steps will you (your friends/colleagues/community) take? Who will do what and by when?

Convert all this into a plan – a long term one, a part of which you will implement in the next three months, and work towards this with everyone.

## Conclusion

Teachers often say they are not allowed to make such changes. Do remember, if we are free to teach badly, we are also free to make improvements. Nothing stops us from smiling more, using local materials (did you know leaves grow in 1s, 2s, 3s, 5s and 7s, and are a terrific multiplication tool?), or reading half a story and leaving it at an interesting point so children want to read the rest on their own. Other ideas include: highlighting one child/group every week for having been the most helpful to others, setting highly creative challenges to be solved by working together (for

example, asking them how they would reorganise the furniture of the class if they were allowed to use only one hand), assessing children as a whole group rather than individually and so on. Nothing stops us from enjoying ourselves as teachers and finding fulfilment in the kind of relationships (and therefore, learning) we are able to generate in our class and school.

In any case, everything that is written above is also what the National Education Policy 2020 is aiming at too. As you move towards the remodelled and socially responsive school, the most likely outcome is that you will be held up as an example!

## Endnotes

- i Subir Shukla. Why We Need Responsive Schools. Learning Curve. *Every Child Can Learn Part 2*. April 2020. Issue 7. Pp 92.
- ii For example: <https://chachi.app> and <https://mananbooks.in/downloads/> for material containing activities



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*Madamji, school kab khulega?* (Madam, when will the school reopen?) This is a common refrain from the children every now and then to government school teachers who we work with in six districts of Madhya Pradesh. As they call students to check the progress of worksheets and digital lessons, they hear this appeal from students over and over again. The younger lot, class III, IV, V and VI students, seem to be longing for school the most. They crucially need the space and the peer interaction that school offers for the socialisation that goes alongside academic enrichment.

As most Indian states record a dip in COVID-19 cases, more and more states are announcing the reopening of schools and other educational institutions for in-person classes after nearly a year-and-a-half of closure. A few states, like Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Chhattisgarh and Delhi, are already experimenting with offline classes for class IX and above. Haryana and Chhattisgarh have also announced the opening of schools for primary and middle school classes in the coming weeks. However, the irony of the situation is that in most states, children of classes IX and above are being called to schools for offline classes, inspite of the repeatedly expressed expert opinion that it is the primary level children, with their foundational needs for literacy and numeracy, who need the direct, face-to-face engagement the most.

A Block Academic Coordinator (BAC) from the Hoshangabad district (Madhya Pradesh) recently shared his anxiety as to how the 6 - and 7 - year olds, who have not even been introduced to formal schooling and have missed out on it completely in the past one and a half years, would cope with the very process of schooling when they come to school. A primary school teacher echoed this saying, *'Yeh bachhe to ghar se door jakar seekhne ke bare mein jaante hi nahi hain. To jab yeh school aayenge, hum inhe uthna-baithna sikhayein, pahli ke path padhayein, doosri ke ya teesri ke?'* (These children do not even know what going away from home and learning is. When they come to school what should we teach them – formal processes of school, or class

I, class II or class III-level lessons?)

It is a cause for national attention and concern that these very children studying in classes I to VIII, who ought to be safeguarded by the Right to Education (RtE) Act, are the ones being pushed to an ineffective online mode of education. So, on the one hand, we need to rally together to demand the reopening of schools for the lower classes, and on the other, we need to plan creatively and constructively as to how schools need to prepare for reopening and functioning when they do reopen.

It is in the wake of these preparations towards reopening of schools that I would like to revisit some fundamental approaches to education that can guide us in the current times and later, when schools reopen formally.

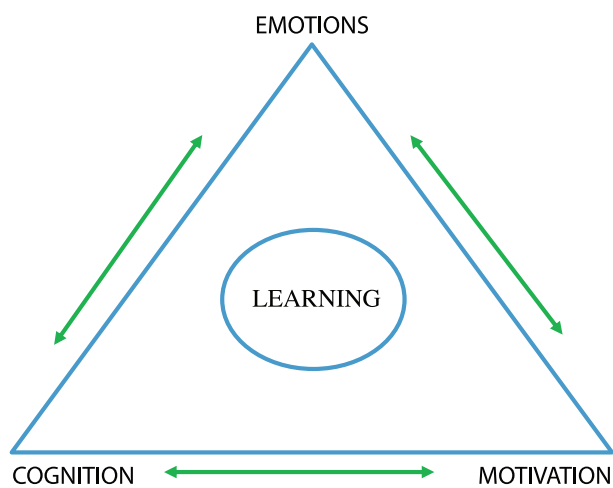
### **The ever-elusive Affective Domain**

We all know and yet, in practice, we often seem to forget, that learning is a psycho-socio-emotional process and that we learn best from the people we connect with or feel safe with. In workshop sessions with school teachers from both government and private schools, with teachers-in-the-making, and with grassroots-level education workers, I have repeatedly tried to map the emotions that children have experienced in early school life. I now have data from over 500 participants from different parts of the country, and *fear* is painted large on the canvas – pointing to the fact that fear is the predominant emotion that children experience in elementary school life. It is time now that we change this and provide a more positive, engaging, emotionally-enabling and academically-challenging atmosphere to our students.

COVID-19 has made many of us lose our near and dear ones and jolted us enough to realise that we need to build positive relationships among those we connect with in life. And for teachers, what could be a better way than to do this with students?

Already, the demography of children in government schools clearly shows a predominance of *dalit* and scheduled tribe (ST) children and girls.<sup>1</sup> This means that the children from families facing the most difficult economic situations are the ones attending government schools. This also means these children would be the most starved, both physically and emotionally, with parents caught up in the struggle of daily livelihood. For these children to be able to focus on a topic in the classroom would require a huge amount of acceptance and validation from the authority figure in the classroom – the teacher. As teachers, the best we can do is to realise this need of our students and provide them with an accepting and warm classroom atmosphere. To begin with, the least we can do is recognising and analysing our own biases and coming to terms with them. A constructive second step would be to question these biases and search for their source within. This would lead to better acceptance of our students and the socio-economic backgrounds they come from and could lead towards building a relationship of care and concern with them.

Another important dimension to this discussion on the importance of bringing in the *Affective Domain* in early age classrooms is how learning is related to and dependent on emotional health.



As the triad above shows, Emotions, Motivation, and Cognition are the three interconnected areas that influence each other and work together to make learning possible. Hence, for any meaningful learning to happen, it is imperative that, as teachers, we engage with the emotional state of the learner, value the emotional energy that they bring to the classroom and use it to create a motivated atmosphere that promotes cognition.

To begin with, as teachers, we need to realise that we have to build an emotional connect with our students. We have to accept that we like some of them, dislike others, and may even be averse to some. Can we, as humans, check these emotions and find their source, which may lie within us? Can we be more aware and accepting of what we feel and try to process it within?

### Build on what children know

In the past year or so, there has been a hue and cry over the terms ‘learning gap’ and ‘learning loss’. It is important to study the learning gap/loss to help policy-level changes and to work on pruning the syllabus so that the uphill struggle that children face on coming to school after the one-and-a-half to two years’ gap is made somewhat easier. However, aren’t there a totally new set of experiences that children have had during these months of closures and lockdowns? Is it not possible that in their formative years, when they were going through the pandemic, lockdown/school closure, children may have learnt some other things as well? Perhaps resilience, perseverance, some new craft or skill or the new language of the pandemic?

On a recent visit to Hoshangabad, a child of 8 or 9 years, asked me, ‘*Madamji, lockdown aur lock-up mein kya farak hota hai?*’ (What is the difference between lockdown and lock-up?). I was aware that she was exploring conceptual terms in English like in-out, small-big, up-down, thin-fat etc., but this use by the child of her current explorations of conceptual English language terms to make sense of what was going on around her, astounded me.

Within the classroom, it may be worthwhile to pay attention and try to understand what children have experienced in this phase. Questions like what happened to their families, to their parents’ work, what they did about food and ration supplies, did they meet neighbours and friends, what did they talk about, had anyone in the family contracted COVID-19, what kind of medical support did they get, who helped them in times of need and so on.

The list is never-ending, and teachers can build on it according to the context they and their students live in. This could be a good way to build a dialogue between teachers and students on what the past months have been like and to understand the challenging conditions that students live in. Sensitising teachers to talk to children and listen to them, to understand the information and knowledge base they have built in the past year and more, could

lead to (a) a positive teacher-student relationship and (b) a strong foundation for learning, based on what knowledge children bring to the classroom. Better learning will take place on this empathetic and constructivist foundation.

### **Classroom design and seating**

Physical distancing is part of the new normal we are into. Even in classroom settings, the need for seating children apart from each other will continue for some time to come. This gives us an opportunity to break the rigid classroom architecture and examine if students sitting in passive rows, one behind the other, is really a good way to learn. The question we need to ask ourselves is: what kind of seating fosters more inclusive and participatory learning?

Another COVID-19 reality is that we need to call students to school in batches. In remote government primary schools, the enrolment numbers may hover around anything between 20 to 80. So, for those schools that have only two or three rooms and some open spaces (like verandas), it only makes sense to group children according to their ability levels and make them sit in spaced-out circles – an arrangement where all the children can see each other as well as the teacher/facilitator. Schools that have higher enrolment figures and either not enough rooms or not enough staff to attend to smaller groups, calling students in batches either for part of the day or for certain days in a week, could be a strategy employed.

In both cases, this is the time to break away from the teacher-centric classroom design of rows of students and shift to the more inclusive circle-seating arrangement – where children sitting one hand away from each other and yet facing everyone in the classroom is possible. This would also enable peer interaction and shift the focus from teacher-driven learning activities to shared cross-learning among students and the teacher.

Another exploration that can further help this process of a shared and interactive way of learning is to divide the students into small groups and allow them to perform some activities/tasks in these groups according to directions given by the teacher. Where rooms are small and sitting in a big all-inclusive circle is not possible, making smaller groups is a way in which more peer interaction can be facilitated even while maintaining the necessary physical distance norm.

### **Role of nutrition and health in learning**

COVID-19 has taught us to pay attention to our own health and that of those around us. School

education too can learn from this experience and build a robust system of nutrition and health support within schools. Awareness about one's body and the way it functions, and basic healthcare are areas that have to find an important place in every elementary school curriculum. Another step schools can take in this direction is to incorporate minimal, basic healthcare facilities within the school premises.

Then, we are aware of the significant role one hot meal a day in the form of the mid-day meal (MDM) plays in making the child ready for some cognitive work in the classroom. The MDM is now available only to students of ages 6-14 years (and to 3–6-year-olds in *anganwadis*). As students enrolled in government schools come from the most deprived and under-served sections of any society in India, the availability of food may not be a guarantee for them at home. This nutrition deficit is taken care of through MDM till class VIII in MP and some other states, and class VII in some states, like Maharashtra. However, a study carried out by teachers in Chhattisgarh clearly indicates the need for the continuation of MDM for students in the higher grades. However, as soon as the student graduates to high school (whether it is class VIII or class IX), the MDM facility stops, although the situation at home continues to remain the same. This drop in nutritional input causes a dip in the nutrition status of the student, pushing many into a state of mild or moderate malnutrition.

The COVID-19 situation and livelihood losses have further aggravated this situation. The pandemic has also caused children to go hungry or manage with less than normal food for many months. Hence, a quick shift back to providing one hot mid-day meal to all school children is a necessary step today.

### **Recognising stress in teachers**

Teachers themselves have been under huge stress during the pandemic. In states like MP, they have been entrusted with the responsibility of running the quarantine and isolation centres; ensure surveys and vaccination drives; visit *mohallas* to take classes; go from house to house to supply textbooks, dry rations and worksheets; work at the grain *mandis* to supervise grain purchases, and more. With no training in handling these tasks, no PPE kits and no extra insurance support, many have risked their lives and some even lost their lives to COVID-19 or other stress-related illnesses.

Learning and handling digital techniques for their own capacity-building as well as carrying out their teaching responsibilities through the virtual medium

is only adding to all this stress. In such a situation, it is vital that efforts are made towards equipping teachers better, both physically and mentally, to go out and work in critical situations. Teachers need to be equipped to identify, acknowledge and manage their emotions and work towards stress-busting.

Our efforts to carry out workshops with teachers on Mindfulness practice in all the blocks of Hoshangabad district has proved to be very useful, where teachers are made to just be with themselves and focus on things around them – sounds, visuals, tactile experiences. We plan to (a) hold more such workshops with teachers at the block level, and (b) adapt such activities so that teachers can do them in their classes too, to help the children address their stress.

### Use of technology

Technology is here to stay – in schools and in other aspects of our daily lives. So even though in the school context, especially pertaining to government primary schools, we have to acknowledge the fact that most children are unable to access digital learning content and even fewer are able to engage with it meaningfully, we cannot ignore the ‘new normal’. There is merit in the move towards digitisation for simple processes impacting the life of a child – like filling a *Navodaya Vidyalaya* form or applying for a scholarship.

In MP and Maharashtra, one of the attempts the *Eklavya* Foundation has tried out is the use of low-cost *Raspberry-Pi* set-ups in the community with individual log-in accounts for students of classes V to VIII. The students can come in batches to these centres and log in to [www.teysu.in](http://www.teysu.in), a platform where they can work on pre-designed, interactive learning modules in Hindi, English and maths. The response of students, parents and teachers has been very encouraging. The local youth and teachers have

worked as anchors to help students work on the modules and address their increasing curiosity and explorations triggered by the learning experience.

In a nutshell, avoiding or being averse to technology is a thing of the past. It is now time to think creatively as to how to make students technology-trained, even while respecting the crucial place a human teacher holds. As schools prepare to reopen, the need for repair and maintenance of the digital devices and continue to use them in a blended manner is a strategy that teachers could use to their benefit and to that of the students.

### Reimagining assessment

Online schooling has turned the enterprise of assessment into a fallacy. Since simple questions requiring direct answers are not suited to online assessments, this is the time to work with teachers so that we understand what assessment for learning is and develop systems to assess the actual capacity of the children to understand a principle and apply it to a new situation.

One such way is to hold open-book exams and prepare question papers that require a child to think, connect different pieces of information, and apply what they have learnt to some new situation.

As schools across India prepare to reopen after about a year and a half, it is important to use this opportunity to upscale some changes that have been proposed by policy documents and experimented with on a small scale. Hence, here is a chance to change a challenge into an opportunity. How we make the most of it and reawaken education will depend on whether we see the glass as half-empty or half-full.

### Endnotes

- i More girls enrolled than boys in ages 4-8 years (ASER report). <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/number-of-girls-getting-enrolled-in-govt-schools-more-than-boys-in-4-8-years-category-aser-report-1636731-2020-01-14>
- ii [https://www.eklavya.in/pdfs/Sandarbh/Sandarbh\\_116/01-11\\_Malnutrition\\_Among\\_High\\_School\\_Tribal\\_Children.pdf](https://www.eklavya.in/pdfs/Sandarbh/Sandarbh_116/01-11_Malnutrition_Among_High_School_Tribal_Children.pdf)



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# What Awaits our Teachers when Schools Reopen

Vimala Ramachandran

## Background

It has been almost two years since schools closed. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on children and teachers. The governments, state and central, have started waking up to the enormous damage done by school closures. While there is some discussion on the inherent inequality of online schooling, what is missing is a serious discussion on what awaits our teachers when they return to school. In an earlier essay on the reopening of schools after the pandemic (*Learning Curve, December 2020*), I outlined some of the challenges that teachers and educational administrators face. We now have a lot more information on the impact of school closures on children, the precarious existence of contract teachers, job losses in private schools and the immense pressure on teachers to teach online or through WhatsApp, distributing worksheets, running *mohalla* classes and contacting children at home.

## Facts and figures

Barely one-fourth of the children in urban and eight percent in rural areas sampled in a recent qualitative survey were found to be studying online - a shocking statistic by any measure. This recent survey reinforces what we have known for some time now - online education is a luxury that very few in our country can actually access. Equally significant is that 90 percent urban and 97 percent rural parents want schools to reopen. While this survey focused primarily on deprived areas/communities - this is an urgent reminder that the government needs to start reopening schools -

right from pre-primary to class XII. An ASER<sup>ii</sup> study done in 24 districts of Karnataka reveals a slight increase in enrolment in government schools (as many private schools shut down or parents could no longer afford to pay fees), a huge drop in reading and numeracy levels, with a discernible decline in foundational skills (ASER, September 2021). Given that we now know a lot more, what are the challenges our school teachers are likely to face when schools reopen?

National and international media has been reporting 'missing children' - those children who have just dropped off the education radar. They have not attended online classes and nor have they participated in local in-person classes or activities. Many of them have started working, sent on bondage as child labour, married off, taking care of children/siblings at home or joined their parents in their work. We have no idea of the number of such children in India. All the old 'out of school survey' reports have very little meaning in the changed COVID-19- related lockdown days.

It is now universally accepted that the onus of finding the children will invariably fall on teachers, school heads and what is left of the school management committees. The enormity of the problem eludes us and unless each and every state government starts a child census - going from village to village; urban ward to urban ward; local sweatshops; *dhabas*, brick-kilns, carpet weaving factories, metal/jewellery/stone cutting workshops to name a few. One way of doing this would be to organise parent-teacher meetings, track which

Proportion (%) of sample children who:	Urban	Rural
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Are not studying at all nowadays	19	37
Have not met their teacher(s) in the last 30 days	51	58
Did not have test/exam in the last three months	52	71
Are unable to read more than a few words	42	48

Source: *Locked Out, September 2021*<sup>i</sup>

children's parents have come and make home visits to those who have not. Delhi government did two weeks of class-wise parent-teacher meetings and tracked attendance closely. They had almost 70 percent of children's parents attend. The Department of Education and the Department of Labour, alongside the child-rights commissions need to start identifying the 'missing children' right away and help bring them back home and then to school. This needs to be done before schools reopen and needs to continue for at least a year, so that, as a society, we can make sure every single child is back in school.

### Teachers' contribution

This is easier said than done. The hard reality is that the pressure on school teachers is going to increase with many states having either terminated or not paid their contract teachers (who constitute 13.80 percent in elementary and 8.40 percent in secondary schools in 2018<sup>iii</sup>). In some states, like Jharkhand and several North-Eastern states, contract teachers account for more than 50 percent of the teacher workforce. The situation with respect to teacher availability is likely to be grim, especially when we expect a surge in the enrolment in government schools.

Getting children back to school is going to be an uphill task and this situation would be different at different levels. For example, let us take children who are 14 years and above. Motivating them to get back to school may be far more difficult than anyone can imagine. Working children, especially those who have not been to school for two years and were last in upper primary or secondary, may have not only forgotten what they had learnt but may also be under immense pressure to contribute to the family income. Given the economic distress faced by the poor in both rural and urban areas, the migrants, the daily wage labourers and informal sector workers – weaning the children away from work and getting them back to school may require more than just verbal assurances. The entire family would have to be taken into confidence to initiate a dialogue on schooling.

The problems faced by girls who have got married during the pandemic would be even more challenging. Revisiting and redesigning the residential bridge course model – (one that

was tried under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), or the *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV) model or the *Mahila Shikshan Kendra* model of the erstwhile *Mahila Samakhya* programme) – may become essential if we want young adolescent girls to come back to school. Interestingly, I hear many NGOs talk about the need for similar residential schools/programmes for boys – especially if we want them to get back to school. Accelerated learning programmes for a duration of two to three years may help them catch up on their upper primary level and complete class X.

The central and state governments need to make additional funds available to meet the varied requirements of the post-pandemic phase. One of the suggestions that have been discussed among NGOs is to imaginatively use MNREGA funds to get additional support for schools – and as this is likely to be for a year, or for a maximum two years, getting local educated persons to come into the school is an option that can be explored. Teachers of many low-cost, private schools are unemployed – this may provide such persons an opportunity, at least till private schools reopen, if they do. Re-introducing residential bridge courses/accelerated learning programmes; opening more KGBVs in rural and urban areas and for girls and boys; starting new schools or adding to the capacity of existing schools (to make place for children who have left private schools) and most importantly, hiring many more teachers at all levels, should be considered. The idea of the school-complex being the nodal point – as recommended in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – could be the fulcrum around which the planning and implementation processes could start.

Teachers of all levels from classes I to XII need to be made aware of the kinds of problems, challenges, and opportunities that they have in the post-pandemic phase. This places a huge demand on district and sub-district institutions, like the Block Resource Centre (BRC) and Cluster Resource Centre (CRC), where teacher educators, resource persons identified by SCERT and NGO workers with experience in child-centred teaching-learning can be identified. The state governments need to gear up at least a few months in advance to prepare dynamic and interactive training modules to help teachers plan to respond to the different needs of children. Mindless cutting of topics from the curriculum is not what we need. Teachers need to help each child start from where they are and

help them move up the learning ladder, slowly and gently. Recent efforts to design foundational learning programmes may be very important so that teachers not only have the freedom to respond to the situation in the classroom, but also are given at least a six-month lead time to enable their students to make up for the learning loss.

### **Suggested solutions**

One of the biggest challenges we face is the mindset of educational administrators and teachers. The one-way communication with children has not worked and is not likely to yield any positive outcome. Engaging with each and every child requires a radical shift in the way we approach learning. Some administrators are talking about time-bound foundational skills modules. The experience of NGOs that are working on foundational literacy and numeracy has demonstrated that a pre-designed module is not the answer. Using a mix of stories to read to children and children reading to each other, engaging with ideas and activities can motivate them to enjoy the process of reading and writing. Similar activities in mathematics, science and local history and environment during the lockdown could also help children connect with each other and with the learning process.

Once this process has been initiated, all school teachers need to set aside the first couple of weeks or more for talking to children, listening to their experiences, taking stock of where they are in different subjects and create small groups of children at similar levels for every subject and draw up a plan to help them navigate learning. Children are bound to be not only at different levels in different subjects, but some children could be more traumatised than others. This is particularly true in the case of children who have moved schools – from private to government, from a city/town to a village or from one city to another. Children cannot be expected to go back to ‘normal’ from day one. This means that teachers would have to meet at least ten to fifteen days before school reopens and plan the activities with care.

All teachers may not have the ability/skill to be focused on the needs of children, the problems they face, handle each child with sensitivity and most importantly, enable them to start enjoying being in school. In the short and medium term, state governments may have at least two teachers in each class – even if that means appointing more teachers or reaching out to local resources to

teach in class. We may need at least two teachers for a group of 25 children – if we are serious about working with each child, starting from where he/she is. Equally, regular activities may be required to help children articulate their fears and apprehensions, talk openly about their experiences and gradually understand that their experiences are shared by so many other children. While the term ‘mission mode’ has been criticised a great deal, what we need is an intensive phase of activities so that teachers and children can navigate the difficult phase of getting back to school, reconnecting with their peers and friends, engaging with teachers and the teaching-learning process. There is indeed a lot that children need to adjust to.

Several international experts have been talking about a ‘hybrid’ model – where person-to-person interaction is supported by online or electronic resources. Here again, it is important to keep the age of the children in mind. While something like this may be quite useful in secondary/higher secondary levels, it may not be an option in primary schools across the country. To begin with, rural elementary schools face the additional challenge of poor infrastructure, erratic electricity supply, lack of computers/projectors to use in the school. What may seem doable in urban areas, may not be feasible in rural areas, as what works in the one may not work in the other.

### **Taking immediate steps**

All this essentially implies that we need to start right now to bring teachers on board and make them a part of the planning process. Start discussing these issues, encourage them to articulate the challenges they anticipate and encourage them to visit households to get a realistic picture. It is really distressing that governments announce school reopening dates and expect teachers to carry on as usual. In many states, secondary schools have opened and the feedback from children in urban areas is that many of them could not learn effectively either through the online mode or through worksheets and homework. The levels vary a great deal even in classes X -XII. If this is the situation in urban areas, then we can well imagine the situation in rural and remote areas.

Disregarding the voices of teachers has never yielded any positive results. Making them partners in identifying challenges, searching for solutions, planning how the challenges can be overcome, drawing up detailed context-specific plans and

making sure adequate human and financial resources are allocated, is the way forward. There are no easy short-cuts or ‘magic bullets’; we need to plan systematically with teachers, school heads

and administrators as partners for each and every school complex; and define new roles for parents as partners in re-energising government schools.

#### **Endnotes**

- i Nirali Bakhla, Reetika Khera, Jean Dreze, Vipul Paikra. 2021. Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, 6 September 2021.
- ii ASER: Annual Status of Education Report.
- iii Vimala Ramachandran, Deepa Das, Ganesh Nigam and Anjali Shandilya. 2020. Contract Teachers in India: Recent Trends and Current Status. Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

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Azim Premji University, Loss of Learning During the Pandemic, February 2021  
ASER survey 2020 Wave 1 and ASER Karnataka, September 2021  
Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, September 2021  
Several initiatives by state governments and NGOs in 2020 and 2021



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## Schools and education since March 2020

Schools in India have been closed from March 2020. Children have had no face-to-face interactions with teachers or peers since then. In the past one-and-a-half years, various models of online education have been tried out. Studies conducted to estimate the efficacy of these models revealed the vast inequities and divides in access to technology and the internet and the gross inadequacy of online mediums in imparting any true learning. (UNICEF, 2020, Azim Premji University, *Myths of Online Education*, 2020). Practitioners and parents across the country have raised concerns over the limitations of online medium in providing personalised attention to children's academic and socio-emotional needs, which, in turn, form the basis for any meaningful learning. It comes as no surprise to us that the majority of school-going children have not only not had any significant learning, but they have also been engulfed in the scenario of 'learning loss,' or 'academic regression', which as we understand it, is the phenomenon of forgetting previously learned concepts.

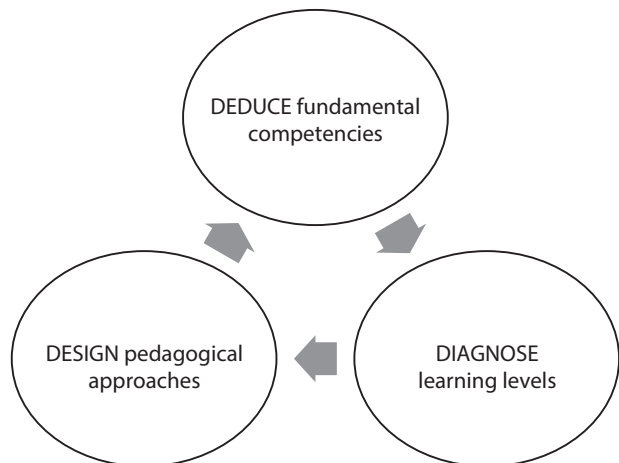
In the study, *Loss of Learning During the Pandemic*, conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation with 16,067 students across India, it was found that, '92% of children on an average have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across classes. Illustratively, these specific abilities include describing a picture or their experiences orally; reading familiar words; reading with comprehension; writing simple sentences based on a picture. 82% of children on an average have lost at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous year across all classes illustratively, these specific abilities include identifying single- and two-digit numbers; performing arithmetic operations; using basic arithmetic operations for solving problems; describing 2D/3D shapes; reading and drawing inferences from data.' (p 4, *Loss of Learning during the Pandemic*, Azim Premji University, 2020)

In such a situation, educators need to be cognisant of the current learning levels of students. It is quite likely that students who are currently in class V may not be at grade-appropriate level due to the phenomenon of learning loss described above. As schools gear up to reopen there are some critical questions that confront us, such as, how do we decide what to teach? How do we align our teaching-learning processes to the current learning levels of students? What sort of diagnostic assessment approaches should we adopt to understand student learning levels? How should the syllabus be reorganised and transacted in a multi-level classroom with diverse learner needs? In this article, using a diagnostic assessment model, we attempt to answer these important questions that the entire education community is grappling with.

## Diagnostic assessment model of teaching-learning

This model suggests three clear steps of approaching the questions confronting schools and educators.

### Diagnostic assessment model



**Step1:** Deducing the fundamental competencies for each stage. These competencies need to be progressively organised in a learning ladder to help teachers address multi-level learners in their classrooms.

**Step 2:** Diagnosing the learning levels of students' basic and fundamental competencies on the learning ladder. Such diagnostic assessments should be done using a variety of methods and contexts.

**Step 3:** Designing pedagogical approaches that are in sync with the outcomes of the diagnostic assessments. These should form the basis of differentiated instructions tailored to individual students/groups of students in the classroom.

### Step 1: Deduce fundamental competencies

The most pressing question we can think of once schools reopen is: what exactly should be transacted in the classroom? Suppose you are the class teacher of class V, teaching all the subjects. The last time you saw your students was when they were in class III. You spent 18 months teaching them in online and some offline modes. Once they come back to school what should you start with? Let us take another scenario, suppose you are a

primary school teacher in a government school, and you had children from classes I to V in your class. You conducted some community/*mohalla* classes with them in the last 18 months and now they are all back to school. How do you begin engaging with this multi-grade class? Let us take a third example: suppose you were the mathematics teacher of class IV. The last time you engaged with your students was when they were in class II, and you taught them how to count or how to add two-digit numbers. What should you teach them now – should it be multiplication?

