Community Participation in Children's Learning

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences, beyond the spread of the disease itself, on the social, economic and political life of the people. The severity of the pandemic, which has resulted in the closing of educational institutions, has been an unprecedented test for education. Academic activities in India were rapidly halted by the end of March by institutions and states even before the countrywide lockdown was announced. After the lockdown lifted, most higher education institutions have shifted their teaching to the online mode and many students have managed to get the required facilities.

However, this is not true of primary education. Primary schools, with students from different economic and social status, are located in every corner of rural and urban India. Even if students can access online classes, pre-primary and primary students are too young to be able to operate online platforms. Both government and small private institutes have found it challenging to sustain primary school students' learning and maintain the systems related to the online mode of education.

The idea of engaging the children in schools and running a distance school, or community classroom, was a new strategy which we thought of in May after the lockdown was imposed. Apart from academics, there was a huge need for the school to provide emotional support to the children and parents and some families needed assistance even for bare necessities. When the team visited and interacted with children, the students did not speak much and were unresponsive to the teachers' enquiries. It was clear that both the parents and children were disturbed.

As a result, when a discussion was initiated in our team on conducting community-level classrooms, though there was a lot of fear and confusion about the pandemic, there was excitement too. Every individual had some responsibility in the process of engaging children in the learning process. The team divided itself into three different groups and went to the villages to carry out a situational analysis. Our relationship with the community, which had always participated in our activities, made us confident of the success of this venture.

Profile of our school

- Our school has a strength of 87 children (grades I-III) from six villages which are at a distance of three to six kilometres from each other.

- Half of the students belong to families of daily wage earners, one-third of the parents have marginal land holdings and very few are from well-to-do families. A little over two-thirds of the families have smartphones but these are not accessible to the students. There are various reasons for this: parents are not available at home during class timings, poor network connections and the children's inability to handle smartphones. Engaging primary grade children through smartphones even for a minimum of one hour is difficult and can have a negative impact on them, both psychologically and physiologically. For all these reasons, online classes for primary school children are impractical.

- The parents have always been part of our school practices in the past and have participated in conducting classes on *Janapada* songs and other local activities.

- The School Community Network (SCN) team is a body of community members representing the six villages. Members from the school team hold frequent meetings to discuss matters and take decisions about arranging events, classroom orientation and parent-teacher meetings.

Situation analysis

- Awareness about social distancing, maintaining personal hygiene and wearing masks was found to be very low in the villages. The children were unaware of the dangers of infection. Life was the same as in the pre-lockdown period. As children could not go out to play, they were watching a lot of TV. We found that there was a need for meaningful engagement.

- Lot of myths were circulated among the public

about COVID-19 that made the children afraid to interact with others. Surprisingly, the parents were not seen taking the precautions they wanted their children to take.

- Our interactions with the parents and community showed that the parents were concerned about their child's future and education. However, because of the differences in the parents' literacy levels and professions, they were more worried about the effect the closing of schools would have on their children's immediate learning. Ninety percent of the parents would have sent their children to school if the necessary precautions were taken.

Collaboration with the community

We organised small meetings in public spaces in the village where we had short brainstorming sessions with parents to find ways to conduct classes with the children. Parents wanted homework, alternate-day classes in the school premises for small groups of children and so on. When the idea of conducting classes in their village was proposed, all the parents agreed without a moment's hesitation. Parents told us to re-open the school as early as possible and said, 'The children are not listening to us, but they will listen to you'. Their immediate response and willingness to support us surprised our team. Some of the steps they took are described here.

School premises

Eighty-five students live in five villages (only two come from the sixth village), so the students were divided into two teams in every village. Each group consisted of a maximum of ten members. Classrooms were arranged according to the group size. In the first phase, the parents could arrange eight rooms for the classes in *Samuday Bhavan, Samaj Khone, anganwadi* centre, Ambedkar Hall and two centres in the temple premises. However, after two classes, the teachers and parents realised the open spaces, where the rest of the classes were being held, were very noisy, so rented rooms were arranged. Teachers visit the two students in Bhimalli, (the sixth village) once a week with homework and assignments.

Volunteer teachers

In Hunsihadgil village, the community was so concerned that the children had lost touch with reading and writing that they enlisted a teacher from the community itself to follow-up the work given by the teachers. They even offered to pay the teacher for her work in sustaining the children's learning. However, knowing the parents' financial condition, the school team assured them that it would not be necessary.

Communication

Parents undertook to inform/remind the children of class timings and ensured full attendance. They looked after the facilities and made sure that the recommended precautions for safety were being followed. Parents and support staff also voluntarily sanitised the 'classrooms' and cleaned the premises twice a week.

Follow-up

Parents followed up on student and teacher absentees. This was important in the COVID situation as positive cases in the villages meant that classes would have to be stopped for the two-week quarantine period. In the villages where there were positive cases of COVID, we gave worksheets (with the children's names on them) to one of the parents who helped us by distributing them to the children.

Some results

So far, the team has engaged children from six classes in each centre in June and July. From August, four consecutive days of classes were organised at each centre. This schedule will continue up to the re-opening of schools.

Our efforts have led to 96 percent attendance in everyday engagements. Efforts are being made to systematise the process with weekly reviews. During the lockdown, the children had forgotten letters, sounds, reading and writing, skills the teachers are attempting to teach again.

Learning outcomes

As a result of the teachers' efforts, some positive outcomes have been:

- Creating awareness of COVID-19 and supporting students' safety and security.
- Expanding the skills of listening comprehension and the connection between sounds and words.
- Enhancing basic reading and writing skills both in Kannada and in English.
- Developing spatial skills.
- Identifying and making 2D-shapes by folding, paper cutting on the dotted grids, using straight lines etc.
- Learning basic operations in maths.

Insights on community support

Being a social institution, a school has a major responsibility in achieving the full participation of the community members in the school system. The system of establishing SCN or SDMC (School Development and Monitoring Committee) should be as high a priority as learning.

Shared understanding

A partnership between school and community members results in school development. A small observation on our surrounding schools might help to explain how important the school-community network is and the change that may take place in school when both the agencies work together in a collaborative mode. But this is possible only when the school *invites* the parents to be part of it. Teachers calling parents occasionally to school, familiarising them about school practices and updating them about their children's learning, showing them how they can support the teachers,

increases their participation. Respecting parents is a crucial aspect of this approach.

Conclusion

Although the team is moving forward enthusiastically to engage children in learning and the children are taking time to adjust to the changes, they are trying. Teachers are also facing difficulties as this method has its limitations and is not like the actual classroom experience. For instance, it is difficult to have displays of the children's work or use TLMs in limited spaces. Conducting activities with social distancing rules is impossible and the increase in the number of COVID-positive cases as well as asymptomatic people is creating fear. Students, too, are taking more time to open up to the teachers. If these conditions extend much longer, there will be a huge impact on students' learning and their relationship with the teachers, though of course, if conditions remain the same then, this may be the only option for students and teachers.

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