

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



Nawlesh Kumar is a mechanical engineer by qualification. He joined the Azim Premji Foundation as Associate in 2020 to pursue his passion for social work and social change through education. He likes to read and write about various social issues and is a regular voluntary blood donor. He may be contacted at nawlesh.kumar@azimpremjifoundation.org