#### Where to begin?

It is necessary to turn to learning outcomes, or competencies, to decide what to teach. Due to the present situation of learning loss, a teacher may not be sure of exactly which level or class textbook, syllabus and learning outcomes to use as a reference point. In such circumstances, a teacher may need a well-organised set of fundamental competencies that are foundational and core for every class across all school subjects. These competencies can be used to begin teaching.

#### Sample of fundamental competencies

Domain	Level 1 Competencies - mapped to class I & II syllabus	Level 2 Competencies - mapped to class III & IV syllabus	Level 3 Competencies - mapped to class V syllabus
Reading skills	<p>1.1 Can recognise the letter of the alphabet- both in form and sound. हिंदी के वर्णमाला के अक्षरों की आकृति और ध्वनि को पहचानते हैं</p> <p>1.2 Can read the names of familiar objects commonly found in the textbooks. जानी पहचानी वस्तुओं के नाम पहचान और पढ़ पते हैं (जो किताबों में अक्सर होते हैं, जैसे आम, अनार, खरगोश, कबूतर।)</p>	<p>2.1 Can read short sentences, stories and poems. छोटे वाक्यों, कहानियों, और कविताओं को पढ़ पाते हैं।</p> <p>2.2 Enjoys reading a variety of textual materials based on their interest and ability, such as pictures, posters, unfamiliar stories, poems, etc. अपने स्तर और पसंद के अनुसार तरह-तरह की रचनाओं/सामग्री- कहानी, कविता, चित्र, पोस्टर, आदि को आनंद के साथ पढ़ते हैं।</p>	<p>3.1 Can read and comprehend textual materials beyond those suggested in the textbook, such as newspapers, hoardings, etc. अपनी पाठ्यपुस्तक से इतर सामग्री (अखबार, बाल पत्रिका, होर्डिंग्स आदि) को समझ कर पढ़ते हैं</p>

Some principles to identify fundamental competencies:

- They should be the most basic, or foundational, ideas in a subject, for example, counting in mathematics, reading in language, etc.
- They should form the stepping-stones for acquiring other competencies in higher classes. For example, unless a child can count, she may not be able to develop a number sense. Similarly, unless a child is able to identify words, she will not be able to read full sentences.
- Since we are talking about a learning ladder of fundamental competencies, it is also necessary that the competencies are graded. These levels could be as per the class-level outcomes for example, Level 1 could be aligned with classes I and II competencies, while a Level 2 could be aligned with classes III and IV competencies and so on.
- Clubbing grade-level competencies is necessary since students' learning may not correspond exactly with the competencies of any one class. For example, a child of, say, class IV, may be at level 1 in one domain in a given subject and at level 2 in another.
- The competencies should also suggest a progression in complexity across classes. This will help the teacher address multilevel learners in a given class.

The sample on the previous page presents the fundamental competencies progressing from classes I to V for reading skills content domain. Similar lists can be generated for all content domains in school subjects.

### **Step 2: Diagnose learning levels**

As suggested in the previous section, learning levels among children in the same class are likely to vary considerably and will be lower than expected for their class level when they return to school. Teachers must know the learning levels of the students in their classrooms to bring children back on track. In such a scenario, diagnostic assessments aligned to the fundamental competencies to identify the learning gaps and used to adapt classroom practices to children's learning levels will be helpful.

In general, diagnostic assessments are conducted at the beginning of the learning process to gauge what students know and are able to do in

order to help teachers guide and plan classroom instructions for a topic. At present, the scenario is complex – teachers are expected to diagnose students' learning levels against a large number of competencies of the previous classes. The learning ladder would be a very helpful tool here to assess students' learning levels against the important prerequisite competencies to take the current curriculum forward. This approach will help teachers to fill in learning gaps and build the scaffolding necessary into the current curriculum, instead of trying to transact all the knowledge and skills a student may have missed in the previous classes.


Each student and each class is different and it varies from state to state, district to district and village to village because the quality of interventions that they have received during the school closure has been very different. Some state governments have initiated community-based learning programmes right from the beginning of the lockdown and closure of schools, while online education was imparted in some schools. Though the efficacy of online education and these learning programmes is uncertain, a teacher will have a fair sense of the kind of intervention her students received during the school closure. Based on this understanding, a teacher will be able to design appropriate diagnostic assessment tools and plan classroom instructions for all the students in her class. Teacher autonomy in designing and using assessment is essential for ensuring a teaching-learning environment that addresses the diverse needs of children.

Diagnostic assessments should be planned and designed for different content domains, such as oral expression, reading skills, reading comprehension, and writing skills in the languages; and numbers, measurement, patterns, and data-handling in mathematics. The worksheet should contain a variety of assessment methods, which include oral questions, select-response questions, essay-type questions, projects, and activities, all of which enable the measurement of students' learning level for a content domain through their performance. It is important to include a child-specific note sheet in the assessment to record individual students' learning gaps and misconceptions. A teacher will be able to capture valid observations about students' learning only if the assessment items are well-aligned to the fundamental competencies with respect to the cognitive skills a child needs to

attain for a content domain. Also, the progression in the assessment items is important to diagnose students' learning levels.

We are reproducing here a sample diagnostic assessment worksheet for Hindi reading skills that can be used for classes IV and V. Here, if a child is able to circle similar words, then he/ she is at

Level 1 and if they are able to associate words with pictures and show interest in reading familiar/ unfamiliar text, they are at Level 2. If the children are able to read various texts (newspaper, children's magazines, hoardings etc.), they are at Level 3. Similar assessment worksheets can be devised for other subjects.

Level 1
<p>1.1 Can recognise the letter of the alphabet- both in form and sound. हिंदी के वर्णमाला के अक्षरों की आकृति और ध्वनि को पहचानते हैं</p>
<p>शिक्षक बच्चों को कविता लयपूर्वक पढ़कर सुनाएंगे और फिर कविता में <b>म</b> और <b>ल</b> पर गोला लगाने के लिए कहेंगे।</p> <p>मुर्गी माँ घर से निकली झोला ले बाज़ार चली चूज़े बोले चेंचें-चें- माँ क्या हम भी साथ चले?</p>
<p>1.2 Can read the names of familiar objects commonly found in the textbooks. जानी पहचानी वस्तुओं के नाम पहचान और पढ़ पते हैं (जो किताबों में अक्सर होते हैं, जैसे आम, अनार, खरगोश, कबूतर।)</p>
<p>यह किस चीज़ का चित्र है?</p>  <p>सही उत्तर पर गोला बनाइये:</p> <p>क. घंटा ख. घर ग. घड़ी घ. घड़ा</p>
Level 2
<p>2.1 Can read short sentences, stories and poems. छोटे वाक्यों, कहानियों, और कविताओं को पढ़ पाते हैं।</p> <p>2.2 Enjoys reading a variety of textual materials based on their interest and ability, such as pictures, posters, unfamiliar stories, poems, etc. अपने स्तर और पसंद के अनुसार तरह-तरह की रचनाओं/सामग्री- कहानी, कविता, चित्र, पोस्टर, आदि को आनंद के साथ पढ़ते हैं।</p>

दी गयी कविता को उचित हाव-भाव से पढ़िए।

बहुत जुकाम हुआ नंदू को,  
एक रोज वह इतना छींका।  
इतना छींका, इतना छींका,  
इतना छींका, इतना छींका।  
सब पत्ते झड़ गए पेड़ के,  
धोखा हुआ उन्हें आंधी का।

### Level 3

3.1 Can read and comprehend textual materials beyond those suggested in the textbook, such as newspapers, hoardings, etc.

अपनी पाठ्यपुस्तक से इतर सामग्री (अखबार, बाल पत्रिका, होर्डिंग्स आदि) को समझ कर पढ़ते हैं

दिए गए समाचार पत्र के अंश को पढ़कर सुनाइए।

**यूपी में शीतलहर का प्रकोप जारी, कई इलाकों में आज व कल बारिश के आसार, बढ़ेगी ठंड**



उत्तर प्रदेश में जारी शीतलहर का प्रकोप और गहरा सकता है। मौसम विभाग ने अगले 24 घंटों के दौरान पूरे उत्तर प्रदेश में कुछ स्थानों पर बारिश होने या गरज चमक के साथ बौछारें पड़ने की चेतावनी जारी की है। मौसम विभाग ने आम जन से निवेदन किया है कि वे बहुत ज़रूरी काम होने पर ही अपनी सुरक्षा को ध्यान में रखते हुए घर से बहार जाने का निर्णय ले।

### Step 3: Design pedagogical approaches

The effect of the pandemic has blurred class-level boundaries: despite being in a particular class, students may not have acquired the competencies expected from that particular level. In such a situation, the pedagogical approach planned and facilitated for a class needs serious reconsideration. Matching classroom teaching to students' varied learning levels is a central component of differentiation. A classroom in which the teacher is able to differentiate between levels of competencies, resources, content, teaching process and the learning environment, is desirable.

The basis of differentiation is students' attainment of competencies as per the diagnostic assessment worksheet which is designed according to the learning ladder. A teacher may arrange students in different groups based on their learning levels. A variety of approaches may be used for each of these groups to scaffold

students to the desired class-level competency. It is important to note that children had attained desired competencies before school closure but may now have forgotten those since they were away from school for a prolonged period of time. Diagnostic assessment worksheets will help a teacher in recording the competencies in which children need help and those that they can complete independently.

As the curriculum and the teaching-learning environment may have changed in the current situation, dynamic curriculum reorganisation based on student groups is the need of the hour where multi-grade and the multi-level teaching approach needs to be followed in all classes in order to address the learning needs of each child.

The following is a sample grouping for reading skills in primary stage. A teacher needs to plan, design and facilitate appropriate pedagogy for every group of students.

### Group 1

Children who are not able to recognise letters and sounds

### Group 2

Children who are able to connect letters with their sounds, but are unable to associate words with pictures

### Group 3

Children who are broadly comfortable with both letters and words but struggling with reading of small stories and poems.

### Group 4

Children who can read familiar texts easily but are unable to read unfamiliar texts.

## Summary

Given the wide variation in student learning within any classroom, standardised and centralised assessment designed at state- or national-level will not be effective in the current scenario. Central, state and district organisations should make every effort to identify fundamental competencies and

organise them into a stage-wise learning ladder, providing professional development to help teachers design diagnostic assessments, support teachers to translate assessment data into classroom instructions and explore ways to integrate learning loss with current grade curriculum.



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# Retaining Effective Processes from Community Classes

Durgesh Kumar Manerao

During the last two years of school closures, many of us teachers have tried to maintain one or the other form of contact with our students, mainly through small group classes in the community. The two significant learnings that emerged from this were, firstly, children could express themselves through art in the form of a variety of activities that I devised for them, and this helped them to continue learning something new. Secondly, we realised that we must continue to do something like this in normal school days also and incorporate local resources into our teaching so that children can work with ease.

I talked to the children about folk songs and asked them to find out if their parents knew songs that are sung at weddings and other festivals. I asked them to learn these from their parents and sing a few lines in the group. This activity was very helpful in making the children comfortable and happy. We sang and listened to each other's songs. I sang a Marathi and a Bundelkhandi song. When the children started singing, there was a flurry of Marwari and local songs. But we could not write them down. We plan to do this activity properly when school resumes.

Art involves a highly diverse range of human activities and abilities which is why it helped the children cope with the anxiety and effects of the pandemic. Children engaged in art that generated positive energy. Parents also understood that art is a part of our teaching and education.

We mainly worked on writing songs, composing tunes and singing them. A couple of awareness songs were composed by the children. We used them in the Corona *Pheri*. With this, the children's creativity got a new direction, something that was different from the normal school days. In the beginning, there was a lot of talk about how to compose the tune for the song. We heard a lot of songs. Everyone in the group shared their experiences of listening to the songs at home with

greater attention and what they had understood. The children of classes V-VIII composed a few songs. We worked on composing music, writing songs, making instruments using locally available tools, etc. The children just needed a few clues and a push. As a teacher, I learnt that this kind of work, which enhances the creativity of children, should be continued even in normal times. In upper primary classes, children should be taught a brief theory of music. There is a need to work further on the new ideas of teaching music using local resources.

Very little work has been done on *taal* (beats) and *sur* (melody) in the classroom in the past. We need to work more on these. Listening to folk music and light music on a good sound system would help. During this time, we provided children with more viewing and listening opportunities. This has enhanced their experience and the learning is reflected in their presentations as well.

Working with musical instruments has a different kind of role in a music class. Children feel comfortable with musical instruments and their proficiencies also increase. The experience of working in the community has taught us that we can also do a creative job of making instruments. We could see how well children can present the songs they have heard in a new way with the instruments that they have improvised. We need to do this in the classroom in a well-planned manner and monitor how the children react after listening to music for a reasonable period of time. Do all children have the ability to create rhythm? Do the children we have worked with do it differently from those that we have not worked with? What different patterns do we see when a new child works with us? Do the children, after spending a certain amount of time with the music, understand musical patterns in nature and use these in their presentations? These questions need to be answered systematically while working with children. This should also be documented to help others who want to work further in this area. What follows is our strategy for working with children in the coming days.

## Next steps

We did some very effective activities in the community school which will help children feel comfortable when they go back to school. One of these was writing about their experiences, which the children did with a lot of passion. These were also discussed at length in the class, for example, a child shared his experience regarding cleanliness and the other children also added their views.

I see this possibility in music too. We can ask children to write about their experiences after listening to music. This will give us an insight into how they feel while listening to a certain kind of music. What children think about music at a particular age may be documented as well, which can help us improve the teaching-learning process. Writing about an activity and expressing one's thoughts freely is also the objective of language learning, so both can go together. Now the question is what should be the duration of such an activity? If a child independently narrates their experiences in a music class, then how should it be seen in relation to other academic subjects, such as language?

### Use of local resources

All of us know that using local language and context helps children understand a subject better. There are several different methods that can be used to teach by picking examples from our surroundings. In the case of music, we must include local songs in class and write these down to have a good compilation of folk songs. There can also be discussions around which folk songs are sung when, what the various types of instruments used in the songs are and how songs are classified in classical music, etc. We can also think of doing this as part of project work. This activity can be done with children of classes V – VII. In the higher classes, this is likely to be done in a more integrated manner with other subjects, for example, in social studies, exploring an ancient local building, temple, stepwell, the culture of a nomadic community, etc.

Understanding sound in music, the internal and external structure of instruments and methods of their sound production etc., can be explored. For example, empty canisters, tin cans, cardboard, rubber, plastic bottles, metal and stone pieces etc., can be given to the children to improvise with, so that they do not get bored and will participate

actively and innovatively.

There can be many other categories of resources:

Category 1: Resources available in the school, such as arts and crafts and music teachers.

Category 2: Resources available outside the school, such as local artists, potters, farmers, bamboo workers or any other person in the community who has knowledge about arts; unused items in the house.

Category 3: Resources in the natural environment, such as the sound of a river, trees, leaves, etc., and finding ways to use these in music.

### Integration with academic subjects

Where there is a possibility to integrate music with other subjects, the possibility should be explored with fellow teachers. For example, in making a musical instrument from waste or unused items, a session with a science teacher can be planned to understand the reasons behind sound production. What should be the structure of the instrument? Can all sounds be used in music? A music teacher can also do a lot of work with children about what kind of sound is useful for music and this can be planned according to the level of the class.

Currently, we are working with classes I - III for one-and-a-half hours along with the other subject teachers. Teachers are making use of the opportunity of better integration of different subjects, which is also helping me to understand their work.

### On-the-ground activities

I start the session with meditation. We play soft *tanpura* music on the mobile phone, listen to it for a couple of minutes and the children follow my instructions on how to breathe while listening to the music. After that, we start with the songs. Children act and sing, and teachers also join in. Children sing in large and small groups.

Then, the teacher asks the children to pick any five words from a song and writes these on a small card. Now it is time for children to participate. She divides them into two groups and showing them the card, asks them to read out the words. Children try to read, while also helping each other. The second group observes and when it is their turn, they do not make the mistakes that the first group made in pronouncing the words. Later, the children are asked about the problems they faced in recognising the words and the strategy adopted by the other group. In another activity, a character

from the song is picked and the children were given homework based on that. So, music and language are being taught easily. I also observe children's performances, the tune of their songs, acting skills, self-confidence, solo and duet singing. The various aspects of language learning, such as listening, memory, singing with emotion and writing could also be covered. We can also use this activity while teaching English rhymes.

There are children who are quiet in class and do not actively participate in activities. We can provide them with more opportunities through music to increase their participation and help them express themselves in ways that they are comfortable with. Music and art can provide more opportunities for joyful learning. Teachers must observe and assess how our efforts are helping a shy child, or whether we need to change our strategies.

### Time vs impact

All these activities require time. How should we

plan our time? How should the individual adjust to the school or school group so that research in music can be undertaken? There is a lot of potential for thinking and working in new ways, one of which is to teach music with a lot of practice from the very beginning. This would require us to deliberate on how we view music teaching in school and how it should be implemented.

'Melody, the beauty of musical sounds, are all important means of moral and intellectual development' (*The Depths of the Child's Heart*, Vasily Sukhomlinsky). Teaching music does not mean making children musical artistes. Just as academic subjects lead to the mental development of children, similarly, music education also leads to self-education. Teaching music will also help in making children better human beings and keeping the world beautiful, which is also a primary aim of education. The teaching of music must be ensured in all schools, in a systematic manner, even if not as a core subject.



### Endnotes

- i Similar to the *Prabhat Pheri* (literally, morning round), which is a procession of people singing religious hymns, the *Corona Pheri* is meant to spread awareness messages on COVID-19 within a locality.



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As schools reopen, our public-school education system will struggle with the children missing from classrooms - children lost due to migration, child labour, child marriages and so on. While this will remain a pressing challenge, another hidden challenge would be with those children who come back to school. These children will not only need academic support to cope with regression but also psychosocial support to help them make sense of their life during the pandemic, heal and become ready to learn again. While the education system prepares to tackle the academic regression, it is important that educators and teachers give equal importance to the social and emotional regression that has occurred during the pandemic.

### **Stress as a trigger for regression**

Children have gone through tremendous amounts of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The looming fear of infection, loss of family members, not having access to their friends and teachers, forced migration, domestic and child abuse and so on. The Childline India telephone helpline did not stop ringing during the lockdown and is indicative of the distress that children experienced. The helpline received more than 92,000 SOS calls asking for protection from abuse and violence in the first 11 days of the lockdown in 2020.

Nancy Close, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Child Study Centre at the Yale School of Medicine and Associate Director of the Yale Program in Early Childhood Education shares: 'I've been seeing a lot of regression and more than what, in typical times, is developmentally appropriate. I've seen children regressing through using baby talk, needing help with routines, needing help with sleeping and toileting – and much more than what's usual for them. Coping with and expressing strong feelings can be really challenging, so we're seeing temper tantrums in older and younger children and even college students. We're also seeing a lot of behavioural challenges. We notice children getting really sad over not being with their friends or their teachers and demonstrating exaggerated emotions and behaviours around the shifting in what school

looks like. All of these uncertainties are so much more prevalent and so much more frustrating because we are all striving to reach something that is normal and predictable. We are discovering that consistency and predictability have been more difficult to achieve during COVID-19. This can lead children to feel anxious and frustrated which can certainly result in behavioural dysregulation.'

As children transition back into school, creating a space for personal and collective healing is key to ensure preparedness to connect back and create the readiness to learn again in the school environment.

### **Using stories for healing**

How can teachers and educators prepare for this important task that lies ahead? Can children's literature and stories be used as a tool to help with this process?

This will require us to look at reading from a whole new angle. Reading is not merely the act of reading, it is a way to understand, decipher and internalise the world we live in. Denise von Stocker writes,<sup>ii</sup> 'Reading, from a global point of view, is a very complex activity which is not merely decoding a text, but it entails too the child's capabilities to understand what he has just read, to integrate it in his own context and personal experiences by analysing it in a critical way so he is able to take a stand on what he has read. Only this kind of complete and deep reading education will take children towards a real, integrated literacy.'

Reading and listening to stories, then, has a critical role to play in how children make meaning of their changing worlds, internally and externally. An important framework for supporting this lies in using stories as a medium for social and emotional learning, and the process, a chance for healing.

I work at the *Buguri Community Library Project*, and the initiative, *Hasiru Dala*, a not-for-profit organisation that works with informal waste pickers

in south India. The initiative runs community libraries in *bastis* that waste pickers live in and makes books available to all the children within a community. Children of waste-pickers are some of the most marginalised and at-risk children, hence, it was important for the library project to respond to their social and emotional needs. At the library, there is a focus and an attempt to integrate these needs of the children into our work.

### Creating a vocabulary for emotions

An important aspect of socio-emotional learning is the ability to identify and articulate one's own emotions. Many times, children struggle to recognise their felt emotions or express their needs. Also, given our cultural context, we discourage children from speaking about and expressing certain emotions, especially difficult ones, such as anger and sadness.

About three years ago, when I started working on a module for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) with a group of children who had not spoken earlier about emotions, I started by showing them puppets with faces depicting various emotions. When I showed them a puppet with a smiling face and asked them to identify the emotion, most responded by saying - *smile*. So, the first few sessions were spent establishing the difference in naming and understanding basic emotions. This naming was an important part of the articulation, for example, in saying, 'I am not talking to you because I am sad'. It took a while for the children to decipher the difference between the response to the emotion from what was the trigger/cause for it, for example, a smile or laughter comes from happiness or tears come from sadness (in most cases). As the group matured into naming the basic emotions and sharing stories about them, we slowly opened conversations on mixed emotions. For example, when a child expressed how she felt after her mother scolds her, she said she felt angry, but she was also crying. I asked her if that was so because she was feeling something else too? She nodded as I held up the sad puppet. This opened conversations on mixed emotions. This, I think, is an important phase in developing self-awareness - to be able to tie thoughts and feelings to responses and behaviours.

Building a vocabulary to make the connection between a felt emotion and the response to it became a critical starting point of work with SEL. Books like *Feelings to Share From A to Z* by Todd

and Peggy Snow, *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain, *My Many Coloured Days* by Dr Seuss and so on, invite children to name, claim and share their emotions.

### Picture books for socio-emotional learning

Trudy Ludwig, children's advocate and author, says in her article *Using Children's Literature to Build Social-Emotional Skill*,<sup>iii</sup> 'Well-written, developmentally age-appropriate literature offers wonderful teachable moments that allow children to:

- Identify with the story's protagonist
- Acquire insight into the characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions in relation to the particular issue
- Experience catharsis (the release of pent-up feelings) upon the realisation that they are not the only ones who have this problem
- Explore other possible ways of working out their own problems by seeing how the characters handled problems themselves and how their actions or words played out
- Share personal experiences as a natural progression of discussion'

A good story that extends to developmentally-appropriate discussions can provide the opportunity for children to explore emotions that provoke conflicts and/or events that might mirror those emotions they and/or their friends routinely experience. This mirroring experience can help the child come out of patterns of self-isolation and provide new pathways to deal with their feelings.

In one of the library sessions that explored the emotion of anger, I used the book *Angry Akku* by Vinayak Varma (Pratham Books) and experienced some of Ludwig's theory at play. During the read-aloud of the book, I stopped at the juncture where Akku is distressed about an embarrassing incident at school. I asked the children what they think she should do. Most of the children reacted by saying that she should beat up the bully. But as the story proceeded, the children realised that it is not how the protagonist reacted. I asked them again to share why they thought she did not react that way. One of the children said, 'She had self-control'. This triggered the discussion on what makes us angry and how we choose to react to these emotions. Among other incidents, like personal conflicts with friends or teachers, children spoke about how

domestic violence in their homes made them angry.

### Exploring difficult emotions

In another such incident, the story *Mukund and Riaz* by Nina Sabnani (Tulika Books), triggered conversations on friendships lost because of changing circumstances that were not under one's control and the sadness and the grief that such memories brought. The book explores the friendship between two boys in the background of the partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. During the extension activity for this book, which was about drawing a picture of the person you missed the most or a memory that is special, eight-year-old Sharanya drew a picture of her father. He had committed suicide the previous year. She made several attempts at drawing a picture but every time she would draw a face, she would erase it. She finally drew two figures. Initially, I thought

it must be a picture of her with her father. As she left the session that day, I gently asked her about the drawing. She said the figure to the right was her father and the one to the left was her mother. I observed that the mother's figure was bigger, maybe depicting her mother's larger presence in Sharanya's life today.

Carefully curated picture books, engagements and interactions can thus lead to very rich exchange while addressing the social and emotional needs and growth of children. As children return to school, while many might experience excitement and relief, there is much that has shifted inside them, that requires exploring and healing. Hence, creating an SEL curriculum within the school and using the power of literature and stories would be a vital and necessary change at this point in time.

### Endnotes

- i Is my child regressing due to the COVID 19 pandemic?
- ii Stocker, Dennis Von (2009): The Importance of Literacy and Books in Children's Development - Intellectual, Affective and Social Dimensions
- iii Ludwig, Trudy. 'Using Children's Literature to Build Social-Emotional Skills. Sept 24, 2018



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# Living with the Virus

Madhumita Dobe

## Introduction

We have been living with viruses for a hundred thousand years now. History records epidemics and pandemics and that is how we know that viral epidemics (outbreak of infectious diseases caused by viruses that spread quickly and affected many individuals at the same time in a community) began during the Neolithic period, around 12,000 years ago, when humans developed densely populated agricultural communities, allowing viruses to spread rapidly. Sometimes they spread over multiple countries or continents and were known as pandemics – the most recent example being the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that has ravaged the world over the last two years.

As knowledge regarding these viruses increased, especially with the emergence and spread of pandemics in the recent past, caused by Ebola, SARS, MERS and Nipah viruses, the importance of precautionary behaviour like hand hygiene, food hygiene, mask-wearing and distancing was emphasised. However, the world was taken by surprise and was totally unprepared when the news of a new Coronavirus began to emerge from the Wuhan province in China. By the time the world woke up to understand the new virus, it was rapidly spreading and wreaking havoc.

## School closure and its impact

As the pandemic progressed, restrictions were imposed for containment of the spread of COVID-19 and as one such measure, schools were closed down. A UNICEF report states that the closure of 15 lakh schools due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the resultant lockdowns in 2020, impacted 24.7 crore children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in India. While we do not yet have enough evidence to measure the effect of school closure on the risk of disease transmission, the adverse effects of school closures on children's safety, wellbeing and learning are well-documented.

India is amongst the four or five countries across the world where schools have been closed for the longest time. The resulting disruptions have not

only aggravated the already existing disparities within the education system, but also in other aspects of children's lives. School closures also carried high social and economic costs which impacted the most vulnerable and marginalised boys and girls and their families most severely in the following ways:

### *Interrupted learning*

Disruptions to instructional time in the classroom have a severe impact on a child's ability to learn. When schools are closed, these opportunities are denied to children and youth, particularly underprivileged learners who have fewer educational opportunities beyond school.

### *Disruptions in essential school-based services like nutrition*

Many children and youth rely completely on the meals provided at schools. When schools close, their nutrition is compromised. School meals have been shown to increase learning and cognitive abilities. The years a child spends in school coincide with the period when they are most vulnerable to the impacts of poor nutrition. This is exactly what happened due to the suspension of school meals programmes, which cover around 370 million children globally, with the largest number of beneficiaries (in million) in India (~100). During this crisis, there has been a 30 percent reduction in the coverage of essential nutrition services, such as school meal programmes, iron and folic acid supplementation, deworming and nutrition education.

School closures have also disrupted the normal distribution channels through which school meal programmes operate and attempts have been made to use take-home rations, top-up cash transfers or food vouchers. However, these are not long-term solutions. Globally, in 2020, an estimated 39 billion in-school meals have been missed during school closures by the 370 million children who were benefiting from school meals programmes pre-crisis. In India, missing the midday meal (provided under the government's Midday Meal Scheme) has

been shown to decrease calorie deficits in children by 30 percent.

#### *Confusion and stress for teachers*

With prolonged school closures, teachers have had problems in connecting with their students to support learning even in the most conducive contexts.

#### *Pressure on parents*

Parents have often been called upon to facilitate children's learning at home and most of them struggle to perform this task, especially those with limited education and resources. In the absence of alternatives, working parents often have to leave children alone and this is leading to an increased prevalence of risky behaviours, like substance abuse. In financially-distressed families, economic shocks have forced children to work and generate income. Sexual exploitation and abuse of girls and young women have increased, and early marriages, along with teenage pregnancies, have become more common. Some working parents have to miss work in order to take care of their children, which results in wage loss and has a negative impact on families.

#### *Social isolation*

Schools are hubs of social activity and human interaction. When schools closed, many children and youth missed social contact, which they had only in school. Studies around the world have revealed that prolonged social isolation has a detrimental effect on the mental health of children and can cause stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and disrupted routines.

#### **Reopening schools**

The prolonged period of living with the virus has made us realise that schools need to reopen safely and in line with the country's overall COVID-19 health response, with all reasonable measures taken to protect students, staff, teachers and their families. Parents have genuine concerns and to address these, there is a need to dispel misinformation and bring science into public discourses to facilitate evidence-informed, decision making. A range of stakeholders and experts in public health and education, as well as parents, need to join hands to enable the reopening of schools safely.

UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, World Bank and World Food Programme have together developed a *Global Framework for Reopening Schools* which

has been adapted to the Indian context by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. The Framework for Reopening Schools (June 2020) provides information for decision-making regarding when to reopen schools and support preparations and guidance for the implementation process. Each school needs to adapt this framework according to its context (particularly community transmission rates) and continuous adaptations are necessary in order to respond to changing local conditions. Obviously, school reopening should begin in areas with the lowest rates of transmission and the lowest localised risk of infection. School openings could be done in stages, for example, initially limited to a few days a week, or applicable only to certain grades or levels.

It is essential that parents, teachers and schools work and support each other in a coordinated, cohesive and complementary manner to plan, implement and monitor activities to ensure the safety of the children both inside and outside school. An important prerequisite is the strengthening of communication and coordination mechanisms that promote local dialogue and engagement with communities and parents.

#### **Collective action prior to opening**

- Detailed safety protocols to ensure stringent hygiene measures, including hand-washing, respiratory etiquette (covering mouth and nose while coughing/sneezing), use of masks and other protective equipment, cleaning procedures and safe food preparation practices wherever applicable. One of the most important precautionary behaviours is hand-washing. So as part of the opening process, a school needs to ensure access to adequate safe water, soap and hand-washing stations.
- Revise policies to protect staff, teachers and students who are at high risk due to age or underlying medical conditions. Detailed guidelines should be developed to prioritise and facilitate the process and vaccination of teachers and other staff.
- Develop clear and easy-to-understand protocols on physical distancing measures, including prohibiting activities that require large gatherings, staggering the start and close of the school day, staggering mealtimes, moving classes to temporary spaces or outdoors, and having school in shifts to reduce class size.

Since younger children are at the least risk, primary schools should probably open first,

followed by classes IX-XII. Both hand-washing and physical distancing need to be supervised closely, hence administrative staff and teachers need to be vigilant. Also, cleaning staff needs to be trained on disinfection and provided with personal protection equipment (PPE) to the extent possible.

- Establish clear guidelines for procedures to be followed if students or staff become unwell while attending school. This should include monitoring student and staff health, maintaining regular contact with local health authorities, updating lists of emergency contacts and mandating that all sick students and staff stay at home.
- Provide mental health and psychosocial support services to children and their families coping with the continued uncertainties of the pandemic and stigmatisation/discrimination.
- Re-establish regular and safe delivery of essential services, like school meals. All possible measures should be taken to safely reopen and restart school meal programmes. For safe school feeding, there is a need to improve the hygiene throughout the process (from food preparation to delivery), develop standard operational procedures, enforce physical distancing while serving, engage in capacity-building and training of all those involved in the process.

This opportunity can also help in focusing on some neglected issues, such as the addition of micronutrient content of meals (incorporating iron-rich vegetables, eggs and fortified food), and investment in solutions that will help not only the present generation of school children, but also those that follow.

#### **Collective action after schools reopen**

- Well-defined decision algorithms for re-closing and reopening schools needed in case of a resurgence of community transmission.
- Sustained behaviour-change interventions to encourage proper use of masks, increase in both the intensity and frequency of cleaning and disinfection activities and improvement of waste management practices.
- Communication in child-friendly format for clear, concise and accurate information about COVID-19 along with messages to dispel fear and anxiety.

#### **Vaccination of children**

There has been a lot of debate around COVID-19

vaccination of children, particularly as a precondition for reopening schools. If we look at the world scenario, we find that by the end of June 2021, schools were operating – to a variable extent – in nearly 170 countries. However, vaccination of children younger than 12 years has not been initiated in any part of the world. The current global evidence suggests that vaccination of children should not be a prerequisite for opening schools.

In India, the push for child vaccinations is based upon hitherto unsubstantiated assumptions, such as since adults are being vaccinated, only unvaccinated children remain at risk of developing a severe form of the disease. Data from Indian states, including the latest national sero-survey, shows that children have been infected with COVID-19 at a similar, or even higher, rate than adults but were mostly asymptomatic and had far lower rates of severity of the disease. Children are at the lowest risk of severe disease and 60-80 percent of them (in India) have already developed antibodies.

Unlike adult vaccination, which aims at reducing the hospitalisation of severe cases and deaths, the purpose of vaccinating children is to reduce transmission. Awareness campaigns should be undertaken to address the common concerns of parents and families, dispelling rumours, and sharing scientific information on COVID-19 vaccination of children. As further evidence is consolidated, it may emerge that a vaccine with a proven role in the reduction of transmission or a single-dose vaccine would be recommended for high-risk children in the 6 months-17 years age group as and when available, but not for all children.

#### **Towards a healthy future for children**

The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well-informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. Unravelling the nature and spread of these viruses had not been an easy task but we now know that, like other viruses, this virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it is important that students, teachers and staff follow appropriate precautionary behaviours, like wearing a mask properly, practising hand-washing and physical distancing both inside and outside the school premises.

Ample evidence points out that the opening of schools does not pose additional risk to our children. In our attempt to protect the health of our children, we should not end up depriving them of quality learning, which can happen only through in-person schooling. So, while we learn to live with the virus, the reopening of schools should be prioritised with appropriate precautionary measures based on

the three principles of understanding, trust and the participation of all the stakeholders. This includes parents, teachers, school authorities, public health service providers and other relevant decision-makers. Schools need to be a safe setting where children can return for their optimum development towards a healthy future.

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Foundational numeracy is an important skill in mathematics, and it has always been a challenge to teach it in the school education system. Without foundational numeracy, by which is meant an understanding of numbers up to at least two digits, the four basic operations with two-digit numbers and applying the concepts in different situations, a child will find it difficult to progress in school and, eventually, in life. One of the reasons for the fear of mathematics and dropping out is the lack of this skill. Various national-level studies and National Education Policy 2020, indicate that a large proportion of students, beginning with elementary school students, have not attained foundational numeracy. The learning gap has further widened because of COVID-19 because schools were closed for the last 16 months. Some schools managed to work with students through the online mode and community classes up to some level, but a large section of students from the public education system were not meaningfully engaged during the closure. So, the concern is: how to achieve foundational numeracy skills and grade-level competencies. This article relates the learning loss across grades and the strategies of working on foundational numeracy and their impact on the learning of students. Our experience may help teachers of the public education system in planning their engagement on achieving foundational numeracy skills and concepts for class-level teaching.

### Looking back

Last year the teachers in our school worked with the students of classes III to VIII on foundational numeracy in community classes. This effort has reflected so well in students' learning that this year, we are continuing with the same plan. Since most of the students could not get a proper education for last almost two years, major issues observed are the loss in learning and change in behaviour.

Let us understand the situation with an example. Suppose a student is now in class V and before the lockdown she was in class III. That means

students have been promoted from class III to class V without an engagement with the competencies of class IV and there is a high possibility of loss of learning of class III as well. So, some students who are now in class V cannot write numbers, some cannot subtract numbers with regrouping (making groups of ten in addition and subtraction), and some cannot divide correctly.

Another aspect is behavioural issues. Students are unable to pay attention, or sit through a lesson in the classroom, etc. Therefore, the challenge was two-fold: preparing students to participate in the classroom process to achieve foundational numeracy and higher concepts as well as engaging the students' attention. It requires lots of patience, planning and teamwork within the school.

### Methodology

The examples given below are focused on work with students of classes III-V. Here are some of the major requirements for our interventions to be effective.

#### *Preparing the students*

Since the students have not been engaged with for 18 months and may have been restricted within a closed environment, some of them have lost the habit of coming to school and focusing in class or interacting with their friends and teachers. We need to create an environment which will attract students by focussing more on activities like drawing, painting, playing games, storytelling etc. This will help them in connecting with the classroom environment.

#### *Identifying student needs*

We developed a baseline assessment test on number sense, the four basic operations and their application for the students of classes III-V to assess their levels of understanding and need; and conducted one-to-one interactions to assess their counting and writing skills. This included questions on concepts based on complexity. For example, in the subtraction of whole numbers with regrouping, we had questions such as  $152 - 29$  and  $1002 - 127$ .

In the case of  $152 - 29$ , the number 152 is regrouped to 1 hundred, 4 tens and 12 units. But consider the different regrouping that happens in the case of  $1002 - 127$ . First the number 1002 is regrouped to 10 hundreds 2 units, then to 9 hundreds, 10 tens and 2 units, then to 9 hundreds, 9 tens and 12 units. However, students found questions that requires regrouping in different ways difficult (Figure 1).

$$\begin{array}{r}
 4 \ 12 \\
 1 \ 5 \ 2 \\
 - \ 2 \ 9 \\
 \hline
 1 \ 2 \ 3
 \end{array}
 \qquad
 \begin{array}{r}
 9 \ 9 \\
 10 \ 10 \ 12 \\
 1 \ 0 \ 0 \ 2 \\
 - \ 1 \ 2 \ 7 \\
 \hline
 8 \ 7 \ 5
 \end{array}$$

Figure 1

The children of classes III-V were grouped based on their needs and were assigned to learning stations based on their understanding of number sense, four functions and their grade-level readiness (Figure 2). One teacher was assigned to each learning station. In each learning station, we discussed concepts from classes I to V. For example, in the number-sense learning station, we started the discussion with one-digit numbers, then presented place value to introduce two-digit numbers. This was continued till we reached six-digit numbers. This process included identification, writing, comparison, etc. The emphasis was on both conceptual understanding and practice.

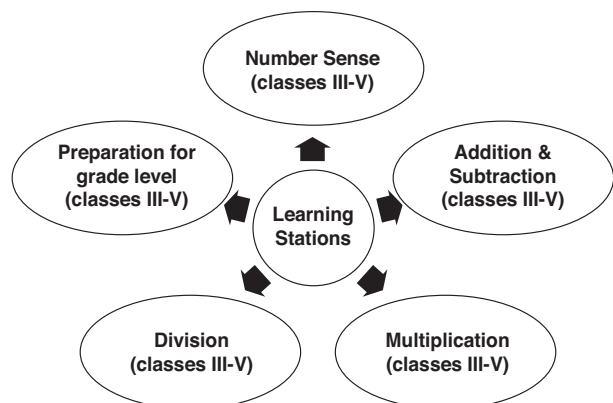


Figure 2

We had observed that about 27 students (out of 90) had issues in foundational numeracy, but the range of the problem varied. For example, some

students could not write some numbers like 79, subtraction with regrouping like  $32-19$ , mistakes in multiplication and division of numbers due to lack of practice of multiplication tables. The rest of the class were at different levels.

#### Creating a timetable

Since without foundational numeracy higher concepts cannot be learned, we had decided to focus on foundational numeracy and related higher-level concepts for all students to bring them to class level. Our focus was on three subjects - mathematics, Hindi and English, with about 9 hours' extra classes per week for mathematics to give sufficient time and continuous engagement to the students.

In the present scenario, all government schools have to provide at least 1.5 hours per day in the timetable for the first month of the opening of the school. All the teachers, except teachers of classes I and II have to work together on foundational numeracy. For example, a school can allot one hour (10.30-11.30 am) to classes III-V for mathematics. The children will be divided into three to four groups, based on the number of teachers in a school.

#### Teamwork and focused engagement

In regular school, one teacher usually teaches all subjects. But now, after schools reopen, imagine the range of the learning loss of students. To ensure effective use of time, students will be divided into groups. For example, in class V, there could be four to five groups of students at different levels of understanding of the concepts of number sense and the four basic functions, similarly with classes III and IV. This means that each class teacher will have to work with all these five groups, which is very difficult from the teaching and time management point of view. If the children are in groups, each teacher will focus on one concept at different levels. Proper focused teaching and good time management is possible when teachers of a school work together. An important point is that the number of groups will depend on the number of teachers in a school.

#### Preparation and resources

In primary classes, all the teachers teach all the subjects, so it is not difficult for teachers to deal with mathematics. But when schools reopen, planning is important because we have to achieve much more in much less time. We have to decide *what* to teach and how to teach. Suppose a child

makes mistakes in  $32 - 14$ , (Figure 3), how to make the child understand the regrouping concepts? In this case, we can see that the child has made a mistake in regrouping, she could not consider the 2 in the unit place. So, we need to help the child to understand the regrouping using dienes blocks (Figure 4) or fake currency.

$$\begin{array}{r} 2 \ 10 \\ \cancel{3} \ 2 \\ - 1 \ 4 \\ \hline 1 \ 6 \end{array}$$

Figure 3

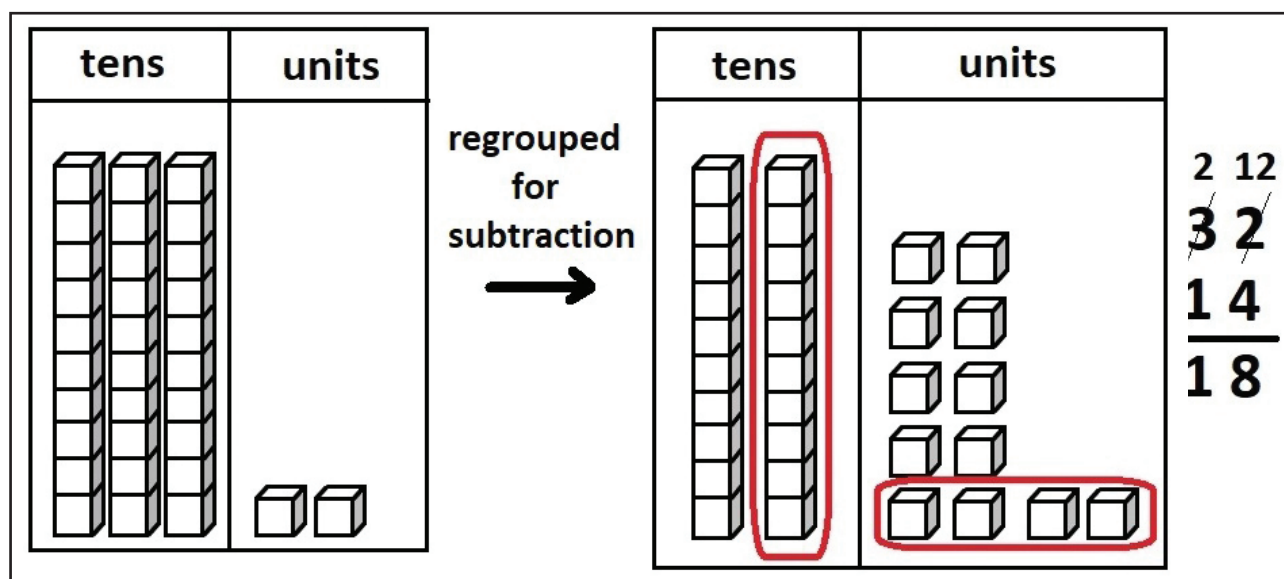


Figure 4

Here using dienes block, the number 32 is regrouped as 2 tens and 12 units. And now the child can subtract 1 tens and 4 units from it to find the answer as 1 tens and 8 units i.e., 18.

After explanation, we should be ready with a set of questions of the same type to assess students' understanding and develop confidence in solving similar problems. Then, more complex problems can be presented for solving and discussion. For example, when a child is confident in solving questions of types  $32 - 14$ , we can then move on to more complex concepts like:  $302 - 25 = ?$ ,  $1002 - 127$  etc. So, we should have a collection of different complexity levels within a concept. Preparation and discussion, including collection of manipulatives, worksheets, and different types of questions could be assigned on that concept are needed.

### Recording progress

Even students within the same learning station could be at different levels. Some students will complete the required work sooner than others, so there is a need record the progress of each student for providing proper support.

We have developed two types of formats to keep the record of the learning of students. One is the Individual Learning Progress (ILP, Figure 5), which reflects the completed task and current engagement of individual students. In the ILP record, the teacher working on the specific concept or learning station maintains a written record of each child's progress to show the completion of that specific concept by the student. Then, this record will move to the teacher of the next learning station based on the need of the student.

The other format is the Consolidated Learning Progress (CLP, Figure 6) with the names of all students and learning indicators against each student. It is maintained on a weekly basis when teachers meet. Teachers discuss the progress of the students and update the format. This helps in providing a clear picture of the progress of the whole class.

### To summarise

In our school, we had started working with students in January 2021. We used the above method in classes III-V for 1.5 hours a day for about three weeks before schools closed again. We found that about 11 (out of 27) of the students achieved foundational numeracy, achieving class-level competencies related to number sense and the four basic operations. For example, with foundational



*'Didi, kendra kab khulega?'*, (when will the centre reopen) three-four children came asking one of the *sanchalaks* (community-selected facilitators) at the *Mohalla Learning Activity Centre* (M-LAC) in village Gunga, Berasia block, Bhopal. This was part of Eklavya's project *Shiksha Ki Udaan* in which we reached out to children by delivering worksheets door-to-door through *sanchalaks*, something we had never done before. This was in June; two months of lockdown had passed with no circulars from the *Rajya Shiksha Kendra* and there was a sense of concern amongst our team members. We were reluctant to gather children in our M-LACs, so we began to work with them through these *sanchalaks*, who would interact with the children individually, going door-to-door. We had set these worksheets for three different learning levels, which we named *Ankur* (emergent), *Tarun* (intermediate) and *Umang* (advanced).

The COVID-19 pandemic was indeed a time for us to press the 'pause' button on the hustle and bustle of life, pushing us to reset all the facets of our entire social life. Another school academic year passing by, especially for those children who do not have access to technology, has made us all realise how face-to-face interaction with hands-on activities is irreplaceable. This lack of human interaction, especially in the field of education, has led to a loss for children not just in terms of academics, but socially and emotionally as well. The children have been robbed of their 'hub of social interaction', their school, where they made friends, fought and argued with each other, played and did co-curricular activities together. Children have been robbed of their 'hub of social interaction', their school, where they made friends, fought and argued with each other, played and did co-curricular activities together. And teachers, who would have had an opportunity to get to know each child's strengths and weaknesses, have had to think of different methodologies to carry out the teaching-learning process.

One method that has been attempted was through worksheets. This model has become one of the ways

in which teachers could attempt to understand the learning levels of children.

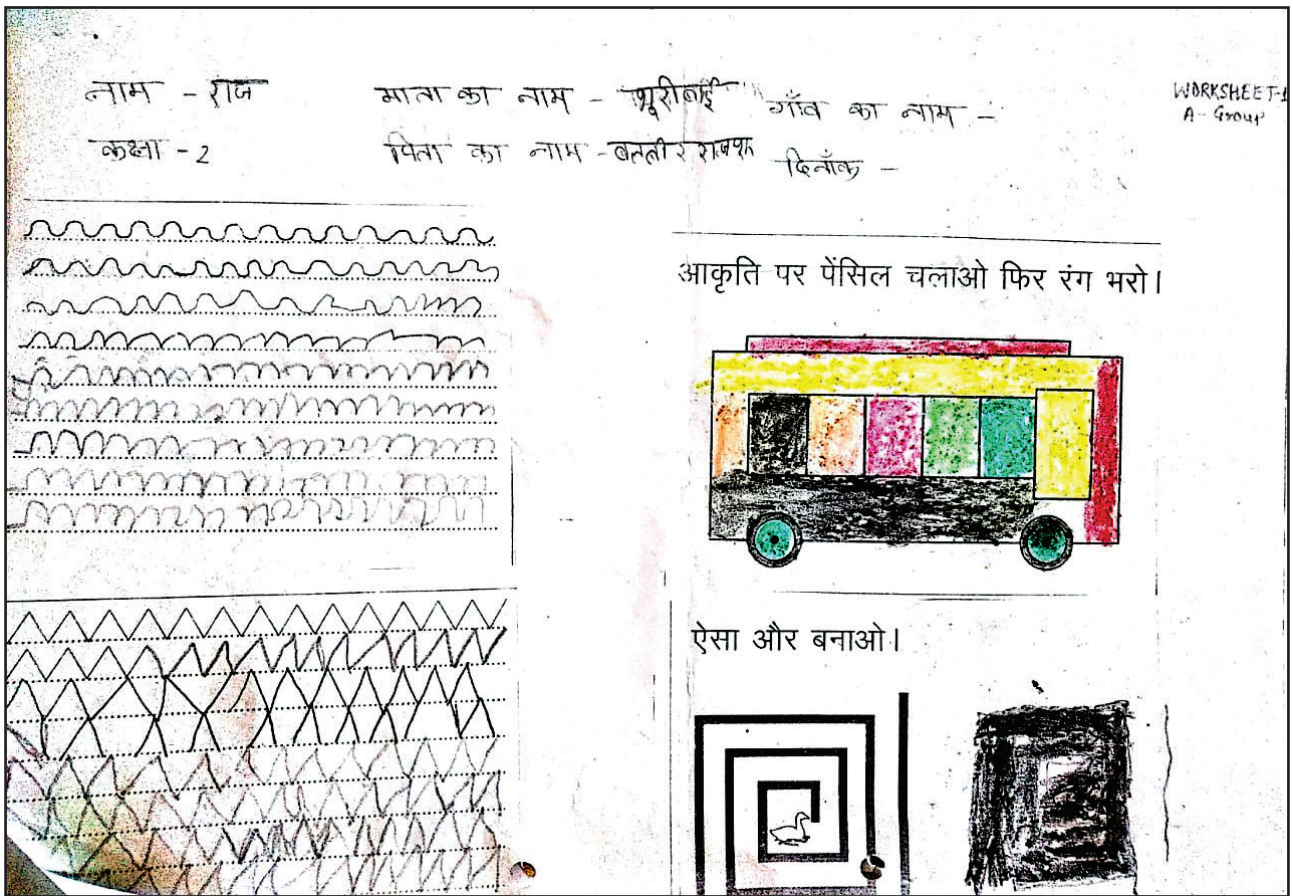
Now, we are trying to look at this intervention also to help us understand the learning gaps of children and prepare them when schools reopen. Although COVID-19 affected us in the most severe ways, it has given us a chance to re-look at the routine of our lives. Several parents, who previously stayed completely occupied with their work, have been able to spend a considerable amount of time with their children during the lockdowns. It also gave teachers some time to ponder on what strategy they could adopt for working with children, a process that may not have been possible had they constantly worried about completing the textbook lessons. This was a chance for them to try out something new, something different.

We know that COVID-19 is not going to go away soon, so this 'worksheet model' could also be integrated in schools and at home. It is important that we talk to teachers about this intervention which can be added to our preparations for the reopening of schools which will require us to work in flexible modes.

Another perspective that COVID-19 has emphasised is that children come from different cultural backgrounds. For example, it is likely that the child from an urban middle-class setting would have support with skills such as interpersonal-intrapersonal relation-building, problem-solving, creative thinking and so on from family and community, along with access to technology. Whereas a child whose family may be engaged in daily-wage work or agriculture (as in the Berasia block) would have life skills but may not have the same type of socio-cultural support. The use of worksheets in M-LACs can play a supplementary role in helping children acquire some of these skills.

### Planning for reopening

Using worksheets during the lockdown made us realise that this is an effective method of learning for children, which reinforces their learning. The worksheet intervention also pushed parents to



This worksheet was designed for the Ankur group with a focus on building motor skills.

engage with their child's learning. As mentioned, children have missed a considerable period of learning and teachers do not know what changes have occurred in their learning levels. Worksheets of different levels, such as these, can help children by working in small groups and supporting each other. Using these worksheets, teachers can help children gradually recall what they had learned in their previous classes.

As schools reopened in Madhya Pradesh on September 1, teachers could work with children in groups and, with the help of worksheets, support them in picking up what they had forgotten without the children feeling intimidated by the next levels of learning. Worksheets, thus, serve a significant purpose in the teaching-learning process where it gives children multiple opportunities to practice along with an assessment tool and makes the transition to new learning easier for them. The emphasis is on the fact that children should feel at ease with the learning process when they return to school.

#### Some experiences

At the Government Middle School, Hirankhedi (Berasia, Bhopal), I began talking to children about


how they felt of coming back to school after one-and-a-half-years, what had they done during this time? Children said that they had been at home, or at their grandparent's or other relatives' homes. One child mentioned that the family visited Van Vihar and Bheembetka in Bhopal. Then, since it was the first time I was interacting with the whole class, we moved on to talking about how we introduce ourselves in English. I asked them to write their names on a piece of paper and demonstrated: My name is Lovis, I come from Bhopal. Children continued in the same way: My name is... I come from Hirankhedi village. Along with this, they mentioned one thing that they liked. I also included an exercise of letting the children identify the first letter and sound of the respective letter. We did the exercise by tagging each other. As children mentioned the things they liked, I wrote down the words on the blackboard.

At the Government Middle School, Harrakheda (Berasia, Bhopal), I began by asking the students about what they had been doing in the last so many months and children told me about having played games on the mobile phone, helping with the household chores and going cycling with

friends. I then did a picture-reading with them by dividing the class into groups. I gave each group a picture story along with chart paper and asked them to select a picture from the book and write about it - *Who* is/are there in the picture? *Why* is something happening and where is it happening? Two members from each group had to present this to the entire class.

Both these were worksheet exercises of listening, speaking and writing in which children were given the opportunity of talking without fear or the feeling of being judged. An activity related to this

could be asking children to draw pictures or write a paragraph about the place they visited or write in their notebooks, five to ten words which they liked from our discussion. Children's writings can be put up on the classroom walls. Having a dialogue with children through such activities and making sure that they enjoy the learning, has to be ensured by teachers once schools reopen and gradually increase the rigour of learning over a period of time. Worksheet activities could later progress into teaching-learning from the textbooks too.



**लॉकडाउन की तैयारी**

समीर की दादी ने परिवार को खाने का ज़रूरी सामान जमा करके रखने को कहा। तुम्हें क्या लगता है उन्होंने ऐसा क्यों कहा होगा?  
 उन्होंने ऐसा इसलिए कहा कि .....

.....

.....

.....

ऐसी 6 चीज़ों के बारे में सोचो जो तुम एमरजेंसी के लिए अपनी रसोई में रखोगे। चित्र बनाओ और नाम लिखो-

.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....

*This worksheet was designed to make children think about the circumstances of the pandemic by integrating EVS and Hindi. They are being asked to draw pictures of six items that they would need in the kitchen in an emergency. This worksheet was used for the Tarun group.*

नाम ..... कक्षा ..... दिनांक .....


माता..... पिता ..... गाँव.....

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प्रश्न 1) क्या आपको घड़ी देखना आता है? हाँ या नहीं।

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प्रश्न 2) आज हिना सुबह 6 बजकर 20 मिनट पर सो कर उठी। नीचे दी गई घड़ी में उसके उठने के समय को दर्शाइए।



प्रश्न 3) आप रोज सुबह कितने बजे उठते हो और रात को कितने बजे सोते हो? इस घड़ी में समय दर्शाओ और खाली जगह में लिखो।



सुबह उठने का समय.....



रात को सोने का समय.....

*This worksheet was designed for the Umang group and focuses on the concept of time, which essential skill in our daily life.*

#### Acknowledgements

*The author would like to acknowledge with thanks the work of all the Sanchalaks of Berasia, who were part of the worksheet intervention; and Arvind Sardana, Hridaykant Dewan and Tultul Biswas for their help with this article.*

#### Endnotes

- i Mohalla Learning Activity Centres (M-LAC) are set up in open, well-ventilated spaces where children of a particular neighborhood/*mohalla* can come to study English, Hindi and maths by sanchalaks (local youth) following all the necessary safety protocols. Before COVID-19, these centres were called *Learning Activity Centers* and were held in school premises.



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# Engaging the Community in School Reopening

Mohammed Ali Rizvi

## The setting

It has been almost two years since the outbreak of COVID-19. The country has seen a nationwide lockdown, two severe waves, lakhs of people dead, schools shut, jobs lost, businesses disturbed, and we are still uncertain of what the future holds for us; awaiting the third wave of COVID-19 which, the experts suggest, is imminent.

Now, in the lull after the severe second wave, life has returned to full swing. Shops, markets, *bazars* have resumed their businesses, jobs have resumed, and life looks normal except for schools. Primary schools continue to look desolate without learners as only teachers come in and a handful of learners in some schools. Teachers are under pressure to continue online teaching through the *Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement (SMILE)* programme. They are often found navigating the networks to check the new worksheets received. They also receive videos on which the worksheets are based, but in most of the cases, learners are made to complete the worksheets without even being able to watch these accompanying videos. It is a challenge for the teacher to teach the lesson or show the video as they cannot officially call learners to the school, and it is impractical to visit each learner to deliver the worksheets. Although teachers send the video links and worksheets to the parents, most learners do not have access to smartphones. The only phone in the family is with the father, who takes it to work. Learners who have a smartphone struggle with the unavailability of data packs and network connectivity. It would also take great motivation for the child to stick to watching videos sent by their teacher and complete the worksheets and not play mobile games or watch videos of their choice. In conclusion, online teaching in rural setups, like Barmer, is just an illusion for the teachers that they are teaching and for parents that their wards are learning. Many surveys and studies have been done on online teaching, including one by the Azim Premji Foundation, and the results speak of its ineffectiveness and limitations especially in rural setups.

