

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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