

Using COVID-19 as a Tool for Learning

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When we started hearing in the news channels about an infection that was traced back to a few persons in some developed metros in India and that too only those who had returned from other countries, it was not a serious matter for us living in a remote part of North-East Karnataka. But when the first lockdown was announced across the country due to which we had to close schools about a month earlier than our regular schedule, we started getting concerned. As the situation was unprecedented and our thoughts of the school's reopening started fading, our concerns about the children's home conditions and the challenges of the caregivers started increasing.

Making a beginning

The challenges

To understand the scenario, we started our discussions as usual: through one-to-one interactions with the parents. These interactions showed us the dark side of the pandemic affecting the lower middle class and the poor and marginalised communities. We started getting the updates of a few children's parents: some struggling to return to their home from cities, others who could not go to work on construction sites or run their autos, or open their roadside shops... even getting enough food was a challenge.

We were unable to reach some of them even by phone because they had lost their connections as they could not afford to recharge. Because of the complete ban on people's outdoor movement, our usual approach of visiting the homes of the children for interactions and addressing challenges became impossible.

New ways of engaging

Our hopes started rising as our organisation's efforts in supporting the district administration in humanitarian and health support began and we got permission from the nodal officers to go to the children's homes to interact with them.

The process helped us in different ways:

- It strengthened our bond with parents and children who appreciated our effort of reaching

them amidst the pandemic.

- It made us understand our role in building awareness of the pandemic and the safety rules.
- It helped initiate our efforts in engaging the children in effective activities while developing their academic competencies.

Removing misconceptions

This was the initial phase of increase in COVID-19 cases and most people had misconceptions on the spread of the infection. To counter this, planned meetings in batches were held with the parents of four villages. How the virus spreads, the precautionary measures to be taken to avoid getting infected or becoming a carrier were effectively communicated with some displays and posters.

The next task of starting our interactions with the children to create awareness and begin academic engagements seemed difficult because the education department had by then initiated online learning and we had to comply.



Meeting with parents on COVID-19 awareness

Changing modalities

We began finding out about resources like the availability of mobile phones with children and parents that could support online engagements. Our school's digital status was not very different from the state average for villages: only about 50 percent of the parents owned smartphones. We began making *WhatsApp* groups of teachers and children of each class and clubbed neighbours together so that electronic resources could be shared.

Learning resources such as stories, poems, rhymes and a few worksheets were narrated on either *WhatsApp* or a phone call. Children were asked to send in their completed worksheets digitally. A few other modes, such as sharing online links for the upper-primary children, were tried out. In about two weeks, we had a list of concerns and challenges arising out of online classes though there were also advantages.

Misgivings

Our biggest concern was: are we bringing up elements like economic inequality in the minds of our children? This was something we had always tried to avoid in our school with its environment of providing the same resources for all to learn, to use, to play etc. How could we expect parents, whose top priority at this time of reduced earnings was to provide food and shelter to the children and who did not even own a TV, to be able to provide their children with a smartphone? Were we ignoring the ideals of social justice and humanistic values in the name of addressing a temporary gap of academic support through the online mode?

The reason for these thoughts were the instances we saw during the process. Parents (especially fathers) owned the only smartphone in the family and would allow their children to use it for schoolwork only in the late evenings or sometimes not at all. Many times, the phone data would be insufficient. All this led to some children demanding smartphones of their own. It was even worse for the girls. Were we sacrificing the concepts of a just, humane and equitable society in the name of teaching-learning practice, when in fact, teaching-learning practices have to be strong tools to establish these values? These were the questions we asked ourselves.

As a result of our reflection, a second round of discussions started. All of us agreed that, under these circumstances, the most effective way of interacting with our children would be face-to-

face meetings. Finally, we came up with the idea of reaching smaller groups of children in their villages. The challenge was that our children from grades I to IX were spread over six villages five to ten kilometres apart!

Planning the delivery

The best idea that emerged was using COVID-19 as a theme for both awareness as well as academic learning. Hence, an integrated approach of using language (Kannada, English and Hindi), science, social science was planned. What could be better contextual material than the pandemic when they were being exposed to it through newspapers, TV channels, community interactions and discussions at home? Small groups of teachers worked on the theme. Since the teachers were familiar with the learning levels of the children in the group, their task was made easier.

Some of the themes we chose were: introduction of microorganisms which we are living with, examples of some common viral fevers (like flu) which affect our health, introduction to a new strain of virus named *Corona* and why such precautionary steps were being taken throughout the world, introduction of terms, such as *vaccine*. We used videos to illustrate some of these. We went on to discuss how the virus spreads and how we can remain safe by observing social distancing and hygiene practices such as wearing masks and washing hands. We also introduced new terms like *quarantine*, *isolation*, *testing*.

This led to discussions on the impact of the lockdown on the children's lives through the children's own experiences and case studies from other parts of the country, which they gathered from the news. We were able to discuss data-handling and analysing.

In this manner, we brought in history and geography by having dialogues on past pandemics with the help of maps. Stories, rhymes, songs, charts, posters, case studies, newspaper cuttings, maps, videos prepared by us and selected from *YouTube*, etc. were some of the resources we used. All these efforts by the team made the children observe, listen to and discuss the topic and develop an awareness of the pandemic. Both the timetable and our visits to each group became more effective with time and parents, too, became more confident about our approach.

The engagement showed the team the many possibilities that COVID gave us for acquiring the

skills needed for different subjects. Designing projects became easier. For example, we could practise hand hygiene at the venue of the engagement and hold dialogues if the norms were broken. Designing posters and writing a booklet gave the older children a sense of responsibility and participation.



Teachers engaging with small groups of children

The challenges

Of course, the team faced some challenges. Some children's attendance to these engagements was

irregular because their parents took them to the field to work and, as these were not school days, rules did not apply.

There were some difficulties regarding the venues too, for instance, some were too public, or there was water-logging etc. Travel to the villages with the risk of COVID-19 spread and the non-availability of transport was difficult.

Learnings from the experience

- Contextual materials using a specific theme developed for this duration are effective in developing children's basic competencies in language, mathematics, environmental studies etc.
- Usage of digital material along with face-to-face engagements seemed to be an effective combination, especially for children above upper-primary class.
- Some modes like *Door Sabha* teleconferences are useful as they can be used on ordinary phones. These make children less diffident about practising spoken English as they are not visible.
- Face-to-face engagements are better as direct interaction between the learner, her peers and the facilitator provide the possibility of individual attention and encourage direct participation which uses all the five senses and aids better learning.

The team's efforts have resulted in the creation and use of digital material in regular schooling. It has also made teachers more confident in coming out of the classroom and take their teaching outside. So, the pandemic has given us an opportunity to learn new things that can also be used in our normal schedule.



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