In such a scenario, where we have seen a learning loss of almost two years, we need to think of concrete, feasible and safe school-reopening plans rather than just believing that learning is going on with online teaching. Many countries and Indian states too have already opened schools, though the opening of schools and their functioning in full swing also gives rise to the fear of the spread of COVID-19. That is probably why most of the states have not yet decided to open the primary classes.

This fear will remain unless we get a vaccine for our learners and all of them get vaccinated, which, in itself, will be a long and tedious task. So, what shall we do with the primary classes? Should we continue with the online classes or shall we think of ways of having face-to-face interactions with the learners, for which teachers in a few schools have worked out ways to start in small groups. A Panchayat Elementary Education Officer (PEEO) in a *panchayat* in Barmer decided to find a way to start regular classes in a safe and protected environment because we cannot just wait for the government to open the schools. We needed to find a way to organise in-person classes for learners and we did it with the help of the local community.

## Community involvement

Teachers identified a group of children who live in proximity of each other, spend time and play together. The idea of having regular classes for the learners was shared with the community and they were involved in the planning of the classes. Each primary school could find two or three locations where the learners live in clusters. A location was identified for the classes; an open space or a large hall where learners could sit in compliance with COVID-19 protocols, which was easier to follow with a smaller group. The community also did not feel anxious as all the learners came from families that were relatives or were known to each other.

Rural Barmer is full of *dhanis*, clusters of houses usually belonging to a single clan or a family or people who tend to be very close to each other because of their caste or lifestyle. Our associates, who were

practice-teaching and supporting the teachers in panchayats, called these classes the *Dhani* Classes. The timings of the classes were kept from 7:30 to 11:00 a.m. considering the high temperatures in Barmer. The learners would assemble in time for the classes. Excitement ran high among them for getting to attend classes in an unusual setup and after a very long time. The classes were a refuge for the learners from the boring schedule at home which they had been following for the last eighteen months. For someone like Kheta Ram, a first-generation learner, who was gutted about the loss of two years of his school time, it was a matter of delight as he could study his favourite subjects from his teachers.

### Returning to class

The classes posed various challenges for the teachers. The first major challenge was that they had to deal with multi-grade and multi-level (MGML) classes. Though this challenge may look big, in a way, it also helps in cutting short the preparations as one MGML lesson plan (with slight variations) could be worked out in almost all the *dhani* classes. The other difficulty was time management. The location of the classes could range from 2 to 5 km apart and some of the locations could only be reached by a sandy path or climbing a sand dune. To mitigate this situation, the teachers made a timetable as per the staff strength of their schools. For instance, if there were two teachers in a school

and they had to visit our *dhanis*, they would organise two to three classes a week. This might seem inadequate, but for learners who had been disconnected from formal education for so long, it is a great opportunity to bridge the losses and stay geared up for the regular opening of the schools.

It is also difficult to maintain COVID-19 protocols, such as encouraging learners to maintain distance and wear masks at all times. But with the involvement of the parents and community members, these concerns were reduced. The unavailability of water, washrooms, handling the students of classes I and II, who had never attended formal classes, were some of the challenges faced. These were worth the trouble taken in accepting and working around because there is immense relief and satisfaction in seeing children learning because of the efforts taken. Although the teachers put in a lot of hard work into the online classes, the intervention did not show substantial benefits for the learners.

### Our learning

To make this idea work, it is crucial to involve the community in the planning of resuming the reopening of schools and returning to face-to-face classes. A little courage from the teachers and co-operation from community members enabled swift change to makeshift classrooms for the learners until the schools officially reopen. These lessons will be invaluable when that happens.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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# The Time for Planning is Now

Nawlesh Kumar

I have been on field visits for the past many days and have been interacting with school teachers. I can say that the teachers are in favour of reopening schools. They also believe that there has been, and is, no alternative to face-to-face learning.

What do you expect from a child of class I? The child who has not gone to school for the past one and a half years, who has hardly seen her teacher, who does not even know what COVID-19 is, whose childhood is spent playing in the mud, who has almost forgotten whatever little she had learnt? Do you expect her to suddenly resume reading and writing without any support? Do you expect that if you give a worksheet to her, she will start answering it on her own? Or if you play a video on the phone and put it in front of her, she will start understanding things herself?

*It is not all that easy*

We will be able to help the children in the true sense only if we plan their further studies after compensating for the damage that has been done to them during this pandemic. Teachers have to establish communication with the children at their level. All future planning has to be done keeping in mind the social, familial, mental and physical condition of children. Teachers may also have to plan separately for each child because in these one and half-years, children have been affected in different ways and their educational loss has also been different. Apart from children, teachers have to also be in constant touch with their parents and establish communication with them. The educated people of the village can play an important role in helping the teachers. Teachers will have to initiate face-to-face engagement with the children by following all the safety measures COVID-19 necessitates. All this has to be done with proper planning.

## Learning loss

There may be some difficulty in the beginning which is inevitable because teaching and learning have not happened smoothly for almost two years.

Children may take some time to fall into regular school schedule and practices. Initially, teachers will have to engage with the children through a variety of activities. They have to find activities that will help children recover the learning loss that they have suffered and accelerate their further learning. After the school reopens, teachers will also have to make a lot of changes in the way they teach.

During my field visit, I talked to a teacher, Shiv Kumar (Government Primary School, Mylagode), about this. He told me that the government and the people think that all this is very easy – that the schools will reopen, and the children will start coming to school again; that teaching and learning will go on as before. But it is not so simple. He said that the long duration of school closure had affected children mentally, physically and emotionally. Children have lost the habit of sitting in one place for long hours and to concentrate. It will be a challenge for them and also for the teachers to make them pay attention in class.

## Impact of other losses

Children who have not had any kind of social interaction for one and a half years may face difficulty in interacting with teachers in the beginning. They may also not be able to express their emotions in front of everyone as they did previously.

It is no secret that there are many families facing financial difficulties who send their children to government schools so that they can get at least one nutritious meal a day. Due to school closure, children from such families have suffered a great deal physically as well. After the school reopens, the government should ensure that the nutritional value of the mid-day meal is enhanced, and a good diet is served to the children. Overall, we have a complex situation in front of us. We need to work on all these aspects now so that after schools reopen, these activities gather momentum, and we can work with the children according to a fixed plan.

This is not just one teacher's concern. I met many teachers who have more or less the same opinion. Also, after meeting the children, it is clearly visible how much loss they have suffered. If the issue was limited to just the academic loss of the children, it would have been easier for teachers to work on. Along with the learning loss, there has been many other major losses that can hinder the overall development of children impacting their further academic learning.

### **Way forward: Some thoughts**

Till now, we have discussed the kind of challenges we might have to face. However, whenever I talk to teachers, I also try to find solutions to all these challenges. I also try to find out from them the kind of preparations they are doing at their level to engage with children when schools reopen. While most teachers are finding the task of preparing for reopening difficult, there are some who are making some plans at their level. I discuss some of these:

#### *Understanding personal problems*

One of the ways to proceed with this could be that even before the school reopens, teachers go to children's homes and meet them. This meeting should not be limited to just giving homework and picking up worksheets. Teachers need to have a dialogue with the children and their parents in which they can discuss all issues openly, including how COVID-19 has affected them and their child, what are the things their child has had to go through because of the closure of schools, what changes have occurred in their lives and what they are looking for from the school now. When a teacher talks to a child she has taught, she will be able to notice the changes that have occurred in the child. The child may even feel hesitant to talk, so the teacher must meet children frequently, so they open up easily.

#### *Engaging with small groups of children*

The second thing is that the teachers should make small groups of children and ask them to begin coming to school where they can engage them in various activities, including sports. Children should be called to school not to be simply given a worksheet to be solved but the teacher should sit with them to watch a movie, listen to their stories and tell them stories. She should talk to them, walk around the garden with them, talking about plants and animals. Even now, children do not understand

COVID-19, or why their schools are shut, or how vaccination works. Teachers should explain all these things to them correctly and in simple language, through animation, plays or models. This is extremely important because the misconceptions in our society about vaccination are affecting the children too. If their misconceptions are not cleared now, then when the time comes for them to get vaccinated, they will not be ready.

### **What do children want?**

We often ignore children's opinions and points of view. On one hand, we say that while teaching we should ensure that children also learn and understand democratic values but on the other, we do not deem it necessary to take children's opinion in the very work being done for them. We should try to know and understand what children feel regarding the reopening of schools. What do children want? Do they want schools to open and to start going there as before? Some of us may feel that the opinion of the children is not that important, as they do not have the understanding of such matters. Children may not have concrete reasons, but they can share what they think at their level. Keeping this in mind, I talked to many children and tried to know their opinion about the reopening of schools. I would like to share their opinion. These are just a few examples. I have met many such children who eagerly want their school to reopen. They want everything to become normal, so that they can have fun in school again.

*Sir, we have forgotten everything during the corona period. The school was closed, and we used to stay at home all day. We were bored. When we were going to school, we used to play a lot with friends and have fun. All along the way to school and back, we used to have fun with friends. The teacher also used to make us play different games. Let the school open soon, and we can have fun with friends again.*  
– Vimala, class V

*From the time schools got closed, I have had to do a lot of housework. I stay at home and my parents scold me if I go out. I loved running with friends, buying biscuits with them from the shop while returning from school. The teachers also used to give me many things to eat, but now even that is not available. After the school reopens, I will again ask the teacher to feed me a variety of things.*  
– Vandana, class IV

*Sir, we had a lot of fun in school. We also used to have fun with the teacher. We used to study and play in school. We used to eat and distribute food in*

*school. We also used to pray in school. If the school opens soon, we will be able to do all those things again. – Umaid, class IV*



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# Multi-grade, Multi-level Teaching is the way Forward

Niket Sagar

The COVID-19 situation has affected every aspect of our normal day-to-day activities, functioning of institutions and service-delivery mechanisms across the country and the globe. At present, schools are closed for children, though some states are moving forward in the direction of reopening, even as there is some uncertainty after the second wave of COVID-19. In these eighteen months, state governments have experimented with customised approaches to facilitate the teaching-learning processes by leveraging online and mass-media platforms. Although teachers tried their best to implement these modes of engagement in government schools in rural India where there are regional and geographical disparities, inaccessibility and unavailability of resources, and a huge digital divide, there were many problems. This issue of the limitations of virtual and online learning has been well-documented by many studies across the world.

We have identified some major areas about which we need to think deeper in our upcoming work when the schools reopen. Through our scheduled sessions and workshops, these areas have been discussed with all those involved: teachers, head teachers and parents. Our teachers have shared their preliminary understanding of the upcoming challenges, as well as mitigation plans and strategies. In their words, this gap in the school life of children will have a long-lasting effect on the overall learning of children. While the closure of school has limited classroom interaction, it has also distanced teachers from effective practice.

These issues are discussed below. I am highlighting how all of us are preparing for better teaching-learning processes by visualising and readying for the reopening of schools. We consider what can be done, how we can move forward in the present context, and plan for the achievement of our goal of bridging the learning gap and moving back to the

normal functioning of schools.

## Children and lost time

For a child, this so-called 'new normal' has invaded every aspect of their life – no school, no examination and now a long wait for the opening of schools. In these one-and-a-half years, children have suffered at many levels -- from psychological to social – due mainly to the limited opportunities for socialisation. There are major changes in their daily lifestyles, routines, and overall social behaviours. In our district (Banswara), a majority of the inhabitants live in rural areas and the sudden emphasis on health- and hygiene-related aspects in regular rural life has caused fear and anxiety.

Our teachers have noted all these factors in their day-to-day interaction with children in the community. One of our teachers, Dharmistha Pandya, says, 'Once the schools open, we teachers must take the first steps toward understanding the needs of our children. These needs are not limited to academics, but cover a wide range of lived experiences, feelings and thoughts of vulnerability'. She further adds that, to begin with, she has already started interacting with children about their day-to-day experiences, paying attention to the narrative of each student in her school – what they like or dislike, in what ways they get engaged, and for how long they are able to pay attention to any purposeful engagement. Once a child is assured of the continued welcome and engagement by the teacher, they slowly open up, start taking part in the school activities and the teaching-learning processes. This approach has further helped in understanding the academic needs of children. Through well-thought-out games, activities and exercises, Ms Pandya is taking note of the learning levels of the children in early mathematics and language. This level of understanding and systematic capturing of the details of every child

will complement and complete her classroom processes and teaching. It will also ensure that the children in her class will learn more effectively.

### **Teachers' practice and capacity-building**

Shifting from real-time, face-to-face classroom interactions and teaching-learning practices to the virtual mode of engagements, *mohalla*/community classes, door-to-door home teaching and many more contextual and customised approaches has been a learning experience. Our teachers have tried different ways and strategies to engage with the children through their own or state-run programmes. For them, getting back to normal classroom teaching will require more well-planned approaches and a change in practices as well. Highlighting this, Vijay Prakash Jain, a teacher from Government Upper Primary School (GUPS), Mediya, Dhindhore, says, 'As teachers, it is necessary for us to prepare ourselves to adapt to different academic as well as pedagogical approaches.' He teaches language to the early classes and engaged proactively with fifty children of his school during this lockdown period. In his experience, one cannot confine oneself to one's subjects. A more integrated approach would be needed in the real-time classroom teaching process. While working on language, he has understood the abilities and skills of his children in numeracy as well and accordingly, he plans his daily teaching. Also, since the children have been promoted to the upper grades, now greater challenges are lying ahead in the classroom once schools reopen. He cites the example of Sonia, a student of class V, 'She was in class III when this pandemic broke out and now, she has been promoted to class V. I know her learning level in both subjects. I have to work on the required skills and help her achieve class-appropriate learning outcomes.'

This will require a keen understanding of the learning levels of every child in the class, designing and planning teaching processes with a more integrated approach so that there can be effective work, for example, on Sonia's learning loss. Classes will now have groups that are at different learning levels, hence, as a teacher, he will have to adopt the multi-grade multi-level (MGML) mode. Many of us lack adequate practice in the understanding of

MGML teaching, so capacity-building of teachers on this front is required. Such training and workshops will help us draw from our previous practice and experiences to build new capacities that will suit the diverse needs of our students in the coming time.

### **Getting back to normal**

Although schools are closed for children, our teachers are coming to their respective schools as usual. This situation is completely different from before the lockdown when there was excitement, routine classroom interactions and engagement with children. Now getting back to normal functioning will have new components of ensuring health and hygiene awareness and practice both inside and outside the school. Throughout this COVID-19 situation, the whole community has been working together with the school administration and teachers, who also served in various roles and completed their duties as assigned by the state governments. Once the schools reopen, classroom teaching, management and functioning of teachers and administration will change.

In two of our scheduled three-day workshops with eighty head teachers of the Banswara, Talwara, Arthuna, Gadhi, Choti Sharvan and Bagidaura blocks, we discussed and tried to understand the present challenges and plan how head teachers will work on identified needs and goals to ensure better learning in children and adopting better ways of teaching by teachers. The participants highlighted the immediate need for understanding the current situation at the level of the community and emphasised the importance of systematic work towards the community's needs and challenges. Understanding and sensitivity toward the community will play a crucial role in ensuring children's regularity in school and will prevent dropouts. Instead of directly going ahead with academic processes, the schools will have to work on creating an empathetic environment that welcomes and accommodates each child and respects the reality that children have been away from the daily routine of school, and many may have faced emotional and financial trauma.

Therefore, bridging the learning loss, firstly, requires identifying the learning gaps by assessing the children. For this, we need to think closely about

understanding their basic skills in different subjects. It is important to understand the individual needs and learning levels of each child so as to provide them with the best type of support and guidance

(remedial work/bridging course). Hence, we plan to identify and work towards two important goals – ensuring the learning of children and facilitating effective teaching practices.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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In the last one-and-a-half years of unprecedented experiences, when the world has learnt to grow used to uncertainties of various kinds, the bleak reality of school education in our country has become even more precarious. Notwithstanding online classes and other measures brought in by most schools across the spectrum of educational institutions that exist to engage children academically, genuine learning opportunities for children have shrunk drastically. This has been due to the pandemic situation which brought up a slew of new challenges for mankind, of which many required urgent attention pertaining to survival. It is no wonder then, that the education of children slipped much lower on the list of priorities for many families, especially for a vast majority of those belonging to the economically weaker strata of society.

Now when the world is coming out of the additional helplessness and chaos caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the speedy development of vaccines and concentrated vaccination drives, the realisation of the neglect of children's education is slowly dawning upon us. Consequently, there is widespread anxiety among teachers and educationists alike regarding the tasks ahead and over what they will have to deal with, in terms of the gaps in learning that children might have developed, when the schools reopen after a long break.

Fortunately, in some schools, like the Azim Premji schools, everyone is eagerly looking forward to the announcement of the reopening of schools. The experiences during the pandemic, although harsh and extremely distressing, have brought solutions to an unforeseen problem - our next course of action. Some of these actions have been tried out with hope and confidence, and though small, these have revealed fascinating stories of teachers' willingness to deliver in the face of adversities and roadblocks. Guided by the awareness of the immediate needs of the children and their families, with an eye on the curricular goals, teachers innovated ways, reflected constantly, and planned

the curriculum for reopening.

### **Foundation's interventions**

Our schools in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, and Uttarakhand started their intervention for both academic and humanitarian support just after the first lockdown in April, last year. During the course of three consecutive lockdowns, the dire need for food and nutrition emerged as the most immediate and urgent, demanding the attention of not just the governments but of every human being who had certain advantages over others. As an important civil society organization, our response was prompt and effective. Alongside our District Institute teams in different states, our school teachers too worked as willing comrades in supplying ration and essential items to the families of their students.

This was followed by a continuous academic engagement using online mode and worksheets – both of which proved ineffective for our rural and slum-dwelling students for the want of support at home, like availability of smartphones with the children at least for a few hours (even in cases where parents had a smartphone, they would carry it to their work and come back home late). Besides this, both parents of many of our students go to work and, where the mother stays at home, she was unable to help her child due to her own lack of education or the many pressing domestic responsibilities. So, as life began to acquire some semblance of normalcy, a plan for starting regular classes in communities in villages and towns was made and executed.

These visits made it clear that regular classes were vital for the children whose lives had been changed by the pandemic. Some examples, the mention of which is pertinent here for us to see the varied picture of the reality around us, are still etched in my memory.

The image of Bantu, a class III boy, looking for something to eat in the kitchen of their one-room shanty house in a small town and then deciding to make his chapati himself as his mother had left early for work as a maid, forms a bend in this arch of my

memory, followed by the image of an enthusiastic Gayatri, a student of class VIII juggling schoolwork with household chores, looking after her three younger siblings – one of them a toddler – and still trying to make time for studies as her parents start their day early at their small farm; or Joshna, in the same class, struggling hard to be regular at our *mohalla* classes as the responsibilities of taking care of animals and household work at home did not leave her with the time and the mental energy to focus on her studies. Then, the sight of small groups of children sitting and studying comfortably in the big rooms and verandas of one of their houses – thanks to the generosity of the community members – and also the ones singing English rhymes and songs in small, cramped rooms in the oppressive heat and humidity and to top it all, the images of thin and pale-looking children roaming in the village streets much before their school time. These are the focal images in my mind of the children away from their schools. In all these memories, what is dominant even without being mentioned is our teacher who has been the anchor and the driving force, braving all odds to make academic engagement happen and continue.

If this journey has not been easy for our children, it has been far more challenging for our teachers. The difficulties encountered by them were not just emotional and physical, involving the fight against one's fear of catching the infection and even risking it. They had to bear with the physical discomfort of hunting for suitable places for *mohalla* classes or making regular visits to children's homes. Added to their responsibilities were the other challenges of uncomfortable locations, frequent changes in plans and locations, and the fury of the weather gods. But more than all these was the struggle to figure out the best modes and strategies to make learning possible and continue in extremely inhospitable conditions. Needless to say, it involved many rounds of planning, discussions, revisions and execution of the plans – ranging from the use of audio-visual aids, sharing of worksheets, helping the students over the phone to do their tasks, engaging them face-to-face individually or in small multi-grade, multi-level (MGML) groups, using a variety of resources, tasks and methods (conversation, discussion and explanations) as forms of scaffolding to then settling down in class-wise grouping.

### **Future plans**

Now when we look back at this journey, firstly,

we realise that our efforts in the difficult time have brought a great deal of learning our way. For instance, firstly, the use of worksheets was not common in our schools but now we are using them regularly for creating task-based learning opportunities. Secondly, the online mode that was used initially by all our schools for all classes and is now being used only for the pre-primary grades in Yadgir and Dhamtari with some success. Similarly, we have never felt so compelled to think about strategies to engage meaningfully with the MGML groups. But now, our teachers have become more competent at making children work effectively in pairs and smaller groups.

We were always aware of the pedagogical advantages of using children's literature for achieving various curricular and co-curricular goals and to keep the children meaningfully occupied during their long absence from schools, but we could never use it so liberally and usefully as we did during the lockdown periods. Some schools also came up with innovative ideas, like introducing diary-writing and drawing. Along with this, collective recitation of rhymes and songs in their language of comfort and English regularly, at the start of the day was a very fruitful practise for both the younger and the older students.

In a nutshell, now there is greater awareness and understanding of the different modes and methods of teaching languages and other subjects among our teachers, thanks to the variety of efforts they experimented with during the non-school teaching periods. Hopefully, multi-modal teaching will stay in our schools and will benefit students through different ways of learning.

### **The way forward**

The insights gained in these difficult times are expected to become a repository of teachers' tools to ensure learning. Now, as our teachers are equipped with a better understanding and strategies of having more effective academic engagements with their students, they are eagerly waiting for schools to reopen and run as usual. In some schools, secondary-class students have started coming to school in rotation with half the strength on any given day. Teachers are trying to make the most of such opportunities which, in a few cases, is also resulting in their feeling some amount of nervous haste to achieve their objectives. Besides, the anxiety regarding those students who could not be engaged regularly is making teachers go back to the highly structured approach- characterised by

limited input and expectation of quick learning.

In the rest of the schools, frequent revision of lesson plans, timetables and strategies are continuing which are focussed more on their immediate reality. The planning for the reopening of schools is not taking place in any big way, probably because there has been a lot of uncertainty in this regard across the states. However, notwithstanding the current situation, in hindsight, we will realise that these difficult times have helped us get into the practice of working out solutions to unforeseen

challenges, trying them out, reflecting and revising our teaching- and logistics-related plans. The continuation and strengthening of these practices will depend on avoiding the traps of the comfort of mechanically set routine and processes of school life, the expectation of quick results, and working in silos. The role of the school leaders becomes even more significant in this situation. We hope these hard-learned lessons are not forgotten and get established more firmly as a part of mindful school processes.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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# Community Learning Groups Must Continue

Raghavendra B T

As many reports have revealed, India lacks the required base for affordability and access to digital services and resources to ensure that every child gets an equal opportunity to learn using smartphones/digital devices with uninterrupted internet service. In the context of Karnataka, initially, the teachers had tried, wherever possible, to engage their students through virtual classrooms and *WhatsApp* groups. Only students of private and public schools from privileged families who had access to internet services and smartphones could access online classes conducted by their teachers. The transition to online learning was not easy, and in most cases, impossible, for students from economically deprived backgrounds. Though parents and teachers tried their best, very few children could be helped.

Teachers were concerned about this. One head teacher in the Hosapete block (Karnataka) told us, 'There was a student of class V here in my office a couple of days ago. He had come to collect the ration kit. After he took the kit, I asked him to sign in the register. The boy replied that he had forgotten how to sign and asked if he could put his thumb impression instead. I felt ashamed of our system. We have to start engaging with the children.'

## **Vidyagama programme**

Initially, when uncertainty prevailed over the reopening of schools, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) issued an order to launch a continuous learning programme called *Vidyagama*, in which school teachers were asked to take the school to the doorsteps of children in the villages. Teachers started visiting the communities and held classes in temple premises, community halls and under trees. After a successful run of some months, on getting reports of rising cases of COVID-19, the state government discontinued the *Vidyagama* programme. Teachers continued sending instructions over *WhatsApp* and encouraging children to watch lessons on DD *Chandana* TV.

However, activists in Karnataka started demanding the resumption of *Vidyagama*, and as most families

could not afford internet services, the state government relaunched the programme and asked the teachers to engage with the children in the school premises with strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols. This amalgamation of digital and face-to-face engagement helped in bridging the digital divide to some extent until even this programme was forced to discontinue due to the second wave of COVID-19 in the country.

## **Formation of Community Learning Groups**

When *Vidyagama* was discontinued, teachers started virtual classroom engagements again. However, as in the rest of India, in our Hosapete block too only some parents were able to afford smartphones/tablets and internet services and even this was limited by the amount they could afford to spend on these. Online classes were distressing for the parents for another reason: they could not go to work leaving their children alone at home. As a solution, the concept of Community Learning Groups (CLGs) emerged and was shared with teachers and functionaries.

An Azim Premji Foundation's study of January 2021 revealed that there was a loss of learning among primary school students. We organised workshops to share the report and identify alternatives to fulfil these learning losses in language and mathematics. The Foundation teams developed worksheets based on grade-wise learning outcomes and expected competencies. By this time, the Government of Karnataka also suggested that teachers engage children with specified plans, involving the support of community organisations, volunteers and parents.

We organised classes with education department functionaries, head teachers and teachers in the block. They were convinced by the results of the study that online classes, as well as *Vidyagama*, had not impacted children's learning positively. The outcome of the study was that the pedagogical processes used for online classes were not conducive to the way children learn, which is by participating in learning activities mentally and

physically with classmates and teachers. This motivated teachers and the School Development and Managing Committees (SDMCs) to set up CLGs in which community volunteers, preferably old students of the school from the same locality could engage the children in their free time with the help and support of teachers and Foundation members.

Most of the teachers were engaging with their students on their own as the situation was worsening with no hope of restarting regular school when we approached them with this concept.

By this time, the children had started going out with their friends without masks and had stopped using sanitiser/soap to keep their hands clean and parents were not diffident about sending their children to these CLGs fearing COVID-19. As a matter of fact, in most villages, they were happy to do so. Teachers, too, sustained the efforts as they were intrinsically motivated to do this. Issues, such as affordability and accessibility of digital devices, internet services, compulsory presence of caretakers for children and the problem with internet connectivity were addressed through these efforts.

#### *How the groups worked*

Taking into account the total number of students in each school, teachers decided to identify a proportionate number of volunteers from the same community that the children came from. A list of 15-20 students to be engaged was shared with the volunteers to start CLGs in their free time for 60 to 90 minutes daily. Teachers visited each CLG twice or thrice a week to give the volunteers the required support.

Volunteers were initially asked to involve the children in singing, storytelling, drawing, looking at storybooks/picture cards so that both, they and their students, would get used to the requirements resulting from the gap in schooling. A set of worksheets that had been discussed in a previous workshop was given to the teachers, and the head teachers made TLMs, mathematical kits, and other resources available to the volunteers so that they could use these with the children to help them acquire the desired competencies.

Volunteers gathered in the schools every week to plan strategies for engaging the children academically in the following week and to review their efforts and address the challenges faced by them in the previous week. These efforts reduced the dependency on digital devices and internet

services.

These CLGs opened up opportunities during this pandemic situation for interested volunteers to take care of the children in their own neighbourhood, informally and in their free time. Parents supported these volunteers by ensuring their children's attendance in the CLGs and providing space to for the classes.

Teachers found a new avenue for performing their professional and social duty. They had been trying to reduce the loss of learning among the children by employing all possible strategies. Most of the teachers we approached and supported are aiming to ensure that all children have the fundamental language and mathematical skills which would help them to continue in their present grades without carrying any regression from the learnings of earlier grades.

#### **When schools reopen**

Our current efforts are intended to ensure all children are engaged in the process of learning consistently and, when once schools reopen, continue their learning without any difficulties to achieve grade-wise competencies. The support from the community volunteers and the *Gram Panchayat* (GP) Library in-charge will continue even after schools reopen. Since the parents of most of these children are not capable of supporting and overseeing their children's learning themselves, CLG volunteers will work closely with parents and children with a shared plan along with the teachers, the GP Library in-charge and Foundation members. Through their collective efforts and teaching-learning materials (TLMs such as flashcards, stories, pictures, chart papers, colours, worksheets, audio-video clips and manuals) meaningful and engaging activities are being conducted with children who have been away from school for the last 18 months or more. These TLMs can be used regularly in the GP Library, CLGs and schools. Since we contacted and involved the librarians in capacity-building to engage children in library spaces with help from teachers, some GP libraries in villages have been transformed and become more child-friendly.

Based on the learning level of each child, the teachers will design the processes to engage with each child and seek support from the volunteers and Foundation members in order to seal the gaps and bring the children up to their current class-level learning expectations. Weekly reviews and meetings will be conducted to plan and address

challenges that come arise. Since most parents cannot support their children, they will be in touch with the volunteers and teachers to improve the learning levels of their children.

