

# Open Schools, Focus on Recovering Lost Learning: Clear Voice of Teachers

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These papers present findings from Azim Premji Foundation's field engagements in trying to improve the quality and equity of school education in India. Our aim is to disseminate our studies to practitioners, academicians and policy makers who wish to understand some of the key issues facing school education as observed by educators in the field. The findings of the paper are those of the Research Group and may not reflect the view of the Azim Premji Foundation including Azim Premji University.

## Open Schools, Focus on Recovering Lost Learning: Clear Voice of Teachers

**Research Group | Azim Premji Foundation**  
Contact : [field.research@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:field.research@azimpremjifoundation.org)

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## A. Introduction

Primary schools have been physically closed across the country since March 2020 – for about 17 months and over 300 working days. Recently, experts have recommended that schools be reopened with due safety protocols in place, with pre-primary and primary schools opening first.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers in primary schools are also deeply concerned about the urgency of getting children back to learning in schools and classrooms, and with making up for the loss of learning due to school closure. This is borne out by a field study conducted in August 2021 covering 363 primary school teachers across 18 districts in 5 states by the Azim Premji Foundation.

The key findings of this study across geographies are:

1. Children have completely missed out on the regular in-person interaction that is critical for learning, particularly at the primary stage. Even teachers who have interacted with students through different modes during school closure feel that the curriculum of the academic year 2020-21 has not been sufficiently covered, and there has been loss of previous learning including foundational abilities, such as describing a picture, reading with understanding, writing simple sentences based on a picture and the ability to perform basic mathematical operations.
2. When schools reopen, teaching should be informed by the learning level of each child in the class and not the regular curriculum. Given the extent of loss of learning, assessment of foundational abilities – as against class-specific abilities – across all classes is necessary once schools reopen.
3. This in turn would need changes in the curriculum, with a reduction in curricular load to align with foundational abilities, along with a conscious, meticulously planned focus on foundational literacy and numeracy.
4. The approach to teaching and learning will need to respond not just to the curriculum change but also to the socio-emotional issues of students. A variety of teaching-learning materials will be required to cater to learners at different levels in each class.
5. Autonomy and support from the administration, and time and patience, will be necessary for teachers to address learning loss. All other steps, including curricular and pedagogical changes, will not be useful unless teachers are given sufficient time to work on recovering learning loss in their respective classrooms.

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<sup>1</sup> The India Task Force. The Lancet COVID-19 Commission. (2021). Reopening schools after COVID-19 closures. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ef3652ab722df11fcb2ba5d/t/60a3cff2b425ae21a5b49405/1621348340073/India+TF+Reopening+Schools+April+2021.pdf>; Arakal, R.A. (2021, June 22). Karnataka high-level body recommends reopening schools in staggered manner. Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/karnataka-committee-recommends-reopening-schools-in-staggered-manner-7369356/>; Ghosh, P. (2021, July 23). Is reopening schools in India risky now? What experts, government said. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/is-reopening-schools-in-india-risky-now-what-experts-government-said-101627048660031.html>

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## B. What must happen when schools reopen

To counter the impact of school closure, the following are imperative – one, schools must reopen at the earliest, and two, the person closest to the children in the context of learning, namely the teacher, will need to play a critical role in ensuring children return to and stay in school, while also supporting recovery from learning loss.

The teachers in the sample of the study carried out by the Azim Premji Foundation were selected on the basis of prior knowledge of their involvement with their students and teaching-learning processes, as well as their ability to reflect on their own practices. The Foundation has been consistently working with these committed and capable teachers over a long period. The interview schedule used with these purposively selected teachers was designed with a set of important questions around curriculum, pedagogy, learning and socio-emotional needs of children, and support needed by teachers. The objective was to get their inputs on what has happened during school closure and more importantly, what needs to be done once schools reopen. These questions were used to elicit a broader set of responses, which the research group later classified into specific categories.

All the teachers in the sample have interacted with their students throughout school closure. In terms of teaching-learning, contact has been through state-mandated programmes or initiatives taken by these teachers independently, through *WhatsApp* and telephone calls or interaction with small groups within the community. Besides, they have interacted with students during the distribution of worksheets and dry rations. Most teachers are in touch with students who have moved away to other villages/cities.

Physical closure of schools has meant that very few children have had access to learning, due to lack of devices and supportive home environments. Even in cases where children had access to devices, constraints have been posed by online learning and the absence of the social interaction critical for learning. The responses of teachers revealed their concern around the damage this has caused and the significant, systematic work that will be needed to recover lost ground when schools reopen.

