Community Learning Groups Must Continue

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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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