We have conducted orientation programmes on the use of worksheets with combined milestones through which teachers and volunteers can reduce learning difficulties arising from disconnected schooling by fostering fundamental literacy and numeracy. The teachers will support the children by providing the opportunity to watch *Samveda*, tele-classrooms on *Chandana* TV and the discussions

that follow. Wherever possible, inter-school video chats have been organised. This will enable children from both schools to interact reciprocally over stories, pictures, poems that they have read and seen.

We are determined that in this (Hosapete) block no child will be deprived for lack of a system to carry out the teaching-learning process. They will be given the same opportunities to regain age- and grade-appropriate skills as any other privileged children in their localities.



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# Art for Reconnecting Students with School

Ruchi Kotnala

After months of distress and stagnancy, our lives are finally coming back to normal. In the process of unlocking routine activities, the government is now all set to reopen schools. However, this is going to be challenging for school administration, teachers, parents and students. Particularly for students, it will be much more difficult to feel confident and comfortable in school after such a long gap. Therefore, it has become very important to plan some strategies which will help students to re-acclimatise to school with full confidence and interest.

I feel that art can become an effective tool to reconnect students with education. Being an art teacher, I have created a work plan. The use of waste and natural materials, group-based activities and subject integration will be the core of my strategies.

## Use of waste and natural materials

During the lockdown, most students were unable to access regular art materials like paper, colours etc. So, I encouraged them to use waste and natural materials, which were easily available in their homes and surroundings. In all these months, students have made several artworks with these materials. Taking this forward in school will enable them to get comfortable in the classrooms.

There are many advantages of using waste and natural elements. Sometimes students, particularly those who are not skilled in sketching, get bored while doing artwork with routine materials, like paper, sketch pens, watercolours etc, but they find it difficult to express their boredom. In such situations, the use of waste and natural materials can be very useful in re-developing their interest, enhancing their sensory skills by adding a fun element to the learning process. As there is no fixed technique to the use of waste materials, a lot of creativity, innovation and exploration are needed to make art from them. Even though schools provide all possible art materials to students at school, at home, most parents cannot afford to buy such resources for their children on a regular basis. Because of this many students are not able to reach

their full potential. However, waste and natural materials are easily and abundantly available in their homes and surroundings. So, by using them students can continue their artistic journey freely, without having to spend much. Moreover, working with waste and natural materials instils the value of recycling and respect for nature in young minds.

## Some suggestions

Students generally draw landscapes and picture compositions on paper in art class. A similar activity can be done with waste and natural materials. Ask students to explore their surroundings and collect different types of stones, sticks, leaves, cardboard, newspaper, twine etc. Students can either make a landscape by pasting these on cardboard or they can make a model with these.

For storytelling activities, students can make puppets and face masks from old socks, cloth, newspapers and sticks etc.

## Group activities

Working in groups is essential for the mental and emotional development of children. There are some students who perform better while working in a group. But during the lockdown, students worked individually, which not only affected their learning ability but also raised several psychological problems. I also observed issues, like children trying to avoid online classes, not showing interest in their work or hesitating to express their thoughts and feelings. It is important to resolve these issues when students come back to school. For this, I plan to organise group-based activities, which will give children a chance to interact freely, rebuild bonds with their classmates and gain confidence. Besides, it will also make the learning process more enjoyable for them.

## Some suggestions

Students can be asked to decorate the school garden with waste and natural materials. For this, teachers can divide students into teams and assign a specific area to each to decorate on a given theme, such as birds, insects, flowers etc. All team members must join the planning and in

collecting materials, decorating, documenting and presentation. After completing the task, each team would be required to do peer assessment not only of their own teammates but of members of the other teams too. Similarly, we can also organise group-based activities for storytelling sessions. Here, each team can create and present their story by making storybooks, models and puppets, etc.

### Integrating art with other subjects

We all know that the environment of a school plays a very important role in the learning process and schools try to create a suitable environment for their students. However, for several months now, children have been restricted to their homes and it is going to be difficult for them to get accustomed to the school environment again. This may result not only in a lack of interest in studies but may also affect their learning process. So, it is important

to make learning interesting and enjoyable. To achieve this, integrating art with other subjects like social science, maths, language, etc, would be an effective strategy.

### Some suggestions

For example, to teach the concept of 'big and small' in maths, students can be asked to draw animals such as an elephant, lion, dog and mouse. Similarly, students can be asked to make storyboards and models for poems and stories, both in English and their first language. Then again, to give an understanding of the pre-historic era in social science, students can be asked to make weapons and tools from wood and stones. We can also ask them to paint stones with natural colours extracted from flowers, vegetables, fruits, limestone, etc. Apart from this, students can also write or draw hieroglyphs on tree bark, cloth or clay.



Art works and Compositions made from waste materials by students of APS Matli

## Sample lesson plan: Class I

Subject: Visual Art (Integration with Hindi)

Topic: Chapter 4: पत्ते ही पत्ते

### Objectives:

1. To make the learning process enjoyable and interesting
2. To give an opportunity to students to showcase their creativity, innovation and imagination with complete freedom
3. To encourage students to create art from waste and natural objects
4. To develop qualities like teamwork, exploration, planning, sharing of ideas and presentation

### Resources:

1. NCERT class I Hindi textbook (*Rimjhim*)
2. Representative images/photos from the internet
3. Representative videos from *YouTube*

### Teaching plan:

1. Before starting the activity, the teacher will ask students to collect different types of leaves from their surroundings. Students will be encouraged to gather fallen leaves and not to pluck them from plants.
2. Next, the teacher will ask the students to minutely observe the leaves (both collected by them and by other students). After this, the class will discuss the differences between leaves on the basis of their size, shape, colour and texture.
3. The teacher will also ask some questions, like what is the importance of leaves for plants? What is the difference between a fallen leaf and the leaf which is still growing on a plant? Why do different plants have different types of leaves?
4. After this, the teacher will show some videos and photos of artworks made with leaves.<sup>i</sup>

5. Then, the teacher will divide students into different groups and ask each group to make a *bandanwar* (decorative door hanging) with leaves and flowers. Students can make paper or cloth flowers and patterns to decorate their home and classrooms with these.
6. The next activity will be 'leaf printing'. In this, each member of the group will bring a different type of leaf and select a specific colour, then, the whole group will jointly make leaf prints on a large-size paper. A mix of colours and leaf shapes will create interesting patterns.
7. After this, students will do 'leaf characters/figures' activity. In this, students will have to make some characters or figures (cat, fish, dog, bird, human, house, boat etc.) using leaves.
8. In the end, the teacher will read aloud Chapter 4: 'पत्ते ही पत्ते'. The teacher will also help students understand and pronounce difficult and new words.
9. During these activities, the teacher will observe and document the responses of students.

### Assessment:

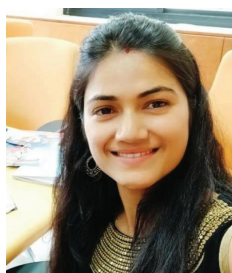
Points 1-4: Rate on a scale of 1-3

Points 5-8: Provide one-line answers

1. Displays cooperative participation in the arts and appreciates peers.
2. Classifies/identifies colours, shapes, textures, sounds and patterns.
3. Enjoys exploring different materials to create artworks and enactments.
4. Talks about the things they find beautiful or otherwise; appreciates beauty in nature.
5. What did you do well in this activity?
6. What improvement will you make to do better in future?
7. Children who do well in this activity.
8. Children who need more guidance.

### Endnotes

i <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBEPR7wziDM> | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kIYABvcvCo>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8mkkC9fs1k>



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Learning is a lifelong process; however, the early few years are crucial for learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has spelt disaster for the education of children, and it is going to be very challenging to mitigate the consequences of this loss and bridge the learning gap. The initiatives taken by the government are not effective even in retaining primary school children's learning of the previous class. The Rajasthan state government launched the SMILE (Social Media Interface for Learning Engagements) programme on the *WhatsApp* platform for the sharing of worksheets, videos, quizzes and homework for students. There were many constraints in the implementation of this programme because of the unavailability of digital devices, poor internet bandwidth, the geographical setting of schools and children and issues concerning level-appropriate content/material, the requirement of continuous guidance from teachers and parents' awareness and concern about learning of their child and so on. Very few teachers could conduct *mohalla* (community) classes during the lockdown to the best of their capacity.

Children are being promoted to the next class without assessing their learning levels. Since March 2020, students have been out of school and have not learned the new class-level competencies. In fact, they have forgotten many things learned in the previous class. For example, a student who was in class III in March 2020 and is now in class V, may have remained at the class III level, and in some cases, may have even fallen to class II level, as he/she may have forgotten the fundamental concepts of a subject. Due to the closing of schools, regression is a trait now obvious in children.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 recommends 'student-centric' teaching practices. This is an umbrella term that covers many dimensions, right from classroom activities to study materials and parents' involvement. If all our processes had been student-centric, there would have been a possibility of better learning levels among students today. Here I am suggesting strategies at three levels to promote self-learning in students.

## At state government level

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends that primary education should be in the mother tongue, so the local context should be included in material developed at the state level. The state government should form a group of motivated, passionate and experienced academicians for research and development of high-quality study material. The study material should be self-explanatory so that students can learn by themselves with some guidance from teachers and parents. In effect, the government should develop self-learning workbooks for learners so that they can continue learning at home.

Health experts suggest that children are at low risk of COVID-19 infection as their immune system is robust. So, even during lockdowns, schools can be run with half or one-third capacity. As the spread of COVID-19 is not uniform across a state, there is no need of closing all schools simultaneously. There would be no harm in decentralising the decision-making of opening and closing of schools to contain the spread of COVID-19 at the district or subdivision level.

## At school level

We have never faced this kind of challenge before, so there are no prior experiences in dealing with this situation. In this hard time, many teachers have triumphed over circumstances and showed by example that work can be continued in some form or the other in changed conditions. Conversations with these teachers can give some direction to the efforts.

- a. There is no substitute for in-person classroom teaching, especially in primary classes where children need teachers' handholding. So, some extraordinary teachers talked with the parents and together with them, identified a common place where they could teach students from the neighbouring houses or communities. In these settings, students from multiple grades and levels studied together but teachers prepared well and tried their best to help each student.

- b. Student-centric teaching is very important. Teachers, from the very beginning, should focus on how to make students own their learning process. These teachers could help learners build the concepts on their own by letting them be actively involved in the learning process. For this, teachers have to prepare a scaffolding plan for each student by assessing their learning and analysing the needs and support they require.
- c. Many researchers and our experiences also show that each student is different from the other and that each learns differently. Moreover, you will find students at different learning levels in the same class. This is the reason that we cannot depend only on the prescribed textbook and workbook, which cannot suit the learning needs of all students. Teachers, in this case, prepared supplementary worksheets for each student to link their existing understanding of concepts/ chapters and work towards targeted learning outcomes.

#### At family level

It is a known fact that the family environment also affects learning. We can see that the learning gap is less in students whose parents are committed to their education in comparison with those whose parents are not. Many students are first-generation

school-goers and find no academic support at home, in this scenario, the role of teachers becomes crucial.

These teachers created awareness among parents regarding the importance of education and the role of continuous learning practices. After counselling, some of the parents started providing an enabling environment for their child's study at home. Teachers also identified, together with the parents, a few senior student volunteers in the community and motivated them to teach the students living nearby. When teachers visited the community, they guided the volunteers and helped them in preparing teaching plans.

#### In summary

The setback education of school children has suffered during the lockdown and indeed during the entire course of the pandemic (which is still looming) has been a learning for all of us to be prepared to deal with any adversity that we may face. The above-mentioned three pillars (government, school, and family) of a child's education should be ready to address all threats to it. In future, we have to be fully prepared and under no circumstances should the learning engagements of students be disturbed or discontinued.



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# Social Interaction in Schools Post-COVID

Sariya Ali

School, for me, was the most reassuring, dynamic place for developing effortless relationships. It was where friendships are built over planning a trick on a strict teacher, doing project work together, eating lunch and sharing one's bizarre, imaginative ideas. For a lot of people, these friendships stay for a lifetime. However, school-going children today are experiencing unexpected isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article is written keeping in mind these isolated times, the gaps they have created, and the importance schools would play in post-COVID times, or whenever schools reopen, as an active space for interaction and learning after such a long gap.

The closest engagement with a school set-up for me, after five years of my own schooling, happened in a small government primary school in Barmer, Rajasthan. As part of the compulsory school practice of the Associate Programme at the Azim Premji Foundation, I had been engaging with a limited number of children in the school for about four months. Through this engagement, I have been able to develop a strong understanding of the social dynamics at play in a school. Barmer is a caste-dominated district, by which I mean that people are actively conscious about this factor and the locals make sure they know your caste in the first meeting itself.

Added to this is the fact that Barmer is a sparsely populated district, especially in its rural parts and people live in small clusters called *dhanis* situated at vast distances. How the caste and *dhani* setup came into being becomes clear when one looks at the social dynamics more closely – each *dhani* comprises only one caste. In such a social setup, the sense of community pride and all the thoughts and culture that run within, are grasped by a child very strongly. Whatever they see and hear is what they ultimately learn about society.

The school, breaking the containment of the community pattern, is the first place a child steps into outside their *dhani*. It becomes the platform for the exposure of a child to the existing diversities in the larger society and for learning to exist in such

a space. At the same time, schools are also the place where a child's behaviour reflects the conventions that they have learnt towards people of other castes or religions. Therefore, it is the school that must consciously intervene to quell any kind of separatism/ discrimination amongst children.

## How is this going to be post-COVID?

Breaking the socio-cultural practices inside a school is a compulsory if difficult task. For example, the practice of upper-caste children of bringing their own utensils for the midday meal (MDM) can only be broken if the school bans such a practice and allows this new learning for children. Unfortunately, a long break of more than a year now has kept children not only isolated inside their homes but also absorbed in every narrative being discussed inside the house. The contagious nature of this pandemic, sadly, has also seeped into people's perspectives in multiple stereotypical ways against certain communities. In such a situation, when regular school begins, the behaviour of children while interacting with other children is going to be unpredictable. It may be positive, given the excitement they will have on meeting their friends after a long time and enjoying school memories together during games, lunch or while copying from each other's notebooks. On the other hand, it may also be negative in terms of the fears children might come to the school with. This can be with regard to catching the virus, or about social distancing from people of a particular community. The latter apprehension is drawn from my field experience during community classes when a child (who needs a lot of reminders for putting on a mask inside the class) warned her peers to wear the mask when a person from a particular community was passing by.

I had a long discussion with this child to understand her bias. She explained that a particular community was responsible for the spread of the coronavirus in our country, and we must be cautious of them. She had heard her parents discussing this. This is one of the problems that may arise post-COVID. This is not only going to be about keeping a distance from a community due to the possibility of transmitting

the disease but can also deepen the discriminatory justifications within communities against a caste or religion.

There is a brighter side to this issue. While primary schools cater to a limited diversity of the population, middle and high schools have greater diversity of caste and religion. Now with class promotions during the pandemic, the children are two classes ahead, that is, a child who was in class IV will be in class VI now. This means that whenever the schools resume, this child would be attending a higher class and a more diverse school. In such a scenario, the school's preparation needs to be ideated in a dynamic manner. To begin with, the stakeholders responsible for the school would have to begin with a sensitive, patient understanding that children may behave in an unpredictable manner, especially the younger ones, for they have been staying in a paranoid, confusing period for a long time now.

Second, the school would need to actively intervene in any kind of socially discriminatory attitude some children may express either verbally or in action, to make sure that mandatory physical distancing does not turn into actual social distancing. Intervention in such matters cannot be something like a scolding, but a morally binding dialogue or conclusions drawn from activities, stories, drama and discussions which would welcome children's fresh perspectives

and learnings. Lastly, the school's interaction with community members needs to be enhanced and structured with the motive of breaking any kind of unscientific myths that they might have developed during the pandemic against a community or a practice. These tasks can be challenging because it would not be easy to break all the conventions developed over the period of almost two years now, but schools could play a crucial role in not letting caste and religious discrimination perpetuate to future generations.

The highlighted problem and its solution might look like a situational concern, but this is how narratives against and for are built and passed on from generation to generation. Any form of hate-mongering and misleading ideas must be dealt with. Especially for children who will be entering the school as the first public space post the outbreak, this is where all their learnings of two years could be played out, putting the responsibility of proper guidance on the teachers. In fact, the nature of social interaction can be used as a blessing to correct children's misconceptions against anyone. In the end, the reopening of schools can only be seen as a hopeful space for restoring socially harmonious practices by communicating correct messages to both the children and the community.



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## Anticipated Challenges and Some Solutions

Vipin Kumar

A few days ago, I had to go to *Bassi Adda panchayat* (Banswara, Rajasthan) for vaccination-related work. At a tea stall, I saw a little girl working. She must have been 9-10 years old. I asked her for her name; she said it was Ritu. I enquired if she was going to school. She replied in her local language that she used to go earlier but not anymore. I asked her which class she is in, to which Ritu replied that she did not know. I thought she might be able to tell me which class she studied in when she went to school, but Ritu could not recall even that. Most children during this time have either been carefree, on their own or burdened by daily chores; whatever the reasons, it is a fact that they have drifted away from school. We can surmise from this that the anxiety of teachers regarding children's learning is not completely unfounded. I also spoke to Ritu about counting, addition and subtraction. She could not count properly. According to her age, she should be in class IV or V now.

### Major challenges

I have been in constant contact with teachers and children in the Banswara district of southern Rajasthan during this pandemic. Here, the Aravalli Range ends due to which one can see both low hills and an island-like terrain. About 85 percent of the population of this district is tribal. Based on the geographical location and resources, four major challenges arise for the education of children in this area presently.

#### *No resources for online learning*

A majority of the population of the district resides in villages. People do not have the required resources for online learning – 80 percent of parents do not have Android mobiles. Even those who have one, do not get an internet recharge for their phones unless there is a dire need. In such a situation, we cannot even think of a way to connect with children through online mediums. The government did broadcast some educational programmes through TV and radio, but even these mediums are rarely used in the villages. Learning simply by listening to or watching a teacher online is a challenge in itself.

To say that the teachers have not made efforts would be wrong. Most children who come to school in this district are first-generation school-goers. In such a situation, even if some learning material is shared online, no one in the family can help them understand it. Overall, any online teaching-learning processes undertaken at the primary level under government programmes have been largely unsuccessful.

#### *Scattered dwellings*

Here, villages do not have *mohallas* or neighbourhoods. Houses are situated far from each other. The distance between two houses could be 50 metres, with the next dwelling 500 metres or even one kilometre away. So, it is challenging to teach children in groups by gathering them in one place. As a result, most children from most schools could interact with teachers only for a very short span of time. It has been the experience of teachers that in such efforts, it is only possible to teach one group for one or two hours at a time. The next day, they have to go to another place, to teach another group. Subsequently, both the interaction time and the regularity of the interaction are incommensurate.

#### *Gap in extant- and grade-level learning*

At the class level at which children are supposed to be learning multiplication, division, fractions and decimals, teachers will have to teach them counting and addition and subtraction. This indeed is a valid cause for concern for teachers. If we look at the NAS<sup>i</sup> and ASER<sup>ii</sup> reports, we find that more than 50 percent of children in schools, even when schools run regularly, are not able to achieve grade-level learning outcomes in maths and language. In such a situation, a gap of 18 months has pushed primary education into deep darkness.

The biggest concern for science teachers is that it is now impossible to teach children through experiments and activities for science content as they did earlier. Conceptual understanding of new scientific terms requires constant dialogue with children which is difficult to do regularly through

mediums like *mohalla* classes.

Another concern of the teachers of science and mathematics at the upper primary level is that the concepts learned in the previous class at this stage are very important and require adequate time to learn. In the current situation when children have been promoted in two classes, it is a big challenge to even bring them to the normal level. Some experienced teachers have also shared that the content at this stage increases considerably as compared to the primary level because of which children's reading and writing skills become crucial. Also, children who cannot read and write properly are unable to complete their homework, resulting in their lagging behind even more. Despite these circumstances, teachers are making constant efforts to work with the children.

#### *Return to school routine*

When children come to the school after it reopens, teachers worry that another challenge will be to keep them engaged in the teaching-learning activities throughout the day after having spent two years free of a regimented school routine. Presently, children only spend sit 1-2 hours in *mohalla* classes because after having spent this much time, they feel hungry and *mohalla* classes have no provision for mid-day meals.

#### **Some suggestions for teachers**

Firstly, ensure regular attendance of children by talking to all the parents. Secondly, create a pleasant and joyful atmosphere in the school for children so that they come to school regularly and eagerly. Establishing an emotional connection with school

and teachers is important for learning and creating children's readiness to learn. Learning-level-wise assessment of children will be very important and the more interactive one can make this assessment, the better. Paper-pencil tests alone will not work. Perhaps a lot of children may find this challenging too, which can lessen their enthusiasm for coming to school.

In the beginning we should make groups according to the extant level of the children and try to bring everyone to their current class level. The groups should continuously change with the change in children's learning levels. The tasks laid out for us right now seem to be centred around fundamental skills in language, mathematics and environmental studies at the primary level and subject-specific basic concepts and skills at the upper-primary level. We will need to focus on this for at least two months. Only a continuous review will reveal if this needs to be extended further. After this, we may proceed by identifying children's class-wise needs.

For children promoted to the upper primary level who need remedial support, grouping 2-3 classes, that is, the multi-grade, multi-level mode teaching process may help. The walls of the school can be decorated with TLMs. This will increase children's exposure as well as the speed of their learning.

It is important to make additional efforts to provide subject-wise, systematic inputs for these possible solutions. If we prepare before schools open, the long road will probably be easier to walk on. What is significant is that teachers are concerned about this, and their efforts will surely change the picture of education after the pandemic.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*

#### **Endnotes**

- i National Achievement Survey
- ii Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)



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# Art-Integrated Lessons to Facilitate Self-Expression

Vishwanath

When we begin our journey of healing from the effects of the pandemic, we must proceed by caring for everyone around us. This is an opportunity to alter our numerous not-so-good habits and ways of life by paying more attention to hygiene and conservation of the natural environment. Our strategy for educating and learning should be to create a safe and welcoming environment in schools to make children feel comfortable.

It has been over one year since schools closed down and most children have forgotten whatever they had learned in school. It is time to re-build their reading and writing skills but only after assessing that they are emotionally ready. Today, teachers and the entire education system are confused as to how to plan lessons and where to pick up from; how to gauge the past learning of children.

## Learning through art activities

It is essential for children to have a joyful learning experience and it is equally important to ensure that all children follow the safety protocols required to take care of themselves and others within the school premises. Along with this, teachers have to keep reminding them in subtle ways to openly express how they are feeling during this time. Here are some thoughts on what teachers can do:

- Focus on attitudes of care and respect towards every child.
- Ensure a fear-free environment within the school for children to share and express their feelings.
- Plan group activities that help children mingle with one another while following COVID-19 precautions.
- Invite local resource persons and parents of children to introduce their local traditions, folk tales and songs.
- Plan activities that promote creativity in children, such as integrating art into lesson plans for all classes and across subjects.
- Promote creation of artwork by using local resources and waste materials with the help of parents and siblings.

## First day of school

At the Azim Premji School, Kalaburagi, on the first day of school reopening, we are planning to conduct some art activities like painting, clay modelling, and playing games so that all the children can enjoy their return to school. This would motivate new children to get familiar with our school culture and promote greater peer interaction. We will be organising a display of artwork where children speak about their creations, share their poems and songs, compose their own tunes, explore the sounds of different musical instruments using kitchen utensils, plastic bottles and natural materials; as well as play some physical games that will rejuvenate them. Every effort will be made to enhance interest in learning different concepts across disciplines.

During the pandemic, we faced many challenges in carrying the teaching-learning materials (TLMs) individually to the different learning spaces in the community; and we had trouble with internet connectivity while sharing videos and listening to songs online with the children. There was a lack of space in community classes that limited our reach to more children. Due to restrictions on gathering in groups, our plans of inviting local artists and resource persons and introducing local art forms to the children were also put on hold. Most importantly, we could not pay attention to the learning outcomes of each child individually.

But even with all these challenges, children loved art exercises that were assigned in the community classes. Through this, they discovered many things on their own and developed self-confidence in their creative capacities. We plan to continue similar exercises after school reopens.

At present, we hope that schools reopen soon and we can return to regular operations. Many of the difficulties that we have been facing in teaching children will cease to exist when we return to classes in the school premises. We can teach more effectively when we interact in person with every child. We will be able to introduce physical activities and art forms in which group participation

and peer-learning are crucial. Most importantly, we will be able to ensure regular nutrition that directly impacts children’s learning and overall growth.

### Our experience with activities

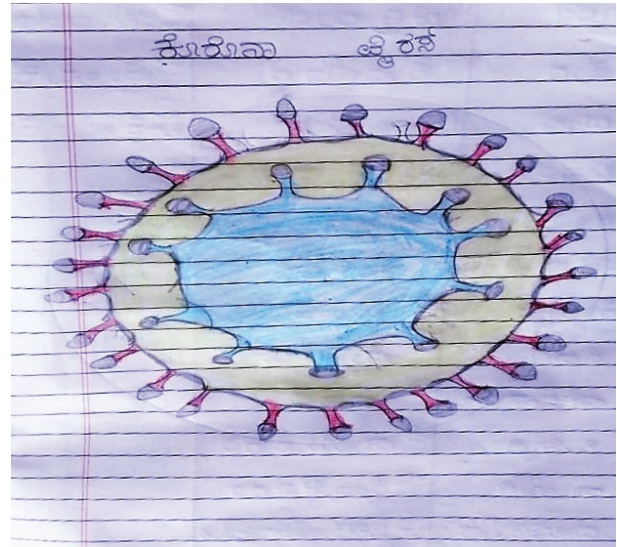
I am sharing some activities that we involved children with during the COVID-related shutdown of schools. When we initially began some exercises to support children with talking and expressing their feelings, it was the art activities and music that prompted the maximum response from them. We also included some fun activities just so that the children could learn with joy.

For children to first learn about cleanliness and safety precautions during the pandemic, we taught them these songs: ‘Baayi baayi corona ninu hogale bekide’ in Kannada and ‘Wash, wash, wash your hands, wash your hands together’ in English. We taught these songs while using a sanitiser and demonstrating the best way to rub hands together. Initially, when the children were hesitant to sing, we, teachers sang along with actions and body movements. When we all stood up and moved our bodies and sang the tune, the children loved it. We gradually introduced the English letters and meanings of words, like *mask*, *sanitiser*, *virus*, *social-distance*, *lockdown*, *unlock*, and *seal-down* etc. Children began to sing the song when they used the sanitiser and slowly got familiar with the meaning of these words and began to use these in regular conversations. A few children also wrote their own songs in Kannada, sang these in their own tunes and uploaded them on *YouTube*.

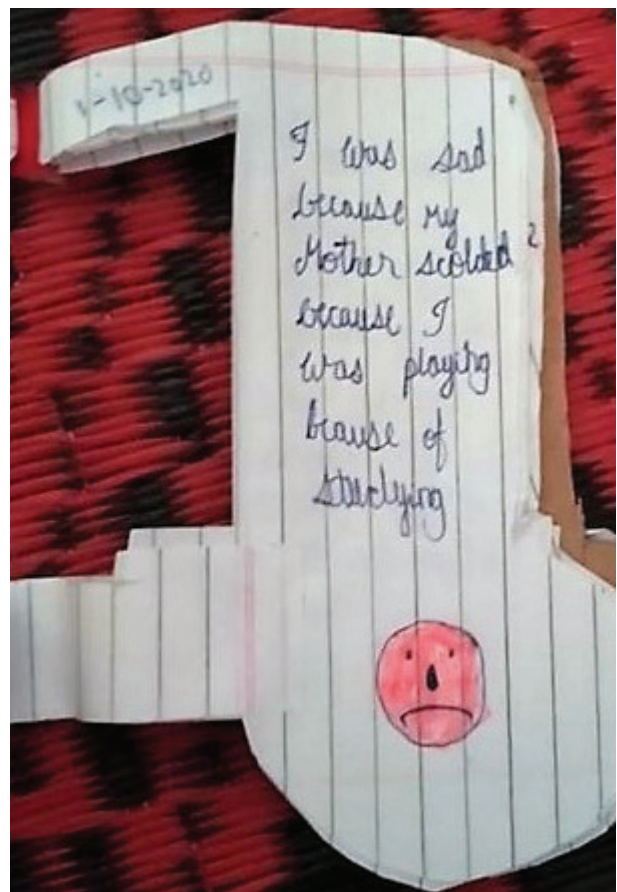
Children were particularly delighted when we taught them how to make masks using wastepaper. After learning to make masks, they gave these to their siblings and parents too.

Children made drawings of the coronavirus based

on information that was available and, also how they imagined it in their own minds. They also spoke about their creations.



Some children made *dandiya* sticks and would dance to the rhythm of the *dandiya*. The aim was to introduce folk songs to help children open up. A few of the children were hesitant to share their feelings, so we asked them to make a diary in which they could write down their thoughts and feelings freely. Children made diaries in many shapes (circle,



square, rectangle and even irregular, as shown in the picture) and wrote in them in English and drew emojis that reflected their feelings.