### ***1. Recognise the deep impact of school closure on primary school children***

The responses of the teachers revealed that the regular curriculum for the academic year 2020-21 has not been covered in its entirety by any teacher. The fact that this is the case even with a purposively selected sample of teachers who have continued to interact with students during school closures is revealing.

There has been a loss of the learning that would have happened if schools were open and regular curricular learning had taken place. Worse, children have forgotten what they knew earlier due to disconnect from learning during school closure, including foundational abilities, such as reading with understanding, performing addition and multiplication, and so on. These foundational abilities are the basis for further learning – their absence will impact not only learning of more complex abilities but also conceptual understanding across subjects.<sup>2,3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Oxfam India. (2020). Status report – government and private schools during COVID-19. <https://www.oxfamindia.org/knowledgehub/oxfamaction/status-report-government-and-private-schools-during-covid-19>

<sup>3</sup> Azim Premji Foundation. (2020). *The myths of online education*. <https://azimpremjifoundation.edu.in/field-studies-in-education/myths-of-online-education>

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*'School closure has largely affected students in lower primary schools. Children have forgotten what they have learnt but have been promoted to higher classes. It will be difficult for children to cope with the curriculum of higher classes all of a sudden. It is sad to see children who are now in class 5 struggling to read simple sentences.'* (Teacher, Karnataka)

*'Children in class 1 who didn't come to school at all will now be promoted to class 3. When children come to school, initially, they take three months just to settle into the routine. Now we must teach them the class 3 syllabus. How is it possible to attain class 3 learning outcomes when the child cannot even hold a pencil?'* (Teacher, Rajasthan)

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This is a reinforcement of the insights from the study on 'Loss of Learning During the Pandemic'.<sup>4</sup> That study, undertaken in January 2021 with 16,067 primary school children in 1137 schools in 44 districts across 5 states, revealed that 92 percent and 82 percent of children, on an average, have lost at least one specific foundational ability from the previous year across all classes for language and mathematics, respectively. This loss of learning was also reinforced by the recent Parliamentary Standing Committee Report on re-opening of schools (Report 328).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Assessment to determine 'what' and 'how' to teach

An overwhelming 96 percent of the teachers were cognizant of the need to assess children on abilities from the previous years when schools reopen (2019-20 and 2020-21), rather than just focus on abilities of the current academic year (2021-22).

The awareness of the teachers about the loss of foundational abilities among children was also evident with 56 percent favouring an assessment of children from the primary classes on foundational abilities in language and mathematics, as opposed to class-specific abilities in different subjects.



**96%** of the teachers want children to be assessed on abilities from the previous classes when schools reopen

Teachers recognise that this assessment must form the basis for planning learning with the intent of helping students recover learning loss and bring them up to class-level expectations. Regular, ongoing assessment will be required to keep track of their learning.

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<sup>4</sup> Azim Premji Foundation. (2021). *Loss of learning during the pandemic*. <https://azimpremiuniversity.edu.in/field-studies-in-education/loss-of-learning-during-the-pandemic>

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Standing Committee On Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports. (2021). *Plans for Bridging the Learning Gap caused due to School Lockdown as well as Review of online and offline Instructions and Examinations and Plans for re-opening of Schools*. [https://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/Committee\\_site/Committee\\_File/ReportFile/16/144/328\\_2021\\_8\\_15.pdf](https://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/Committee_site/Committee_File/ReportFile/16/144/328_2021_8_15.pdf)

### 3. Reconfigure curriculum to focus on foundational abilities

A majority of the teachers (96%) favoured changes in the curriculum to be able to deal with the reality of the loss of learning. The need to focus on foundational literacy and numeracy in the daily timetable was emphasised by 61 percent of the teachers. Around 74 percent of the teachers favoured a reduction in the curricular load and the need to map foundational abilities onto the curriculum so as to focus only on such abilities that they recognised to have been most affected.