Children hand-printed each other's palms on paper, an activity that helped them interact with their peers so that gradually they felt more ready to talk and communicate. They also enjoyed clay modelling and making necklaces out of unused objects, like shells and beads. Children learned

practical skills like sewing. They sewed their names on cloth. They also enjoyed painting teacups in which they sowed seeds and watched plants grow, watering them regularly and recording the growth each day. They made boards for games like *Ludo*, *Snakes and Ladders* and chess to play at home. This helped them to learn shapes, lines and numbers from 1-100.



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# Sustaining Meaningful Ways of Engaging with Students

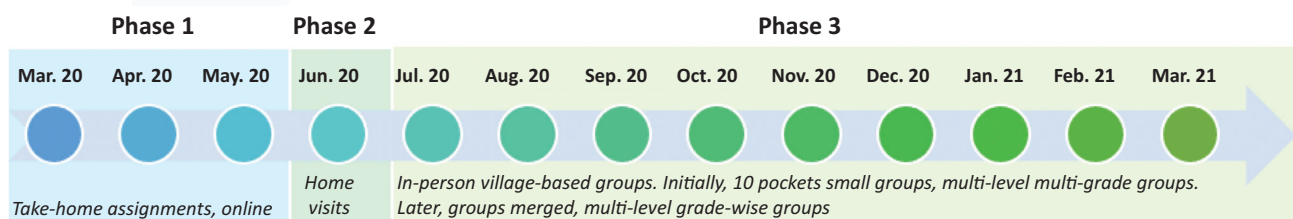
Malavika Rajnarayan and Jitandra Sharma

## Focus of the Azim Premji Schools

The Azim Premji Schools are an integral part of our overall work in school education in the field. The primary purpose of these schools is to demonstrate that good and equitable education is possible even when operating within contexts and constraints similar to those of rural government (or public) schools. This is done not only to contest the generally-held belief that children from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot learn, but also to offer specific practices that public schools could adopt to improve equity and quality. Our continuous efforts are towards the majority of our students achieving grade-level competencies as well as other relevant, age-appropriate skills/abilities, such as communication, crafts and working with teams and dispositions/attitudes, such as resilience and sensitivity to others.

This article reflects on the experience of the eight Azim Premji Schools operational in the districts of Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and

Uttarakhand, which have addressed the educational needs of children from nearby villages and towns during the COVID-19 pandemic. All our schools are located in some of the most disadvantaged geographies of the country, where digital learning is not viable. In the initial phase when the online mode was explored, we could only reach 40 percent of our students and even with them, we could see that this mode was proving to be ineffective. This led the school teams to rethink several details of the teaching-learning process and devise their student engagements through multiple modes. We started looking for meaningful ways of engaging students with the core objective that they sustain their learning without forgetting what they have learned so far due to their context. Therefore, all our efforts were organised around – a) ensuring that all our students have a reasonable competency level in foundational literacy and numeracy across grades and b) optimising the use of all possible methods and available resources for maximum learning.



Timeline of student engagement in Tonk, Rajasthan

## Different modes of student engagement

### Online mode

With many of our teachers not having personal laptops in 2020, adapting to any online mode of research or material preparation became a great struggle. This led to teachers collaborating and learning from one another. A review of the online mode during the first phase of student engagement revealed that the access to smartphones, network connectivity, resources for data recharge, sharing of devices with siblings were all factors that made online learning less feasible and excluded many children.

### Worksheet-based engagement

Worksheets are normally given to learners after they have been introduced to a particular concept. The idea of designing self-learning worksheets, where the teacher support is minimal, was entirely new to the teachers. To add to the challenge was the issue of customising it for students with varying competencies. And what would one do for students struggling with basic literacy skills, or for subjects like music, arts and physical education? After about eight weeks of designing, distributing and reviewing children's responses to worksheets, teachers found multiple problems in this mode. Ranging from

children's inability to read and understand the content, the paucity of time for teachers to explain the worksheets, to parents and siblings filling the worksheets for the children— teachers concluded that the amount of effort being put in designing worksheets was not resulting in student learning.

#### *Working in community pockets with multigrade groups*

When in-person engagement began, it was in very small, multigrade groups of 10-12 students. Emphasis was placed on developing and furthering foundational literacy and numeracy skills irrespective of what subject a teacher specialised in teaching. This led to all teachers planning learning around specific themes that addressed concepts from different subjects while keeping the core focus on reading with comprehension and writing fluently. The use of library books also aided in generating interest among children towards reading.

Generally, schools had to resort to multiple modes in order to reach out to all the students. When circumstances did not allow community classes for all, a mix of methods was tried. For example, in our Udham Singh Nagar school, teachers tried five different modes, namely, video calls, *WhatsApp*-based sharing, worksheets, individual home visits and community classes to reach class I and II students. Some students were able to connect in two to three modes but for those who could not be reached, home visits for community classes for a very small group was the only option. All this meant very hectic and tiring days for our teachers without substantial gains in terms of student learning.

#### **A typical day in our life last year**

In Tonk, when we started in-person village-based group studies, we had ten spots to cover. The students gathered in small primary and upper-primary groups for around one-and-a-half hours daily for:

- Daily sharing of diary reading, other local updates and sharing of the day's plan.
- Common large-group activities – using library books, discussion on a chosen theme or topic
- Small group tasks were either based on the common activity or on the competency level of the students
- Closing with some art activities, like drawing, craft, singing, drumming, etc.

#### **A session for class II students**

After the initial COVID-19 safety protocol procedures, the session typically began with warm-up, physical activities such as jumping on the spot, yoga and stretching or a simple game. This was followed by a short meditation and recall of the previous class. After this, all students would sing Hindi/English rhymes (storytelling on alternate days) followed by a bilingual conversation/dialogue about the story, rhyme, their experience or a picture. Sometimes, the teacher used audio/video resources related to a subject to draw the interest of students into learning. Children also got some reading time with storybooks and children's literature in both Hindi and English. Some games were also used in making the session interesting, such as language and mathematics cards or pictorial games where children write short sentences about the picture.

#### **Learning during the pandemic**

Despite the efforts of the teachers to use these multiple modes, every school found that around 20 percent of the class did not receive sufficient learning inputs when compared to the rest. There were multiple reasons for this: children moving to their native villages, parents not having phones or devices to access online material, homes being remote and having poor network connectivity and difficult family circumstances, etc. If parents or other elders in the family were not literate or available to provide study support, children found it more challenging to have academic continuity in a meaningful way.

We have found that the pandemic has increased the gap between those who were already struggling with grade-level competencies and those who were performing well. All those who had not acquired foundational literacy and numeracy were more at a disadvantage as it was difficult to engage them through material requiring reading-writing skills. Similarly, it was very challenging to engage children of pre-primary and classes I and II. To state the learning loss in concrete terms, we noticed that many of them have lost fluency in reading the class-level text, some cannot identify and pronounce alphabets. If they were creating their own sentences and stories earlier, they are struggling now. In maths, many are struggling with number sense, concepts like place value, carry,

borrow, decimal, etc., and all this needs to be revisited for the identified students.

We carried out a learning-level comparison of our students, keeping their March 2020 learning levels as reference. The data in the following tables shows that we have succeeded in reducing the number of students in Level 1 (below class level) and at least maintained or slightly improved the other levels. This is considering the fact that we maintained some level of academic connect with the majority of our students. One can imagine learning loss for students where there is discontinuity of studies for the past 18 months. We have categorised the levels as such:

Level 3 - Those who are doing class-level work.

Level 2 - Those who require teacher guidance and support to be able to do class-level work.

Level 1 - Those who are below class-level and so need to first work on their previous grade competencies.

Apart from the loss in cognitive learning, the school teams have also noted behavioural changes in some children due to being away from a regular healthy routine and safe school environment. These include a decline in personal hygiene practices (like cutting nails, combing hair, and attending to wounds and injuries), decline in attention, rise in aggressive and discriminatory behaviour, inability to manage emotions, and so on. Some students also picked up abusive language, habits detrimental to their health and wellbeing, so, this is another area which

schools would need to focus on.

### Teachers' learning and insights

The different modes of engaging with students presented the teachers with several learning opportunities and also gave the school teams a good idea of the pedagogies that resulted in maximum effectiveness in student learning. Several insights from these experiences have not only helped us in the current disrupted scenario but will also be useful once regular school commences. These could lead to more resilient and sustainable pedagogies in the longer run. Some of the insights are mentioned briefly below.

#### *Planning sessions for a multi-level, multi-grade classes*

Teachers aim to address a range of language competencies by anchoring the class on a common topic or a set of selected library books and through the use of graded worksheets. While the teacher may have a common plan for the entire class, the worksheets are used to assess each learner's competency level, so that specific tasks can be added to the subsequent worksheets, especially for students who require additional support.

#### *Using an integrated approach to teaching foundational literacy/numeracy*

All subject teachers integrate learning outcomes of foundational literacy in their regular lesson plans for their respective subjects. For instance, an EVS teacher of class V also ensures that her students

Class 5 (who were in class 3 in March 2020)					
Subjects	As'ment month, year	Total Students	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Hindi & Kannada	March, 2020	214	50	41	93
	Aug, 2021	213	30	64	89
Maths	March, 2020	214	49	48	86
	Aug, 2021	213	36	59	88
English	March, 2020	214	72	53	58
	Aug, 2021	213	62	61	60

Class 8 (who were in class 6 in March 2020)					
Subjects	As'ment month, year	Total Students	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Hindi & Kannada	March, 2020	194	44	93	57
	Aug, 2021	192	42	94	56
Maths	March, 2020	194	69	73	51
	Aug, 2021	192	44	86	62
English	March, 2020	194	104	63	31
	Aug, 2021	192	99	56	37

can understand the text related to EVS, summarise it in their words and comment on it in a systematic way – these are learning outcomes of language. In this way, students apply and practise their language skills in all subjects.

### **Learning history from stones**

In the Azim Premji School, Matli, Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand, teachers are integrating subjects at all levels. Recently, they used stone art to teach a history lesson to class VI students. Using natural material and objects around them, students carried out creative experiments eagerly and were excited to share their processes both orally, and in writing, while learning facts about history.

### *Other strategies*

A full session is anchored in the library for purposeful reading and writing, in which students are free to choose any book to read and then take up assignments accordingly.

This allows them the freedom to choose what they read, work on and this also caters to the varied interests of children.

Improving and practising writing through open-ended tasks could be in conjunction to their library class/sessions located within their context. Students can choose to write about any book that they have read or any observation they have made while doing their projects, maintaining a journal and then sharing it with peers for feedback on thoughts and ideas (and not grammar).

Situating lessons within their local context and using local resources to make lessons more relatable is very effective; for instance, learning profit and loss by understanding local businesses of their liking, such as the business of a *chaat* hawker.

In Yadgir, students were given the task of documenting their local folk traditions that included songs and stories. Children interviewed artists in their family and community to uncover the histories of these living traditions— how their elders learnt these in their childhood, and how they cherish them as adults today. This further deepened the children’s regard for their parents and elders in the community.

In Barmer, students were encouraged to create rain harvesting systems using available resources during its short monsoon period. This activity was followed up with a worksheet by letting them observe the water cycle and understand the process of rain.

### *Other insights*

It is essential to better the relationship with students, their parents and the community because this directly affects students’ continuity and learning. During the pandemic, we saw that when people realised that their own house or street could be a place of education, their whole attitude towards the school and teachers changed. There was more trust, sensitivity in interactions and cooperation in efforts, all leading to a better learning environment for the students.

Another insight has been that keeping our alumni engaged has its advantages. They are our resident representatives in the community, hence, help us in mobilising the community. Their success inspires younger students.

It is interesting to note these pedagogical insights are actually general expectations from all good teachers, but we know that not many teachers follow these suggestions. The COVID-19 pandemic created circumstances for us to go beyond the comforts of the textbook- and classroom-centred teaching. As we reflected on all that we have learnt, we realised that the approach and methods we employed are good for any normal school day teaching as well and can continue to be used when schools reopen.

### **Looking ahead**

Being in regular touch with our students and having engaged them academically in different modes gives us a certain advantage. The COVID-19 period has also helped teachers become better equipped to handle diverse learning levels. The larger question is to understand the learning gap in detail and to have fast-paced measures to fill these gaps in an engaging way without pressurising either teachers or students unnecessarily as it would be counterproductive to do so.

We have the following plan for our students:

1. Re-orient all the children into regular school practices and structured learning routines slowly. This is important as they are finding it hard to sit and work for long hours.
2. We already have a good sense of their learning loss, particularly in language and maths, so all teachers will now undertake a more rigorous exercise to understand in greater detail what has been retained and what has been lost. This

is needed more for social science and science subjects on which we could not focus much during the pandemic period.

3. We have begun 'syllabus revision' exercise for different grades and subjects for the remaining academic term this year. On the one hand, this exercise refers to the learning outcomes expected for a subject/class, on the other, it refers to the current learning levels of our students.
4. This revised syllabus will guide teaching work. The initial emphasis for a few months will be on revisiting/teaching concepts and skills from the previous classes. For some students, it will be a revision and they will assist teachers in helping those who are lagging behind.
5. For the primary level, we had developed worksheets as per subject Learning Objectives (LOs) and aligned them to textbook chapters. These will be handy in ascertaining the learning levels of children and refreshing their memories about what they had learnt in the previous classes. For instance, a class V student, can start with a class III worksheet and slowly move up to class V level.
6. We have also identified students who are struggling in foundational literacy and numeracy, so for them, the focus would be on gaining these skills, both in regular class as well as in additional remedial classes for a few months.
7. Similarly, we have students who joined the school either in 2020 or 2021 in pre-primary or classes I and II. Not much work has been done with them, so there is a need to plan differently for them.
8. For students who can work to some extent at the current class level, we will go ahead with the class syllabus. The assignments for this group could be more group-project based as well as the self-learning mode of worksheets.
9. Addressing the children's socio-emotional needs through dedicated time for dialogue, journaling practices, arts, music, drama and physical education will play an important role in this exercise.
10. We will also have to be ready for any school closure due to COVID-19 in the coming months. Our learning from the previous lockdowns will be useful if that happens, as we can quickly go back to our multiple modes of engagement.



*Community class near a pond*



Stone art by students



A temple being used for community classes



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**Jitendra Sharma** coordinates capacity-building efforts in the Azim Premji Foundation and provides academic coordination and support to all Azim Premji Schools operating in several locations. He comes with many years of experience as a teacher and teacher-educator. He loves to work with both children and teachers. He may be contacted at [jitendra.sharma@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:jitendra.sharma@azimpremjifoundation.org)

# Focus on Foundational Learning is Important

Nandini Shetty

School not only enables children to learn various subjects, but it also lays the foundation for their social, emotional and cognitive development. Children learn better and more quickly when they are learning with other children. School keeps children away from family problems, child labour and social ills, such as drug addiction. Children have faced many family and social problems along with learning losses due to the closure of schools. Many children have forgotten how to read, write and solve numerical problems, which may act as a deterrent for them to return to school. Hence, it is extremely important to reopen schools soon and facilitate children's learning.

## Sethu Bandha programme

In our government schools, worksheets were provided to children as part of the *Sethu Bandha* (literally, bridge) programme to ensure continuous learning during the closure of schools. An effort was made to teach concepts through these worksheets. The *Sethu Bandha* programme was carried out for a duration of 45 days for classes I-V. Children were asked to come to school with their parents to collect the worksheets. If children were unable to come to school, the worksheets were taken by the teachers to the community for distribution. There were many challenges in implementing this programme.

## Worksheets

Worksheets can be used effectively for practising the concepts learnt and for assessment. However, it is rather difficult to use worksheets for concept formation. As parents carry their mobile phones with them to work, teachers were not able to contact all the children over the phone. Many teachers were also engaged in COVID-19-relief efforts and were not present in the school when children came to clarify their doubts and ask questions. Most of these worksheets were intended for practising grade-specific concepts. They were not related to concepts that were taught in the previous years. Since children were not able to read and write and they had forgotten what they had

learnt in the previous years, they were unable to read, understand and answer the questions in the worksheets. Children were returning either blank worksheets without answering or worksheets with answers copied from previously answered worksheets. Hence, it can be said that it was not possible to implement *Sethu Bandha* programme meaningfully.

## Learning loss

School closure for the past one-and-a-half years has had varying effects on children's learning. In the schools that I am engaged with, I have observed that children who were quick learners have also forgotten what they had learnt in the previous classes and were struggling with foundational skills (reading, multiplication and division). Nevertheless, when we revisit these concepts, they are able to remember what was taught and are able to learn quickly.

On the other hand, children who were slow in learning, such as children who were learning in a graded manner (for example, in mathematics initially these children were provided with concrete objects for concept formation, then the concept was reinforced with the help of pictures and finally, they were given problems in abstract form, that is, in numbers), have suffered a significant loss in learning. Three children in class IV who were taught using this method, and who could earlier recognize and write two-digit numbers in ascending and descending order, recognize small and greater numbers, understand and knew the method of addition and subtraction (concepts that were class-appropriate), were found to have no understanding of quantity which they had learnt earlier. For example, they are not able to differentiate between smaller or greater numbers, nor able to tell which number should be added to 20 to get 30, nor able to understand and solve questions, such as  $5+3=?$ . Teaching these children class IV content would be ineffective as they will be unable to grasp anything. We need to start by teaching them concepts taught in class I all over again.

Similarly, children whose mother tongue is other than Kannada have had no exposure to Kannada during this time. They have forgotten Kannada letters and now need to be taught *aksharas*, *guniaksharas* and *ottaksharas* again. Therefore, we will not be able to make up for this learning loss in 30 to 45 days.

#### *Focus on foundational learning*

The *Sethu Bandha* programme has ended now, and schools have received textbooks for all grades which means class-level concepts will need to be transacted. The formation of these class-appropriate concepts depends on fundamental concepts in language and mathematics (reading, writing, number concepts, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) and other basic conceptual knowledge. In essence, to ensure meaningful learning, we need to make sure that children have learnt foundational language and mathematical skills. These need to be taught before or along with level-appropriate concepts. While teaching science and social science lessons we should start with fundamental concepts as well. If we do not attempt to fill the learning gaps, children may lose interest in learning and may drop out of school.

#### **Way forward**

##### *Assess competencies*

Due to the reasons mentioned earlier, it is extremely important to understand the learning level of each child. We need to use simple, informal and meaningful methods for assessment. When children visit the school or when teachers go to the communities to meet children, assessment can be carried out in the form of conversations, by posing simple questions, by making children read simple words and sentences and by asking them to solve simple problems. Through these, each child's competency in basic language, mathematics and other subjects can be assessed. This would provide us with an understanding of the level one needs to begin teaching from for each child and help us in grouping children based on their learning needs.

##### *Begin again*

As long as schools remain closed, teachers will need to go to the communities that the children live in to teach them. We can start by forming small groups of two to three children. After teaching each concept we must give them simple worksheets to practice what they have learnt. Periodic informal assessment should be carried out to track each

child's progress. A portfolio must be maintained for each child, and the summary of these assessments included in it. Only after a child attains a clear understanding of a particular concept, should the next concept be introduced. Also, we cannot use just one single worksheet on a particular concept because even within a group, children will be at different levels of learning. Hence, for each concept, several worksheets need to be designed to cater to diverse learning needs. For example, if we need to teach the addition of four-digit numbers, we can follow these steps:

Stage 1: Begin with a one-digit number. Simple problems in the form of statements that the child can connect with everyday life should be given. This would make the child understand the concept of addition. If the child is not able to solve this, a few concrete objects should be given to teach addition. Following this, the child can be taught to represent the same using numbers. It is necessary to use concrete materials and a variety of activities for children who learn slowly. Once a child starts solving number problems with ease, worksheets should be given for further practice.

Stage 2: Next, problems with two-digit numbers (up to 20) should be given. As with one-digit number problems, children who struggle to solve the problems should be given concrete objects to work with. Once they start solving the problems, worksheets can be for practice.

Stage 3: Addition with carry-over to tens place using small two-digit numbers can be explained using bundles of tens. Many children struggle to understand the addition of numbers with carryover. Therefore, it is necessary to give opportunities to solve many problems using bundles of tens. The more they practice, the better the concept clarification. In future, this will help children learn the algorithm steps of addition of numbers with carryover.

Stage 4: After children learn to add using bundles of tens, they should be given problems with numbers to solve using algorithms. They should add using the correct steps. Worksheets should be given for practice.

Stage 5: Once children are familiar with the above concepts, addition problems using three- and four-digit numbers can be given. Number problems should be given after children practice with concrete objects. For each concept, relevant worksheets for practice at every level should be prepared.

Stage 6: A worksheet with addition problems using

one-to-four-digit numbers should be given at this stage. This will be the final assessment worksheet. New concepts can be introduced to children who are able to complete the final assessment worksheet correctly. For children who are unable to complete the worksheet, errors should be identified and required concepts need to be taught again. After this, the assessment should be repeated.

It is desirable to introduce each stage with problems in the form of statements related to real life. An assessment can also be conducted after every two stages, before the final assessment. The learning and assessment details of each and every stage should be documented and included as part of the child's portfolio.

Progress of all children needs to be checked periodically. We need to pay special attention to children who learn slowly, even if it means we have to put in some extra effort because only through this will a child be able to secure a better future. Children will remain in the education system if they learn well and if there is continuity of learning.

#### *Prevent children from dropping out*

Whenever school starts, our main task will be to bring the children back to school. Children might have been subjected to various kinds of physical, sexual and mental abuse during this time. Some may have lost their parents or others in the family. As we know, many children have started working due to financial distress at home. It will be very difficult to bring these children back to school. It is imperative to have conversations with parents and guardians to convince them to send children back to school. We need to have conversations with the children, too. Again, this may seem like a difficult task, but it is absolutely necessary to make an effort in this regard.

At present, children have lost the habit of attending school regularly. Children who were frequently absent earlier may not be interested in coming back to school. We need to meet these children and convince them to come back to school. The only way to prevent absenteeism is to understand children's mental state and the problems they are facing, and by treating them with love. When they do come back, they should be engaged in drawing, colouring and other activities that they are interested in, before engaging them in academic learning, especially for those who have lost interest in learning. Children who have lost interest in schooling may need some time to get used to learning activities. They may have lost the habit of sitting attentively in class and following lessons. Hence, lessons must be planned with a lot of activities and ample opportunities for observation, practical work and data collection which will take children out of their classrooms. This will ensure children's enthusiastic participation. We need to keep checking children's learning through informal assessment methods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has destabilised the life of many children. We have a responsibility to protect these children's future. Many children will completely drop out of the education system unless we take adequate measures to ensure that they can continue to learn. If we let children drop out, many families will face financial, social and familial difficulties in the future. This will further widen the inequity that is prevalent in society. Children have lost a critical one-and-a-half years of joyful school life due to school closure. Quality education is the right of all children. Under no circumstances should children be deprived of it, and it is our duty to ensure that their right to education is protected.

#### **Endnotes**

- i *Sethu Bandha* programme was implemented by the State Government in all government, Kannada-medium schools of Karnataka.



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# Competency-wise Grouping for Level-appropriate Learning

Navneet Bedar

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted everything around us. Though it has had a deep impact on our economy, emerging from it is relatively easier. Its impact on education and children's learning, however, is profound and we will see its consequences for generations to come. Amid an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, schools were shut, and in the initial months, the lack of resources made it impossible for teachers to communicate with their students. This long period of school closure has affected the learning of children in two ways: not only did their regular learning get interrupted, but it also came to a sudden halt; secondly, due to schools not functioning regularly, they have begun to forget some of what they had learned earlier. Here, an attempt is made to understand this with an example.

In March 2020, Kareem had passed class I. In class I, he had learned to count up to 50, identify Hindi and English letters, identify simple words in Hindi that had no *maatras*. He could also read chapters from his textbook *Rimjhim*. He could do simple addition and subtraction sums without carryover. He had also memorized some multiplication tables. He could read some easy texts in Hindi both from and outside of his textbooks. He had also learned to write capital and small letters in English. He could read and write words, such as 'cat', 'mat', 'hat', 'rat'. He could also understand formulaic or instructional/imperative sentences made of simple words, such as 'sit down', 'stand up', 'come in' etc. He had memorized some English nursery rhymes.

In the academic session of 2020-21, he became a student of class II without any formal assessment. He did not come to school because schools were shut, and he was unable to participate regularly in whatever teaching-learning work that had begun at the community learning centres in the month of August. Meanwhile, his village was declared as a containment zone twice and he could not visit

the community centre during this time, as well. Classes in community centres were held for just two to three months during the year and Kareem could only devote 20-30 percent of his time to formal learning/schooling. When he was attending class II lessons held at the community centre, he realized that he had forgotten much of what he had learned in class I and what was being taught in class II seemed difficult to him. It was impossible for Kareem to connect with his teacher online as his household had only one basic phone which was with his father all day.

Each day that Kareem attempted to study/read class II level lessons was a painful reminder to him that he should have tried harder to understand all the topics he had missed in class I. He found it difficult to solve carryover addition and subtraction sums and multiplication and division sums. It was difficult to understand text-based questions. The problem of text-based questions was not just a mathematical one, but a linguistic one too.

He has been promoted to class III in April 2021. It is extremely difficult for him to use what he learned in class I as a base for learning in class III, which is even more difficult. Kareem is clearly not prepared for the requirements of learning and understanding the content that class III demands. He still has only half the skills of class I. Also, environmental studies (EVS) has been added to his class III curriculum. This includes many topics and concepts that he has zero familiarity with.

## Challenges teachers face

All kinds of challenges came to the fore for the teachers as well. Many a time, a village or locality was converted into a containment zone and the community did not allow the gathering of children for classes and parents too refused to send children to community classes. Still, teachers continued to make every effort to ensure the learning of children

in whichever way they could. But we know that there can be no substitute for continuous and regular five to six hours of daily teaching-learning in a classroom. The work done in the classroom helps children initiate dialogues with each other and the complete ecosystem of the classroom helps them learn. When a child shares her life experiences during a classroom discussion, she not only helps herself to understand various notions better, but other children who are listening to her are also able to relate to those experiences and in the process, they too develop an understanding of the said notions.

Kareem's example is of a primary level student but the experiences we will need to address further are of upper primary level students. Many children who were in class IV in March 2020 are in class VI now and similar challenges are coming to light in their case too. They too show similar learning gaps as we saw in Kareem's case. They may have had a longer exposure to schooling as compared to Kareem, but they are not far behind when it comes to forgetting concepts. Essentially, we currently have the opportunity to work directly and continuously with upper primary students only. Similar work is being done with primary level students in community centres but there is still a problem of regularity there.

### **My experiences in schools**

My personal experiences are related to schools in two places - Dhamtari (Chhattisgarh) and Dineshpur, Udham Singh Nagar (Uttarakhand). Teaching-learning processes are being carried out at the upper-primary level at both places.

Schools have not formally opened in Dhamtari, but efforts were continuously being made to work with children to continue the teaching-learning process. At the primary level, teachers continued to work with the children in their homes or in the community, making worksheets based on each concept and lesson, ensuring that the worksheets reach the children and reaching out to the children at regular intervals to understand the difficulties faced by them in filling the worksheets and solving problems together.

Despite this, when schools opened after 17 months, we saw that children had forgotten a lot of what they had previously learnt. This issue is clearly visible in the upper primary level classes. Basic operations in mathematics, fractions, decimals and all such concepts are either completely forgotten

by students or they are making common mistakes in these operations. Similarly, their reading and writing skills are marred by problems in the recognition of words and script. This problem is more in English than in Hindi.

### **Identifying challenges**

To address this situation, an attempt was made to create a rubric of language and mathematics learning outcomes. Based on this rubric, a student can be tested on what she has successfully learned and the areas where she needs more attention.

Baseline assessment of children was carried out based on such clearly-outlined learning outcomes and abilities. It was found that about 35 percent of children have some or the other difficulty in basic abilities/skills. Either they could not develop grade-appropriate abilities/skills, or they forgot them for want of regular practice during the lockdown. To address this, groups were formed based on the ability/skills/level and challenges of the children.

### **Competency-wise grouping**

The first group for Hindi language consisted of 11 children who faced difficulties in basic language skills, i.e., a crisis of letter recognition and reading and writing fast, without a pause. The second group was made up of 12 children who did not face problems in basic abilities but in writing skills, finer phonemic awareness and meaning-making. This group also included children whose first language is not Hindi and who found the sounds ष and ष or र and र unfamiliar.

Similarly, in mathematics, one group was formed of 12 students who had problems with basic mathematical skills, such as number recognition, understanding the number pattern, basic operations etc. The second group was made up of children who faced challenges with class III-V level skills. Besides this, they also had linguistic challenges due to which they faced difficulty in text-based questions.

Keeping these groups in mind, teachers prepared a teaching-learning plan. All the teachers of the upper primary level were engaged in this work. Each teacher was working in a focused manner with two or three children to understand and address the individual problems of students. During this process, we understood something fascinating about students: they have a deep

passion for learning! But amidst the school routine, with so many other students and for various other reasons, this learning is not ensured. But this is a tale for another time.