**96%** of the teachers favour changes in the curriculum

#### Voices from the field

*'This year the curriculum should be reduced, and priority given to foundational abilities. Attaining foundational abilities should be done in a mission mode and completed at the earliest.'*

(Teacher, Rajasthan)

*'We have to focus on basic concepts such as addition, subtraction, etc. to enable children to pursue studies in the current class they have been promoted to. We can extend the academic year and give extra hours to recover what has been lost in the past 18-20 months.'* (Teacher, Uttarakhand)

### 4. Realign teaching-learning processes and materials to put learning back on track

Teachers recognise that there would be different levels of learning loss among their students, which they would need to cater to when schools reopen. In terms of pedagogic changes required when schools reopen, 56 percent of the teachers were categorical that initial teaching-learning should focus only on abilities lost by the children with an emphasis on remedial teaching to aid recovery of learning loss.

The need for pedagogical changes to cater to the diversity of learning levels in the classroom was endorsed by 57 percent of the teachers. One such approach could be multi-grade, multi-level teaching, wherein children work independently or in groups according to their learning levels under the overall guidance of the teacher.



**56%** of teachers felt initial teaching-learning should focus only on recovery of learning loss

**57%** of the teachers felt changes in teaching-learning processes would be needed

**48%** of the teachers felt the need for diverse teaching-learning materials to cater to students' needs

Around 48 percent of the teachers also stressed the importance of diverse teaching-learning materials, rather than class-specific textbooks, to cater to the diverse learning needs of their students. Illustratively, teachers felt that workbooks containing worksheets for all classes across primary schools will be very useful since they help children learn in an organized and interesting manner. Worksheets typically contain simple exercises that children can do independently, usually accompanied by interesting visuals. These worksheets can be 'graded', that is, start from basic abilities and progress to higher-order abilities. This is particularly useful with students of different abilities since a common plan can be developed for the entire class, while allowing all students to participate in similar activities. Such an approach would not only enable learning but will also help the teacher assess the progress of each child.

### Voices from the field

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*'More and more contextual activities are required, as these make it easier for students to connect school learning to their homes and communities.'* (Teacher, Madhya Pradesh)

*'There will be many variations in the learning level of children in the same class. We can combine classes 1 and 2, and classes 3 to 5, and treat each of these as a single group.'* (Teacher, Uttarakhand)

*'Books attract children – they love to read stories and look at pictures in the books. I will use the library in the school and set one up in the community. At least we will be able to involve children in reading. We can create 'sets' of books aligned to differing abilities to aid teaching-learning, with children exchanging their current 'set' for another, as they progress.'* (Teacher, Rajasthan)

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## 5. Enabling mechanisms for teachers

Teachers indicated the need for orientation and support to cope with the changed circumstances. While 66 percent of the teachers expressed the need for training (including in assessment processes and orientation to a revised curriculum), 68 percent expressed the need to be supported with teaching-learning materials, like workbooks, that can help address this situation.



**68%** of the teachers expressed the need for support with teaching-learning materials

Teachers were also concerned about the time they will have to focus on for the tasks ahead. They were particularly apprehensive of the various non-academic tasks that they may be pulled into.

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*Teachers from Rajasthan pointed out that they have also been away from the formal teaching- learning processes for a long time and are confused and nervous about the upcoming challenges with ‘how and where to start’ being a big question in everyone’s mind.*

*‘We should not be given extra (non-academic) work; primary teachers should especially be allowed to focus only on academic work. Recently, we have been involved in health- and vaccination-related surveys. This kind of work disturbs the academic processes of the school. The time that I should give to my children goes into other work. This work should be given to the village secretary and revenue officer (patwari) so that we can focus on our primary work, that is, teaching-learning in school and ensure better learning among children.’ (Teacher, Rajasthan)*

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## 6. Maintain continuity of learning

Teachers recognise that even after schools reopen there could be disruptions in the regular teaching-learning processes. This could be due to COVID-19 protocols, which may lead to fewer daily in-person classes (for example, students may come to school only on alternate days), or even intermittent school closures.

Anticipating such uncertainties over the coming months, 81 percent of the teachers were of the view that continuity of learning must be maintained even if schools reopen and close again. The benefit of volunteer- and teacher-monitored, home-based learning support systems was emphasised by 49 percent of the teachers.



**81%** of the teachers were of the view that continuity of learning must be maintained despite continued disruptions that might occur from local outbreaks

## 7. Addressing socio-emotional needs of children

Almost 70 percent of the teachers believed that some or most children would need attention with respect to socio-emotional issues, including disconnect from schools and their peers during school closure, leading to discomfort with the learning processes and the stress that they have forgotten what they knew. Some teachers felt children will face a lack of self-esteem and confidence about their learning abilities since many of them may return to school after having been part of the workforce and having experienced changes in family circumstances (loss of parental income, loss of loved ones to COVID-19, etc.).