The problems were almost the same in both the Dhamtari and Dineshpur schools. Therefore, almost the same method and scheme were used in both places. Almost two months have passed since this method was adopted and its progress can be gauged from the fact that more than 50 percent of students have overcome their challenges.

The first attempt involved 23 children who faced a challenge with basic abilities/skills such as numbers, place values, basic operations, letter recognition, reading ability, and the ability to write what is heard. After two months, about 17-18 of these students have either overcome these challenges or are in the final stages of doing so. Some children are still struggling with these challenges for various reasons, but a change has been visible in them too and we expect them to acquire these abilities soon.

### Teaching-learning process

In the language group, one of Digantar's<sup>i</sup> old package *Sahaj Pathan* was used. In this package, various reading and writing activities are built around six stories. Although this package is for the students of classes III, IV and V, we used it for our purposes with some modifications. Some stories were changed, some new ones added, and some exercises were added too. It was seen that all 11 students took interest in these stories. Through this, they quickly acquired the skills of letter recognition, reading without pauses and writing.

In this package, a poster of each story, a strip of each sentence of the story, each word card was used. On a regular basis, the story was first narrated, then finger-reading was done with students, then sentences of the story and word cards were arranged in the correct sequence to recreate

the story. This process of reading and arranging the story was an almost daily process for all the children individually. Apart from this, students also solved worksheets based on the story. In the worksheet, some words of the story were omitted, and students were asked to fill in the blanks with those words to complete the story.

Word cards from each story were used to form sentences that were not already in the story. The children took great interest in identifying both known and new words, writing them down, distinguishing the sounds of words, associating those sounds with the visual symbols used for them and forming new words. After a gap of two months, 8 out of 11 children can easily read level IV texts of the *Barkha* series and answer the questions based on them. With the remaining 3 children, the challenge of not being able to attend school regularly, not being able to concentrate fully and continuously in class and forgetting concepts remains.

There were 12 children in the other language group. Their problems were of a different kind. For example, children with a different first language had to be given more practice with the rules of grammatical gender. To do this, teachers have focused on one or two children and tried to remedy their individual problems through exercises and worksheets. Even in this endeavour, about 50 percent of the problems seem to have been resolved in the last two months.

### In summary

Based on the experience of the last two months, it can be said that if inputs are given in a clearly defined, planned and continuous manner, that is, by identifying learning gaps and working on them, most of the learning gaps can be filled soon. As to our approach with students of classes VI, VII, VIII, planned inputs will be given to meet challenges ahead. It is expected that by the end of this term, all students will be at grade-appropriate levels.

<sup>i</sup>Names have been changed to protect children's identities.



एक चिड़िया थी। एक दिन वह डबरे में पानी पीने गई। वह पानी में गिर गई। तभी वहां एक बिल्ली आई। चिड़िया बोली- "बहन, मुझे यहां से निकालो।" बिल्ली बोली- "निकाल तो दूगी, लेकिन मैं तुझे खाऊंगी।" चिड़िया बोली- "पहले मुझे निकाल, सुखा और फिर खा लेना।" बिल्ली ने उसे पानी से निकाला। सूखने के लिए मैदान में रख दिया। बिल्ली पंख सूखने का इंतजार करने लगी। पंख सूखते ही चिड़िया उड़ गई। बिल्ली देखती रह गई।

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Endnotes

i Digantar Shiksha Evam Khelkud Samiti is a non-profit organisation in Jaipur working in the field of education since 1978.



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Just as we entered the dawn of 2020, somewhere in mainland China there was an outbreak of a disease that came to be known as COVID-19. However, by no stretch of the imagination could anyone have known that this would leave such a devastating impact across the world. Before the world could take cognisance of it, many events unfolded at lightning speed. The rate of the spread of the infection was so fast that more than 200 countries were affected within a few weeks, forcing the WHO to declare it a 'pandemic' on 11 March 2020. This black day brought into focus the fact that policymakers, in even the most developed countries, were caught unawares against a microscopic organism that could transcend boundaries and jeopardise the most robust healthcare systems.

The lack of clarity about the virus, its origin, precipitating factors, diverging views from the scientific community, unverified information and other factors only added to the confusion, rather than helped in providing a resolution to the mounting crisis. In the meantime, people were collapsing like packs of cards, and many lost their kith and kin, livelihoods and homes. The fear of death and getting infected surfaced across all age groups and grim news in the form of dashboards, similar to stock market news, appeared all over the media. These dashboards initially focused on mortalities which created panic and fear of death, impacting people with fragile minds the most.

### Immediate impact

To prevent the spread of the disease, governments brought in social restrictions on gatherings and closure of schools (which was most disruptive to children's lives), business establishments, parks and outdoor activities, resulting in abrupt changes to routines as well as huge financial losses.

In addition, being subjected to disharmony at home, increased exposure to pre-existing vulnerabilities (drug and alcohol dependence, domestic violence, and mental illness in family members), excessive screen use and unhealthy diet have contributed to stress and affected the psychological balance of

vulnerable individuals. The immediate impact was felt severely by terminally-ill patients, who could not be administered treatment on time. These risk factors, along with environmental factors, such as lockdowns and uncertainty regarding resumption of services, have had a bearing on learning capacities, adaptive behaviours, productivity, physical and mental health of children and threatened growth and development and may compromise their holistic development.

The issues and problems were compounded by the most important question in the minds of all people: when will COVID-19 end? There is no answer for this till date, which adds to fear of subsequent waves of the disease and a lingering fear of repeated lockdowns. It became apparent that children were one of the most affected, as they had witnessed gloom and despair all around, all the time, when they were, in fact, supposed to be enjoying the formative years of their lives.

### Deeper impact

Each individual is unique and certain problems generally occur at various stages in life. However, in this peculiar situation, *everyone* went through the same set of problems at the same time, leading to more trauma as there were fewer coping mechanisms and support systems to buttress such large-scale shock. The risk of illness, protective confinement, social isolation, and increased stress level of parents and caregivers, produce potential risks to child development. Some of the manifestations among children are:

#### *Anxiety disorders*

This is the most common mental health problem in children and those who suffer from an anxiety disorder typically have impairment in multiple domains of daily functioning.

- Difficulty in concentrating
- Always crying and being clingy
- Lack of proper sleep or waking in the night with bad dreams
- Not eating properly

- Getting angry or irritable easily
- Losing control during outbursts
- Always worrying or having negative thoughts
- Getting tense and fidgety frequently
- Using the toilet more than usual

#### *Depression*

- Feeling low or sad persistently, for a long time
- Being irritable all the time
- Lacking interest in things that they enjoyed
- Exhibiting tiredness and exhaustion most of the time
- Talking about feeling guilty or worthless
- Numbness of emotions or feeling of hopelessness or emptiness
- Suicidal tendencies
- Self-harm, for example, slashing their wrists or taking medicine overdose
- Over-eating or eating less than usual

#### *Acute stress disorder*

- Psychological symptoms such as anxiety, low mood, irritability, emotional ups and downs, poor sleep, poor concentration, wanting to be alone
- Not feeling emotionally connected with anyone
- Frequent disquieting and unpleasant dreams or flashbacks
- Avoidance of anything that might trigger memories
- Reckless or aggressive behaviour that may be self-destructive

#### *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*

- Having scary thoughts and memories of a past event or events
- Emotionally numb for a long time
- Sleep problems
- Feeling nervous, jittery, or alert and watchful (on guard)
- Losing interest in things that they enjoyed and seeming detached, numb or unresponsive
- Having trouble showing affection
- Being more aggressive than before, even becoming violent
- Staying away from certain places or situations that bring back memories
- Having flashbacks. These can be images, sounds,

smells, or feelings. The child may believe the event is happening again

#### *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)*

- Excessive concern with cleanliness
- Extreme fears about bad things happening or doing something wrong
- Frequent hand-washing
- Repeated doubts, for example, checking whether a door is locked
- Too much attention to detail
- Worrying too much about something bad happening
- Repeating their own or others' words
- Asking the same questions again and again
- Following firm rules of order, such as putting on clothes in the very same order every day
- Disturbing and unwanted thoughts or images about hurting others

#### **What teachers can do**

##### *Take the problems seriously*

First and foremost, whatever is causing the problem, take it seriously. It may not seem like a big problem to you, but it could be a major problem for the child.

##### *Talk to the child*

By speaking to the child, a teacher can understand the nature of problem – anxiety, fear and worries that the child may be experiencing. If the child does not want to talk to you, let them know that you are concerned and available if they need you. Encourage them to talk to someone else they trust, for example, a friend or a family member. In case of serious issues, such as suicidal thoughts or sexual abuse, teachers must act immediately and seek the help of healthcare professionals and law enforcement agencies.

##### *Child safety*

Make sure that the child is safe after the traumatic event and knows where to seek help in case of an emergency. Teachers can provide contact details of people for quick assistance and can also help the child in contacting them.

##### *Emotional support*

Children usually receive emotional comfort from family or close friends. In the absence of such a support system, the teacher must step in. Healthcare providers can provide support by

explaining the likely outcome of COVID-19, and teaching coping skills.

#### *Recognition of changes*

Help children recognise their feelings and changes in behaviour. This is important because due to stress, a child may feel confused and may not articulate what is happening to them in clear and unambiguous terms.

#### *Checking suicidal thoughts*

It is important to evaluate the more troubled children for suicidal tendencies, especially in those with risk factors, such as co-morbid psychiatric conditions like depression.

#### *Practical support*

This assumes great importance in the case of emotional trauma, which can arise from the death of parents or close relatives and physical and/or emotional abuse. This is because, apart from the tremendous emotional trauma of the event itself,

the child may need help with reporting the incident to the police and in finding someone to provide the support needed, for example, for getting leave from school.

#### *Follow-up visits*

Regular follow-up visits to the counsellor are recommended for all children who have experienced significant traumatic events during this period.

#### **A final word**

The high levels of stress and several other factors related to COVID-19 have resulted in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and could impact children's brain development. To prevent lasting damage, care and support that enhance the feelings of security and affection should be provided to help restore normalcy. To end on a note of optimism, recent research suggests that 68 percent of fathers have become closer to their children as a result of the closer bonding that COVID-19 has enforced.



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The impact of COVID-19 on children is likely to be long-term and complex: it goes much further than infection by the virus, which is arguably less severe among children but affects the determinants of their health and wellbeing. These determinants include nutrition, mental health, social isolation, and lack of access to schooling and healthcare.<sup>i</sup> A study published in *The Lancet* estimates that, as of July 2021, an estimated 120,000 children have been orphaned by the pandemic.<sup>ii</sup> But even for most children, who probably have not suffered such heart-breaking loss, the measures to contain the spread of the infection, such as lockdowns and closure of schools have been immensely disruptive. Two major casualties have been: children's nutritional status<sup>iii</sup> and their mental health.<sup>iv</sup> It is in this context that the current debates over the reopening of schools need to be framed, keeping the health and wellbeing of our children at the core of all such decisions. Given that this situation is completely outside anyone's lived experience, this is likely to be a steep learning curve. But the better we prepare ourselves – and this includes all those involved in the process: the students, teachers, parents, and the system as a whole – the more likely that the transition will be smooth and, overall, positive.

### Health and nutrition impacts: the evidence

Anxieties regarding the opening of schools and the possible health risks for the returning children stem from the following multiple sources:

- a. While the vaccination of 18-year-olds was authorised and started on June 21, 2021, school-age children are currently not eligible for vaccines, even though vaccine trials are in the planning stage. Vaccines for 12–17-year-olds are likely to be available sooner than for those in the younger age groups.
- b. Given that the vaccination programme has picked up and overall, cases are declining, yet, with the numbers surging in some parts of the country, such as in Kerala, and the uneven vaccination coverage, there are predictions that a third wave is inevitable and perhaps the country will again be caught under-prepared.<sup>v</sup>
- c. Even if children can weather the storm and remain relatively unscathed, they are likely to carry the virus home to parents and elderly grandparents, who continue to be vulnerable, particularly to the highly contagious Delta variant that is capable of infecting (albeit less seriously) even those who have had both doses of the vaccine. Evidence shows that children could remain largely asymptomatic and yet be capable of transmitting infection quite effectively.<sup>vi</sup>
- d. Zamrani et al (2021) have looked at global data and show that the pandemic has had significant impacts on children's nutritional status. In low-income countries, such as India, loss of livelihoods and income of parents, combined with the loss of food support such as school feeding programmes, has led to a serious crisis of undernutrition (in some high-income countries, greater consumption of junk food and sedentary lifestyles have led to obesity). The tragic images of migrant workers and their families walking great distances back to their homes from cities will stay with us for a long time. The impact of this displacement on adult and child nutrition is yet to be measured, but the evidence from groups, such as the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN),<sup>vii</sup> and many others providing food and other aid to migrant workers indicates a dire shortage of basic food staples, not to mention nutritional inputs, such as fruit and vegetables.
- e. Inevitably, students from poorer, more marginalised backgrounds will have additional challenges in integrating back into schools. The *State of Working India 2021 Report* by the Azim Premji University shows that an estimated 230 million additional Indians have been pushed into poverty due to the pandemic.<sup>viii</sup> The resulting 'Grief, fear, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time, and parental fatigue have negatively affected the mental health of children.'<sup>ix</sup> Here again, there is yet no hard data in India, but studies have shown that such disasters and emergencies can trigger mood

and behaviour disorders, substance abuse and suicidal tendencies.<sup>x</sup> This has led to an upsurge of voluntary organisations and people's groups stepping up to provide assistance, but this is not a long-term answer to the problem. It requires a sustained, coordinated, and systemic response from those who are tasked with promoting the public good – the government.

### **Actions to build an effective response**

Being prepared for the inevitable opening up of schools with the necessary protocols and arrangements in place to ensure the safe return of students is critical. Schools need to tackle the challenge at three levels (see UNICEF guidelines, pg 5):<sup>xi</sup>

First, students are integrating back into regular school after a long hiatus – this would be a challenge for many of them. Enforcing the standard protocols, while they are now familiar – masking-up, hand-washing and maintaining distance – will be difficult. Yet, these need to be enforced, keeping in mind that these are young children, and their instinct is to interact and play. Detailed guidelines have been developed by the government for the safe opening of schools and are available.<sup>xii</sup>

These guidelines provide advice on various aspects pertaining to making adequate arrangements to preserve the health and safety of children going back to school, including ensuring that the school infrastructure is in working order (water supply and sanitation particularly); putting in place plans for arrangement of classroom furniture; scheduling of regular monitoring of children's health status including screening for symptoms (fever, cough) and testing of children for COVID-19; assigning responsibility in case of emergencies (for example, students testing positive); enforcing rules governing celebrations and congregation of students; and so on. A one-day awareness programme on this or a similar set of guidelines should be undertaken for all school personnel to ensure that knowledge, attitude and practice of COVID-19-safety are uniformly understood and internalised.

Second, even pre-pandemic, India already fared poorly on nutritional indicators, ranking 94th out of 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020. Even worse, data emerging from the National Family Health Survey Round 5 (2019-20) showed that many states had a declining trend in key nutrition indicators, such as underweight (low weight for age)<sup>xiii</sup> and stunting (low height for age). Malnutrition is the underlying and invisible factor

that contributes to more than 50 percent of the almost 750,000 deaths of under-5-years children in India every year. Although it was largely to mitigate the short- and long-term impacts of undernutrition that the Government expanded the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) nationwide in 2001. Now included under the National Food Security Act, the MDMS is the largest school feeding programme in the world and is estimated to cover about 120 million school children in primary and upper-primary classes in government schools across the country.

Schools need to ensure that the MDMS is fully implemented from the first day of school. Other important measures also need to be instituted, such as:

- a. Conducting a systematic anthropometric measurement of all children. This would mean measuring the height and weight of all children and mapping them with WHO 2017 growth charts. This will help to immediately identify the children most at risk and requiring urgent attention. Children who are at a critical level would require immediate referral to the nearest Primary Health Centre.
- b. Using available MDMS resources to provide affordable, protein-rich food, and as far as possible, access to fruit and vegetables. For children from the most vulnerable households, access to staples such as rice or wheat has perhaps been close to adequate during the lockdowns. Supplementation of other food groups is critical – proteins with the addition of peanuts (*chikki*, for example), green gram sprouts or local millets (*ragi* or jowar); fruits, such as bananas, guavas, papaya or whatever is seasonally and cheaply available; and vegetables, again whatever is locally and cheaply available. Schools may consider maintaining a kitchen garden which could have multiple benefits – giving students a chance to learn about plants and how they grow, while also adding diversity to their daily diet.
- c. Planning to bring in all out-of-school children, particularly girls, back into the fold. Due to loss of livelihood and other socio-economic pressures, many older children are engaged in income-generating activities or in domestic duties that preclude their return to school. School personnel will need to undertake active outreach and counselling to encourage families to send such children back, and, in this regard, having a strong MDMS in place can be an incentive.

Finally, arrangements need to be made for the sensitive reception of children back into school. Many children across the board and perhaps particularly those from marginalised households have experienced a range of stresses, as mentioned above. The UNICEF has adapted guidelines for addressing the mental health needs of children with simple actions that can be taken both at home and in schools.<sup>xiv</sup> Briefly, key actions include:

- a. Communicating simply, honestly and in a calm manner with the children, allaying their fears and anxieties of infection or death of a loved one.
- b. Busting myths and misinformation that have been multiplying throughout the pandemic, for example, the hot weather does not kill the virus nor does the virus seek only the elderly and spare the young.
- c. Being sensitive to children who might have either been victims of, or have witnessed domestic abuse and violence. Such children may be withdrawn or sad or otherwise display unusual behaviour. Building a relationship of trust with them is critical, and if necessary, reaching out for professional help by calling Childline 1098

(helpline) or even the police (100).

- d. Teaching children how to remain safe online. Being online has become a way of life for all of us and for children too. Teach children the 5 golden rules of staying safe online (#StaySafeOnline).<sup>xv</sup>
- e. Addressing the stigma associated with COVID-19 infection or death in the family by using facts and data and encouraging students to be empathetic and compassionate to one another.

To reiterate, the experience of the pandemic has been unprecedented for us all, as has been the response. The effort to revert to some sort of normalcy, particularly for children who have been deprived of any semblance of a normal childhood for a year-and-a-half, is bound to be faced with many false starts and revisions. However, we are now in a better position to face the prospect, thanks to increasing vaccination and greater awareness of COVID-19-appropriate behaviour. By applying some simple guidelines that have emerged from our collective global understanding of the situation, we should substantially increase our chances of being successful in bringing our children back to school, safe and healthy.

#### Endnotes

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- xiv This is an excellent resource, including many activities and suggestions for children of different age groups. School personnel might want to integrate some of this into their regular classroom interactions. <https://www.unicef.org/india/media/3401/file/PSS-COVID19-Manual-ChildLine.pdf>
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# Phased Return to the Learning Culture of School

Sreekanth Sreedharan

COVID-19 created a situation in which we realised that education can only be partly digitised. The result was that private schools maintained appearances and some semblance of learning, which was essential for their sustenance. Meanwhile, from the largest study<sup>j</sup> done on government school students, we learnt that 80-90 percent lost at least one ability that they had gained in the previous year in both maths and language. The loss of specific abilities in these subjects ranged from 20-90 percent of students. While it is difficult to convert this exactly to the months of learning lost, it is fairly clear that it is more than the months that the schools remained closed, which, at the time of writing this, was 18 months! For perspective, a study in the United States showed students to be 4-5 months behind due to COVID-19-related closure (school closure in the US were much shorter than in India).

The idea of 'contingency planning', that is, having a Plan B for such circumstances, is common among businesses, but the education world was largely caught unawares. In the interim periods during late 2020, when school opening was planned multiple times, what was seen, was an approach that involved the tweaking of the existing plan by cutting a few chapters and bringing it down to what seemed doable in the remaining time. But then, as the 2020-21 academic year ended, this too could not be implemented. As a good part of the 2021-22 academic year also went by, it is clear that we need a different plan rather than just tweaking the old one.

This article focuses on the return to schooling in government schools in India and the focus is on primary schools.

## Loss of 'learning culture'

Such a long absence from school without any supplementary learning happening at home is not to be seen simply as a learning loss. It is the loss of a *learning culture* that the school invites the student into. For the primary class students in government schools, there is a vast gap in

the learning culture of the school and their homes. The school offers a culture of a type of learning that is missing at home, which is not the case with the children of the middle or the elite classes. Therefore, the problem is one of returning to the learning culture of the school. This is a much larger view of the problem than seeing it merely as fixing learning losses.

## Solution – a phased return

The overarching idea is that a return to the learning culture cannot happen in a linear fashion, but needs to be done in a phased manner, where there may be non-linear jumps in certain kinds of activities between the phases.

What follows is a menu of suggestions and ideas, rather than one tightly-created action plan. Since the design in each state should factor in the local context, a menu of ideas to pick from could be more useful than giving one plan which fits only one context.

### Phase 1

To take the entire scenario into perspective, let us start from the time when schools closed, and students were not allowed to come into school. In 2020-21, this phase was largely wasted in many states. Much more could have been done in this phase to restart learning. The key factors in this phase could have been:

- Use of worksheets
- Assistance from the educated-young from the community
- Use of broadcast media, like TV and *YouTube* and interactive media, like *WhatsApp*
- Teacher support for all of the above

The idea is not to orchestrate or control the phenomenon as the activities in this *phase cannot be controlled*. Instead, the focus should be on providing carefully designed resources by local volunteers, supported by the teacher. By the time of publication of this article, we may have passed this phase, but this might be useful for future reference.

The important aspect in this phase is that it is better to not bring regular education into the homes using technologies. Instead, we would need to take into account the current learning levels of the students, the learning objectives that we have set, the capacities existing proximate to each child and carry out the teaching-learning process as best as we can, given the constraints of the (any such critical) situation. As we have seen, the key problem in this phase has been the equity of access.

There are five areas, each of which are needed to tackle this phase holistically:

#### 1. *Delivery of classes through broadcast media*

The government of Kerala's KITE VICTERS<sup>ii</sup> *YouTube* channel is an example. It had 30 lakh subscribers during the lockdown period. There were grade- and subject-wise live telecasts on TV according to a timetable which were also available on the *YouTube* channel for later viewing. This achieves a basic delivery of lessons, even if they were not interactive. Taken together, the lessons on TV and the *YouTube* channel have a good reach, ensuring comparatively better equity of access, compared to lessons over smartphones or laptops.

#### 2. *Worksheets for learning activities*

The worksheets created by the Azim Premji Foundation and a few other organisations are good examples of this. The idea is to get children to do activities that are designed to fit the expected learning outcomes for different classes, on a regular basis, wherever they are. However, the worksheets have to be level-appropriate and not class-appropriate.

Also, these worksheets need to be made easy for the volunteers to deal with. These are different from the usual workbooks, which were designed to complement teacher-led classroom activities. Although worksheets are not ideal for introducing new concepts, they can complement broadcast classes well, as with these the child is engaged in doing activities, as against listening or watching. Of course, the printing and distribution of worksheets will remain a challenge as the children may be located in different places, as, for example, in the case of children of migrant workers.

#### 3. *Support from volunteers*

As teachers cannot be with every child to help in this phase, anyone with some level of education proximate to the child, a parent or educated youth in the neighbourhood, who are willing to volunteer

can support this work.

Education in the primary classes cannot happen without a guiding and motivating presence. This is similar to the recommendation of the National Education Policy 2020: 'Additionally, it will also be made far easier for trained volunteers - from both the local community and beyond - to participate in this large-scale mission. Every literate member of the community could commit to teaching one student/person how to read, it would change the country's landscape very quickly.... In this regard, the support of active and healthy senior citizens, school alumni and local community members will be suitably garnered. Databases of literate volunteers, retired scientists/government/semi-government employees, alumni, and educators will be created for this purpose.'

Was there a better opportunity to have made this database than during the COVID period?

#### 4. *Role of teacher*

Teachers have to play a key role in enabling this entire mechanism of distribution and completion of worksheets, identification of volunteers with the help of the community and of regularly connecting with volunteers through *WhatsApp* groups or teleconferences for planning, review and support.

#### 5. *Role of curriculum-creating bodies (like SCERTs)*

This phase should, in parallel, be utilised to design the modified curriculum for the next phases. Instead of taking parts from the existing textbooks/cards, what is needed is the following:

- Break down the key learning outcomes of each grade level to the next level in detail
- Create a trajectory towards these through a series of carefully-designed activities, either for the whole class or groups or individuals
- Given the multi-level scenario, it may be better to choose a card-based curriculum<sup>iii</sup>, than a textbook-based one

#### **Phase 2**

The second phase is the period when students are back but 'education as usual' is still months away. This phase should focus less on the speedy return to the normal and more on the psychological aspects of returning to stability for teachers, students and parents in a slow manner. This phase should not be hurried for two reasons – medical and educational. The key aspects during this period are:

- Being cautious so as to not precipitate a relapse to Phase 1

- Addressing the psychological aspects of return to the learning culture

This means focussing on rebuilding the teacher-student relation and the affective side through activities designed for this purpose. Meanwhile, some of the activities of Phase 1 can be revisited and taken forward depending on how much has been achieved earlier (and this will vary widely even within the same school).

Various organisations have produced literature on COVID-appropriate precautions including *WHO's FAQ on Schools*, the Ministry of Education's *COVID Action Plan*, and the Centre for Global Development's *Planning for School Reopening*. The three essential aspects of these are:

1. Being extra alert to symptoms
2. Vaccination status of the teachers
3. Ventilation of all areas within the (school) building

The more we do outdoors in this phase, the better. Let education return to under the tree or in open spaces within the school as much as is possible.

The other important aspect is for all stakeholders to be comfortable with returning to school - teachers, students and parents. Parents and the community need to be part of this to ensure that they feel that all precautions are taken at the school. In the case of anyone contracting COVID-19, the situation should be managed according to a pre-established protocol.

Educationally and emotionally, the child should feel comfortable in returning to learning activities. In all likelihood, children will be relieved to return to school and meet friends and play on the premises. However, the learning activities are of a different nature and there should be a phased entry back into it. Even if a month is spent on getting comfortable with this, it is time spent well. Following which a set of baseline activities could be done to identify each child's learning level. After this, the new card-based curriculum developed during Phase 1 can be slowly introduced.

### **Phase 3**

The third phase is when we bring the focus back on learning outcomes. In this phase, the key is to design a curriculum that has a clear plan for taking students, who may be at multiple learning levels, to the desired level through a series of carefully chosen learning activities. The success of this phase is in ensuring that the cards or other material required

are designed in advance and the teachers are well-prepared before the phase begins. I mention cards because the highly-varied situation makes a card-based multi-grade, multi-level, (MGML) approach more desirable. However, there could be diversity on this across states. This approach is easier for a state like Karnataka where cards are already being used but may not be easy in other states who have not implemented this.

In this phase, the idea is to follow the new (modified) curriculum so as to achieve age-appropriate learning outcomes. After this is achieved, the usual curriculum could be followed with modifications based on what we learnt in the last two years. All these learnings can be factored into school education in this phase for the future:

- Teachers could focus on activities centred around learning outcomes. There is always scope to cut down the time on a few activities and give more time to the more important ones.
- The home environment can complement the learning in school. Local volunteers can work with groups of children post-COVID, for example, *Shiksha Mitras*.
- The introduction of concepts can now be done in the classroom, so we could revert from the worksheets of Phase 1 to workbooks that can focus on reinforcement and practice etc.
- Technology can play a role by providing practice and instant feedback. However, this needs higher investment and needs to be done in moderation to avoid excess screen-time, addiction, etc. However, the bigger role technology can play in the areas of in-service teacher training, data gathering and in faster and regular communication between teachers, parents and educational functionaries, even basic WhatsApp groups can work well.

### **Looking Ahead**

The COVID-19 pandemic hardly produced any new social phenomenon; it only amplified the already existing ones. The children of parents from middle and elite backgrounds continued their education, albeit a highly impoverished one. Government schools initially waited and watched and then started some initiatives, with high variance across states.

What has been highlighted above is the work that can be done in a phased manner, beginning now until schools reopen, as well as after reopening until some semblance of normalcy returns. What

is also needed in the future is *to engage more positively with both technology and management in education*. We need better management in education, that focuses on solutions that may not be perfect, but work well towards children's learning.

Management is a highly contextual art that focuses on results. We do need management in business to be more balanced to its approach to society and the natural environment. But in education, we need much better management of the land, the building and facilities, people and the learning process. We also need much better utilisation of the regular feedback that comes in terms of both student assessment and the continuing drain of children out of government schools.

We also need a similar and more balanced approach to technology. For primary classes, we could look at non-student facing technologies, such as:

- Richer pedagogic content for teachers in all languages through portals like *Diksha*<sup>iv</sup> (used for local workshops at both block and district levels)
- Faster and regular communication between all those concerned – teachers, parents and educational functionaries – facilitated by customised messenger apps that also manage the data collection needs of the government
- Formative assessment data analysed and fed back to teachers, indicating modifications that they can make in the upcoming learning activities.

#### Endnotes

- i Loss of Learning During the Pandemic, February 2021, Azim Premji Foundation. <https://tinyurl.com/86jhm6d>
- ii <https://www.youtube.com/c/itsvicters/featured>
- iii Card-based curricula like *Nali Kali* of Karnataka can be a great way to transact during the current bridge scenario. Cards help each child from whichever level they are to move at their own pace, until they reach a more common level, from where textbooks can take over.
- iv <https://diksha.gov.in/>



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# The Changed Role of CRC | BRC | DIET

Suchi Dubay

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire human race, including children, severely. They have been impacted in many ways with regard to their family and social life, but their education has suffered the most. According to UNESCO, the education of 90 percent of school-going children around the world has been disrupted by the pandemic.

A *Human Rights Watch* report<sup>i</sup> documents how COVID-19-related school closures have affected children unequally, as not all children had the opportunities, tools or the access needed to continue learning during the pandemic. The report found that the heavy reliance on online learning has exacerbated the already existing unequal distribution of support for education. Many governments did not have the policies, resources, or infrastructure to roll out online learning in a way that ensured that all children could participate equally.

## Background

The decades-long, slow, though steady, pace of educating children came to a sudden halt in March 2020. By April, large numbers of students across the country had to stop going to their pre-primary, primary and secondary schools to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus. Later, schools reopened for some students in some parts of the country, while in the rest, students have still not been able to return to school. During school closures, in most places, education was provided either online or by other remote methods, but there is a huge gap in the success and quality of these methods. Several issues, including internet access, connectivity, accessibility, physical preparedness, teacher training and home conditions, have largely affected the viability of distance education.

Elin Martinez, Senior Education Researcher, Human Rights Watch, said, 'With millions of children deprived of education during the pandemic, now is the time to strengthen protection of the right to education by rebuilding

better and more equitable and robust education systems. The aim should not be just to return to how things were before the pandemic, but to fix the flaws in systems that have long prevented schools from being open and welcoming to all children.'

But both government and non-governmental institutions could not do much to address this issue. There were some immediate efforts, but they were not very successful due to a lack of cohesion. Many states in India also tried to start online education as part of the government efforts and sought many other ways to keep children connected with education, but these efforts could not reach the children of deprived and rural families because they could not afford the devices or the internet access. Schools with fewer resources, whose students were already facing learning barriers, particularly faced difficulties in teaching their students due to digital limitations. In addition, education systems have often failed to provide digital literacy training to students and teachers to ensure that they can use these technologies safely and confidently.

In such critical times, the responsibility of government and non-government educational organisations working in the area of education and its management, has increased. Academicians, students and parents are looking at these institutions with a lot of hope. Institutions like NCERT, SCERT, DIET, BRC and CRC<sup>ii</sup> are trying to update their roles in the present circumstances. But innumerable children who have been promoted to the next classes for the last two consecutive years (2020-21, 2021-22) without getting formal education are facing the problem of gaps in learning. Nothing can be predicted about how long they will have to continue facing this problem. It is the responsibility of the districts and the schools to plan and make education simple, authentic and practical for every village. The people or organisations who are regularly working with the children of a particular area should keep in mind the conditions of that area while planning and implementation and review it

from time to time.

From the government's side, SCERT has adopted online methods of educating children at the state level. Efforts were made to prepare worksheets, videos, quizzes, etc, and send them to children through *WhatsApp*. To some extent, these efforts were effective, but apart from the problems already mentioned, there were others, such as teaching material not being as per the level of the children as there was no assessment of the children's academic levels before the preparation of the material. Also, the teaching material was prepared without the help of teachers. Regional conditions were not kept in mind. This was done at the SCERT level, without the direct intervention of other educational institutions. So, like other such schemes, when this reached the ground, it was found to be uninteresting and alien to the context and, therefore, could not be implemented systematically.

Many government and non-governmental organisations have been continuously working in the education domain for many decades now, but in the present circumstances, their endeavours proved ineffective. They should have planned and worked for the children in the changed circumstances according to their district/region.

### **Governmental institutes**

#### *District Institutes of Educational Training*

District Institutes of Educational Training (DIETs) have been established as centres of guidance for educational institutes and schools within a district. Established by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, the DIET is a lighthouse in the field of education. The DIETs are entrusted with the work of creating and providing teaching-learning resources, promoting action research, providing activity-based learning, arranging need-based programmes and facilitating teachers. Their responsibilities also include introducing educational technology in teaching and introducing modern methods of evaluation.

In the current circumstances, if a DIET plans to work at the grassroots level with teachers and children by further enriching its role, then efforts can be made to reduce the learning gap of those children who do not have the facilities of online learning.

To achieve this, the DIETs can take the following steps:

- Identify the entire district on a geographical, social, economic basis

- Form a group of teachers working in the identified areas to assess the educational needs of the children
- On the basis of this assessment, conduct short-duration courses that can meet the basic subject-related needs of the children. Teachers should work online with those who have online resources and reach out to the rest.
- Have continuous discussions with teachers through training, workshops, meetings, etc., so that the plans can be reviewed from time to time, and changes can be made as per requirements.
- Arrange for effective and time-bound evaluation of the plan for every child, so as to know which learning outcomes are yet to be worked out with each child.
- Prepare worksheets, etc., for children according to their level with the help of teachers.
- Worksheets, teaching-learning materials, library books, etc., will have to be given adequate space in the entire plan so that children can use these as effective learning resources.
- In the whole process, parents and other qualified people of the community will also have to be identified as volunteers and given simple and practical training to enable them to work with the children of their family, neighbourhood or locality.

Thus, the DIETs will now have to act as lighthouses in reality. For this to happen, it is necessary that the DIETs coordinate with teachers, BRCs, CRCs and other educational organisations so that the required cooperation of everyone can be obtained in this work.

#### *Block Resource Centres*

At the block level, BRCs work with the District Education Officer (DEOs) and in coordination with the Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) to ensure that various government schemes reach the school, such as:

1. Approval for developing physical infrastructure of schools, such as classrooms, boundary walls, toilets, etc.
2. Transport voucher scheme approved for the children whose homes are far away from school.
3. Provide equipment and educational material for children with special needs.

Each BRC consists of five to six members who constantly supervise and monitor the schools in their block. Their observations are shared with the

CRCs and based on these, the design for quality improvement in planning, training and education is devised.

The functions of the BRCs include:

- Organising in-service training for elementary school teachers
- Cooperating with the CRCs for streamlining and improving the functioning of schools
- Collaborating with NGOs and local administration to implement provisions of the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

The BRC has an important role in a block. Children benefit when the BRC can channelise its members and other resources into their work for children. For example, at present, when the schools are closed, the BRC can use the human resources at their disposal to start community classes, train community volunteers to prepare the material for these community classes as per the level and requirement of the children, teach and assess the children from time to time.

In the present circumstances, BRCs can update their roles and try to bridge the learning gaps of children by coordinating with the DIETs. This may, to some extent, be successful in maintaining at least the grade-level learning that the children were at when schools were closed.

To achieve this, the BRCs will have to do the following:

- Coordinate with the DIETs and other institutions
- Discuss with teachers how to work with children in situations arising due to COVID-19 and organise online workshops and training by preparing modules based on the experience of teachers
- Initiate school-wise planning to ensure that teachers have access to all children
- Create worksheets and other learning materials based on local conditions
- Give constructive feedback by listening to teachers' experiences/problems during school inspection
- Ensure that children's learning is properly assessed
- Organise short trainings for volunteers in villages. The educated youth of the village or those who are studying at +2 level, can be asked to teach elementary language and mathematics to the children of their neighbourhood or locality

### *Cluster Resource Centres*

Directly affiliated with all educational institutions that organise the programmes for schools, the CRCs work closely with the DEO and the Block Education Officer (BEO). The High School of the *panchayat* headquarters is used as the centre and all the schools of that *panchayat* are included under that particular CRC.

The functions of the CRC are:

- Observing classes and provide support to teachers in classroom teaching
- Ensuring enrolment and retention in schools
- Conducting monthly teachers' meetings and teacher training sessions
- Coordinating with school management committees, parents and other institutions

In these changed circumstances, the CRC, in consultation with the school management committee, parents and departmental officials can organise community classes for children with the help of teachers and volunteers at three-four places in the village. This can be planned by conducting a pre-test for each child. In consultation with the teachers, it can be decided what to teach the children and what the process of evaluation should be.

The CRC can also discuss with the teachers what learning opportunities can be provided to the children with the help of the available resources, so that they can learn the basic skills of language and maths in interesting ways and the continuity of their learning can be ensured. The CRC must coordinate with the DIETs and other educational institutions to prepare text materials, like short poems, story charts and booklets in the local language and make these available to the children.

### **Some important points**

In this process, care should be taken that teachers are not neglected. For some time now, the practice has been that one or two institutions of the state create the textbooks and worksheets. The prepared material is delivered to the teachers, and they are instructed to implement these within the stipulated time. Teachers have no interest in this, and they carry it out merely as a government directive. If teachers are given freedom in creating worksheets and methods of teaching children, then perhaps the results would be better and more effective. For this, workshops can be organised from time to time to train teachers.

In the present circumstances, all the people and institutions working in the field of education should think about their roles. We should do some research on how we can work with children in different situations, especially after the COVID-19 experience.

Along with the DIETs, BRCs and CRCs, the schools should also analyse how many and who among the students have left school – who came back and who did not. It should be ensured that the school-return programme traces all dropouts so that every child who is facing the problem of lagging behind in studies can reach age-appropriate levels. We need to think about the children whose financial condition has been impacted due to the pandemic and they are

unable to come to school, or children whose parents are not sending them to school because of the fear of COVID-19 infection.

The following can be done with such children and their guardians:

1. Counselling of children and parents should be done by SMC/doctors/teachers and influential people like the village sarpanch and public representatives so that children can return to school.
2. On the basis of a baseline assessment, a bridge course should be designed to fill the gap between the actual class-level of the children and the prescribed class level.

#### Endnotes

- i Years Don't Wait for Them: Increased Inequalities in Children's Right to Education Due to the COVID-19 Pandem-ic. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/05/17/years-dont-wait-them/increased-inequalities-childrens-right-education-due-covid>
- ii NCERT: National Council of Educational Research and Training  
SCERT: State Council of Educational Research and Training  
DIET: District Institute of Educational Training  
BRC: Block Resource Centre  
CRC: Cluster Resource Centre



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*Anganwadi* centres have been shut since March 2020 due to the pandemic. For close to two years now, *anganwadi*-going children have missed the nurturing and safe environment, as well as the learning experiences. Many children will be directly going to the primary grade without ever stepping into an *anganwadi* centre. Currently, many of these children accompany their parents to their work (mainly in the fields) or are left in the care of their grandparents.

## Impact of lockdown on young children

### Impact on brain development

The early (0-8) years of a child is a period of growth and development. The neuron connections in the brain are formed at an exponential rate and are more extensive in these foundational years when provided with good psycho-social stimulation. Maturation and strengthening of pathways in children's brains during early childhood contribute to their holistic development. Children need experiences that enhance their growth in all domains of development, namely, physical/motor, language, cognitive, social, emotional and creative. Therefore, it is imperative to fully utilize this period for their development and learning for long-term benefits.

Closing the *anganwadis* during and after the lockdowns has resulted in children missing out the opportunity of being exposed to systematic engagements with teachers and peers, and tasks that enable quality interactions resulting in better academic and social development, particularly of children from vulnerable home environments. Missing out on the preschool period which is marked by substantial development in a child's ability to focus attention, manage emotions, and control behaviours has a developmental impact on vital school readiness skills. Depriving these children of learning opportunities widens the social gap even further.

### Nutritional impact

Anganwadi children, as part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme,

were served hot mid-day meals daily. For many children, this was probably the only wholesome nutritious meal they get in a day. This was supplemented by eggs, milk and fortified snacks in some states. During the lockdown, the mid-day meals (MDM) scheme was disrupted, and this has affected the overall nutrition levels of children. The MDM was replaced by monthly 'take-home rations' delivered by the *anganwadi* teachers. This ration supply was not regular in some places. Even where it was supplied, there was a shortage of items.

As parents' livelihoods were impacted by the lockdowns, it would not be wrong to assume that the rations given for children were shared by the family. The daily egg that was supposed to be had by the child would likely end up in egg curry for the family. At home, typically, children get two meals a day sometimes supplemented with a cup of tea with a few salt biscuits. The main meal is normally a brunch of leftover rice mixed with water and salt with pickle; or rice with curry made of chilli powder, tamarind juice and salt. Sometimes, rice or *rotis* is had with boiled dal, salt and some locally available vegetable. Mostly, this is once again repeated for early dinner.

The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2016-18<sup>i</sup> states that in pre-school, around 35 percent children were stunted; 17 percent were wasted; 33 percent were underweight and 11 percent were acutely malnourished. *Anganwadi* closure would have worsened this further causing a long-term impact on a generation of children.

## Lost opportunities and what teachers need to do

Typically, children above 2.5 years are enrolled in *anganwadi* centres. The bulk of these enrolments happen at the beginning of the year. In a year, an *anganwadi* would have about 30-40 percent of new children, 30-40 percent of children who had been attending the *anganwadi* for less than 1.5 years, another 20-30 percent attending *anganwadi* for more than 1.5 years. *Anganwadi* teachers are

experienced in handling this multi-age group of children. Now all the children of this age group, who have not attended the *anganwadi* for almost two years, will be at the same level with respect to their exposure. Once the *anganwadi* centre opens, the teachers can start by engaging children in basic activities every day.

Rather than starting to cover the month-wise syllabus, the teachers must focus on starting with making the children comfortable in the *anganwadi* setting. The teacher can then engage them in simple and meaningful songs, stories, indoor and outdoor play and drawing activities. For the first four to six months, there can be a common, basic set of activities for all age groups, after which, the teacher can gradually move towards age-wise additional inputs.

In addition, the teachers need to have friendly interactions with children and give them opportunities to talk about what and how they are feeling. Teachers need to encourage them to share concerns, ask questions, express their fears and feelings related to COVID-19 and its impacts that they have experienced in their families and immediate neighbourhood.

Special care needs to be taken in terms of cleanliness and physical wellbeing, by focussing on good hygiene practices among children, such as covering the mouth and nose while coughing and sneezing, washing hands frequently and avoiding touching the nose, eyes and mouth.

#### Group 1 - Children between 3 and 4 years

What they would have missed: These are the children who would not have attended *anganwadi* at all. They would not have had the opportunity to engage with others of the same age or slightly older in *anganwadi* as well as missed out on age-appropriate curriculum. However, they could still have 6-8 months with the 4+ age group.

What teachers can do: These children would not have attended *anganwadi*, so they need to be first oriented to the *anganwadi* centre and basic hygiene-related habit formation could be focused on by the teacher. Once the children are habituated to the *anganwadi* environment the teacher needs to spend a good amount of time (2 to 2.5 hrs) on basic conversation, story, rhymes and play.

#### Group 2 - Children between 4 and 5 years

What they would have missed: The 4–5-year-old children would have joined the *anganwadi* in mid-2019 or early 2020 and would have spent 6 to 9 months in *anganwadi*. They would have missed engaging with peers of the same or older age groups and engaging with age-appropriate curriculum, especially pre-numeracy and pre-literacy concepts.

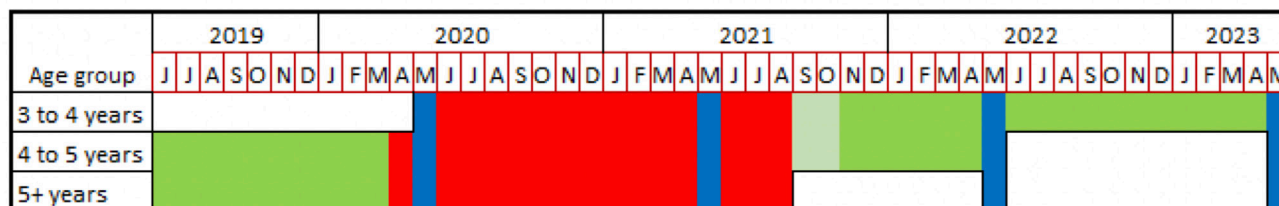
What can teachers do: Apart from engaging with the children as in Group 1, the teacher can, after 6 months, start focusing more on the pre-numeracy and pre-literacy concepts with this group of children so that they become school-ready.

#### Group 3 - Children age 5+ years

What they would have missed: Children in this age group would have been exposed to the basic concepts for 6 to 9 months before the lockdown. They would not only have missed a large part of the opportunities for developing in different domains but also not have been exposed to the pre-numeracy and pre-literacy concepts which is important for joining the primary classes.

What can teachers do: These children will join the primary school (class I) directly, hence, the primary teacher should spend the first 3 to 6 months in school-readiness activities before starting the class I syllabus. Till school starts, these children can be part of the *anganwadi* activities.

To overcome the lack of proper nutrition due to the closure of *anganwadis*, additional food supplements, such as additional eggs, fortified milk and snacks for six months after *anganwadis* reopen can be planned.



■ Children attending *anganwadis*  
■ *Anganwadis* closed due to pandemic  
■ *Anganwadis* remain closed in the month of May  
 Months of year  
■ *Anganwadis* open in some states

## Restart now

*Anganwadi* centres must be opened on a priority basis even before the opening of higher secondary, upper primary or primary schools as the *anganwadi* is the most localised of them all. The decision to open or close a specific *anganwadi* must be taken at the *gram panchayat* level depending on the local conditions rather than those at the state level. There are a large number of villages that have been COVID-19-free for the past six months where the *anganwadis* could have been opened.

An *anganwadi* teacher pointed out that most of the children in villages are anyway playing with each other in their *gullies*. She questioned how playing and learning in an *anganwadi* centre could be riskier than that. The teacher also added that with both parents going to work in the fields, they are more than willing to leave children in the *anganwadi* rather than taking with them to the fields and exposing them to the sun and rain or leaving them at home with grandparents. In urban or semi-urban areas, this becomes even more essential as women who are either daily-wage earners or work as domestic help have no support system at home to take care of the children. Currently, these children are left in the care of the older children.

The *gram panchayats* must be mandated to expedite vaccination and reach a target for 70 percent vaccination in their villages after which *anganwadi* centres in those specific villages should start operating.

Some of the basic preparations that the teachers must make before the *anganwadis* reopen are:

- a. Ensure that the *anganwadi* is deep cleaned, as they have not been used for a long time and in some places, these were being used for storing

rations for distribution.

- b. Keep the place well-ventilated by keeping the windows and doors open.
- c. Sanitise all the play and learning materials.
- d. Build community awareness of hygiene practices.
- e. If enrolment is high, the teacher may divide the children into two groups and alternate between outdoor and indoor activities for the two groups. However, preference should be given to conducting all activities outdoors if such space is available.
- f. Segregate from the children all other beneficiaries, such as pregnant women and lactating mothers who come to *anganwadi* to avail of other services.

## Capacity-building of the *anganwadi* teacher

Many teachers attending workshops felt that there has been a big gap in their practice, which has led to their own regression in teaching competencies. Some *anganwadi* teachers have been doing activities with children during their home visits to distribute rations. Re-engaging *anganwadi* teachers with the ECE (Early Childhood Education) work through multiple modes, such as our series of workshops, sector and project level meetings and support for them at *anganwadi* centres is necessary to ensure that they can transition back to work smoothly. Practising curricular activities should be the focus of these teacher engagements. Prioritising the workshop sessions to focus on basic and appropriate activities, such as good hygiene habits, songs, story, play and creative activities is necessary. Teachers need to be prepared for more centre-based scaffolding in their engagements with children.

## Endnotes

- i Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2016-18 conducted by the Union Health Ministry.

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Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2019). Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (2016-2018) Reports. New Delhi. Government of India.  
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**Yogesh G R** leads the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Initiative of the Azim Premji Foundation at Sangareddy, Telangana. He has been instrumental in mentoring a team of resource persons in ECE and creating a scalable multi-modal engagement for the capacity-building of *anganwadi* teachers. Prior to this, he had worked in the capacity-building of primary and upper primary teachers in the Puducherry District Institute of the Foundation. He has been working in the field of education, IT and management for over 22 years in different capacities. He may be contacted at [yogesh.r@azimpremijifoundation.org](mailto:yogesh.r@azimpremijifoundation.org)

# Talking to Children about Coronavirus | Some Resources

Shefali Tripathi Mehta

A 3-year-old was heard telling another about 'corona'. Her eyes were wide with caution as she warned her friend to not go anywhere near the play area because 'corona is there'. Another day, she started to wail when a person without a mask approached her. The parents had managed to instil the fear of the virus in her so she would not let her guard down when outdoors or on her own. Their caution is understandable but when we unscramble the reality of a critical situation into a bogeyman for children, we make them vulnerable to psychological and emotional harm arising from the absence of drawing logical solutions and expressing their fears and anxieties. Age-appropriate information about the pandemic and how it spreads, along with opportunities for children to ask questions and share feelings is how adults, whether teachers, parents, or older siblings, must approach this topic. Here is a review of the literature created by storytellers, teachers and parents to talk to children about the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers may take a leaf from this and create stories that are set in the children's own contexts. They can transact these in class through storytelling or other exciting ways, such as the use of puppets and role-plays.

## **Pratham Books' StoryWeaver Community**

On this platform, which was conceived to extend the reach of books in the mother tongues of children in disadvantaged settings, stories are available free in most Indian (26) and foreign languages.

### *The Novel Coronavirus: We Can Stay Safe*

Written and illustrated by Deepa Balsavar, et al.

Link: <https://storyweaver.org.in/stories/128586-the-novel-coronavirus-we-can-stay-safe>

To tell a child to rub soap on their hands for 20 seconds for effective prevention from COVID-19 is great but how would a child keep the 20-second time? This book offers a fun solution that all children will love. Various characters, from grandmothers to children, talk about complying with COVID-19-preventive behaviours, such as washing hands, sneezing into the elbow, maintaining a safe distance from each other etc. It also talks of schools being closed and people having to stay indoors and their

loneliness. A very good resource for children in classes I and II.

### *Lights in the Heart too!*

Written by Neha Kumar

Illustrated by Alina Aphayvanh, et al.

Link: <https://storyweaver.org.in/stories/127894-lights-in-the-heart-too>

This simple story touches the point of being kind to animals, of feeding and caring for them and of not abandoning them for the fear of the unknown virus. Children will also get some assurance from the fact that other children are also in the same situation; that they too cannot step out to play or go to school or market.

### *Corona story: I am Rahino's brother*

Written by Omprakash Kshatriya 'Prakash'

Illustrated by Floriana Giotta, et al.

Online: <https://storyweaver.org.in/stories/123427-corona-story-i-am-rahino-s-brother>

A dialogue between a child and the coronavirus is used to explain how a virus can cause the common cold and also the COVID-19. It is on target in explaining how handwashing can protect, a logical explanation of which is important for children to comply with it. But if the target of this story is children with some knowledge of science because there is mention of molecules and the structure of a hydrogen bomb, it may fail to engage very small children and the older ones may find it too simplistic in terms of its tone and explanation.

It is important to use correct vocabulary and phonetic sounds in local languages when translated from English. So, 'Rhinovirus' in English should not have been transcribed as 'rahino' virus in Hindi.

### *You can make the change: Break the chain of corona*

Written by Riddhi Nath

Illustrated by Khushbu Vala and Louwrisa Blaauw

Online: <https://storyweaver.org.in/stories/124803-you-can-make-the-change-break-the-chain-of-corona>

A realistic retelling of how the virus spreads. This is

sure to peg the protocols clearly and succinctly into the minds of children.

#### *A Letter for Amma*

Written and illustrated by Ramya Iyer

Online: <https://storyweaver.org.in/stories/132886-a-letter-for-amma>

A 9-year-old's letter to his mother who is a nurse and away from home, this story can help children whose family members are engaged in COVID-relief efforts to open up and express the anxiety they may feel for them. Teachers can help these children understand the value of the work their dear ones are engaged in.

#### *A group of villagers sitting under a banyan tree*

Written by Estella Rodrigues, et al.

Illustrated by Prashant Kumar Singh, et al.

Online: <https://storyweaver.org.in/stories/257966-a-group-of-villagers-sitting-under-a-banyan-tree>

How a village comes together to find a way in which to accommodate workers returning to villages from cities. While there is a real reason to be afraid of the returning members to villages because they may carry the infection, this story will help children view the situation in the light of reason and understand the need for quarantine and isolation. It may also make children question their elders if they indulge in baseless stigmatization of COVID-positive people.

#### **Mayo Clinic: How to talk to your kids about COVID-19**

Parents and teachers can use this resource to talk to children about the disease and its impact. The strategies it provides will help children cope with stress and anxiety. There is also a video, in the end, explaining the nasal-swab testing so children will not panic in a situation where this becomes imperative.

Link: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/kids-covid-19/art-20482508>

#### **UNICEF: How teachers can talk to children about coronavirus disease**

Detailed discussions for every age/level of children are available here. The teacher must tailor the information provided in this to the needs of their students and their contexts.

Link: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teachers-can-talk-children-about-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

#### **Coronavirus: A Book for Children**

Published by Nosy Crow

Written by Elizabeth Jenner, Kate Wilson and Nia Roberts

Illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Read Aloud by Hugh Bonneville

Nosy Crow, an independent British children's publishing company, has a free audiobook on *YouTube* that provides comprehensive corona-virus information for children. It ends on a positive note that if we all follow COVID-protocols, one day soon we will win over the virus and say goodbye to these trying times.

Link: <https://youtu.be/fCjDo9SskQU>

#### **Kids, Vaayu & Corona: Who wins the fight?**

Published by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India

Written by Ravindra Khaiwal and Suman Mor

A comic book for Indian children with a superhero called Vaayu, this was commissioned to educate children about the coronavirus. Apart from disease awareness, it tells children how to stay safe. Well-intentioned and well-conceived, it is hastily executed and full of typos. One wonders where the superhero's cape vanishes in the last but one page and why he sometimes speaks in speech bubbles and sometimes in thought bubbles! But with all these failings, it can be a good conversation starter for small children who may find the idea of a superhero exciting.

PDF: <https://online.ndmc.gov.in/covid19/images/corona-comic.pdf.pdf>



**Shefali Tripathi Mehta** is the Associate Editor of the Learning Curve. She works at the Azim Premji University and can be contacted at [shefali.mehta@apu.edu.in](mailto:shefali.mehta@apu.edu.in)

# Letters to the Editor



It's hard to choose one issue of LC and say this one is the best when you go through the content – the first-hand, on-ground experiences, the diversity of topics covered in every single issue to expand our teachers' understanding of pedagogy and mindset of children entering their classrooms. I would rather like to choose one close to my heart and that is the edition about 'Play'. Play is such an underrated, underestimated thing in our country, considered a waste of time. Play therapy is chosen as the first way to enter the bubble an autistic child creates around herself. And I am thankful to LC for taking up the case of special needs children in Issue 5, (*Perspectives on Teaching Children with Disabilities*). I felt heard as I could present my viewpoint as a special parent.

The Learning Curve has done commendable work to improve the quality of pedagogical methods at schools and if it could also delve into the ground realities of government schools – the wide gaps between planning, policy, and the available resources on the ground, putting the teachers in a fix on how to implement those wonderful strategies in their classrooms.

In the issue *Every Child can Learn* (Part I), in the article *Four Operations for Every Child*, Swati Sircar correctly points out that one of the reasons children aren't able to do word problems is comprehension. During my graduation, I have seen students from rural backgrounds struggling and lagging behind in academics because of poor reading comprehension and English vocabulary despite being bright. If LC could throw some more light on this issue it will help students and teachers.

Hope you find these inputs relevant. Looking forward to the next issue of LC.

**Anupma Rai**, activist (rights of people with disabilities), New Delhi

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I want to express my appreciation for the recent issue of the Learning Curve entitled, 'Education for Citizenship'. It is very timely and includes nuanced responses to a highly contentious topic where patriotism, nationalism and civic sense are being conflated to a question of loyalty and conformity. The reminder to draw inspiration from the Constitution and the importance of being sensitive to the 'selfless goodness that is around us' (A. Madan, *Different Cultures of Citizenship*) comes as a positive message at a time of deepening despondency about the impact of protests and the power of dissent.

Arvind Sardana writes about fostering teachers' autonomy and comments on the need for action 'to emerge in an organic manner within the local context'. This edition explores diverse ways that this might happen, such as through recognising the potential of the textbook when it draws on specific examples to demonstrate what responsible participation looks like in local communities; cultivating the scientific temper in the classroom; and exploring issues of justice through the creative arts. The framework of the school itself can become a lived model of democracy so that inclusion becomes normalised, and children have the experience of participation in decision making.

Children are astute observers and notice when there are contradictions between what is preached and what is practised, and each article focuses on what the grounded practice of responsible and critical citizenship means.

**Jane Sahi**, teacher and teacher educator, Bengaluru

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Write to us at [learningcurve@apu.edu.in](mailto:learningcurve@apu.edu.in)

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<https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/learning-curve>

This magazine is also printed and published in Hindi and Kannada.

For suggestions, comments and to share your personal experiences, write to us at  
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