Of the teachers surveyed, 71 percent felt that specific activities and processes to make students comfortable in the initial days of schooling would go a long way to address socio-emotional concerns. Some examples of these activities are sharing their experiences during school closure



through dialogue, drawing, writing, drama, and play, and displaying any artifacts or projects they create. Other examples include creativity workshops, sports activities, and so on. About 53 percent also underlined the importance of counselling.



**71%** of the teachers felt that specific activities and processes would help address socio-emotional concerns related to children

#### Voices from the field

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*'Students who were disconnected from online learning because of not having mobile phones or any other support at home will need special attention.'* (Teacher, Madhya Pradesh)

*'Children have been disconnected from studies completely due to long school closure, and they may feel that they will not be able to learn now. Before engaging them with studies again, we should create a friendly and delightful atmosphere so that children come to school regularly.'* (Teacher, Rajasthan)

*'Focus in schools should be more on bridging the emotional needs of children and getting them back to the habit of learning instead of imposing a curriculum with a learning target.'* (Teacher, Karnataka)

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## C. 'Business as usual' after school reopening is not an option

Learning is a social process and happens best through face-to-face interaction in the classroom. Children need mentoring as well as social and emotional support throughout the learning process. Thus, it is important to bring students and teachers together, even if done in a 'different way'.

Given the long period of school closure, a 'business as usual' approach will prove to be deeply detrimental not only to this but also future generations of learners. To prevent the gains of the past few decades from being lost, we must respond with appropriate changes in curriculum, school and classroom processes, and materials while also supporting our teachers.<sup>6</sup>

An ongoing survey of 143 countries<sup>7</sup> reveals that schools were fully closed across all education levels for 79 instruction days on an average (ranging from 53 days in high-income countries to 115 days in lower- and middle-income countries) during the pandemic. Among measures taken to alleviate this loss, 41 percent of countries reported extending the academic year while 42 percent reported prioritizing certain curriculum areas or skills. Over two-thirds of countries reported implementing remedial measures to address learning gaps for primary and secondary school students when schools reopened; most of these were high- or upper-middle-income countries. Some countries are increasing investment to support recruitment, including that of counsellors and specialised teachers, planning special measures to support children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, planning interventions like activities during the summer vacations, extended school days, additional support during and after the school day, and implementing remedial measures to address learning gaps for primary and secondary school students when schools reopen.<sup>8</sup>

The pandemic has, in a sense, starkly brought out the best and the worst in school systems across the world. Some countries are seeing this as an opportunity to 'permanently fix' persisting issues rather than taking a 'quick fix' approach to problems.

In our country, as evidenced by reports that have been shared since the pandemic began, our greatest strength is our teachers and their commitment. This study reaffirms that teachers are best placed to articulate the needs of their students, and what to anticipate when schools reopen. Thus, we must make teachers the centre of our trust, and empower them with the resources and support to exercise their autonomy in helping each child in their care to learn. There is no other alternative - we must ensure adequate availability of teachers in each school, make them allies in this situation and support them in building the capability to help children learn in these changed circumstances.

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<sup>6</sup> Azim Premji Foundation. (2021). Re-opening schools in pandemic times. <http://bit.do/School-Reopenings>; The Wire. (2021, August 9). Schools to face worst crisis ever when they reopen. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lJjiaieVGs>

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD (2021). What's Next? Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. Paris, New York, Washington D.C.: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank. [http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/lessons\\_on\\_education\\_recovery.pdf](http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/lessons_on_education_recovery.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., Viruleg, E. (2021). COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>; Ehren, M., Turkeli, R. (2020). How to repair learning loss from school closures during COVID-19 pandemic: which interventions and programmes are effective? Learn Research Institute. <https://www.researchinstitutelearn.nl/en/professionals-en/how-to-repair-learning-loss-from-school-closures-during-covid-19-pandemic-which-interventions-and-programmes-are-effective/>; UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD (2021). What's Next? Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. Paris, New York, Washington D.C.: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank. [http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/lessons\\_on\\_education\\_recovery.pdf](http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/lessons_on_education_recovery.pdf)



**Azim Premji University**

Buragunte Village, Sarjapura Hobli, Anekal Taluk,  
Billapura Gram Panchayat, Bengaluru – 562125

080-6614 5136

[www.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in](http://www.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in)

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