

Background

Lockdown in India, which began in the third week of March, was perhaps the strictest in the world. In the sphere of education, it has been over eight months and schools and *anganwadis* are still closed. The children of Nizamuddin Basti were seriously impacted by the lockdown as almost all their formal education and part of their nutrition depended on the services of the school and *anganwadi* centres. This corroborates the findings from other parts of the country as well, though the long-term impact will only unfold gradually.

The second blow came when the *Tablighi Jamaat* headquarters, located in Nizamuddin Basti was identified as a source of COVID-19 and Nizamuddin Basti was sealed off leaving the children with no options for schooling. There was, practically, no learning support and the only stimulation seemed to be doing whatever they could manage on their own or watching TV.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) is not new to Nizamuddin Basti. We have been implementing the *Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative*, a public-private partnership project that since 2007 aims to use heritage conservation as a stepping stone to improve the quality of lives of the community. From 2008, our education programme has been ensuring access to quality education to children in Nizamuddin Basti.

The lockdown and the subsequent sealing off of the area led to immense suffering in the community, particularly to the 78 percent people who worked in the informal sector and were dependent on daily wages. The Aga Khan agencies* responded to this situation through the distribution of dry rations, creating awareness, mask distribution and supporting the government in sero-surveys. Through community contact, we also identified vulnerable families that needed extra support.

Seeing no end in sight to the pandemic and the impact of the continued closing of the *anganwadis* and schools on children's learning, coupled with limited or no access to data and devices, AKF decided to work with the parents through community teachers so that they, in turn, could

help their children learn.

Response to the pandemic

The continuation of educational services was all the more challenging as the transition to online learning was not possible for most of the students studying in the school, much less for the children in the *anganwadi* centres. We started with *WhatsApp* in April 2020 as Nizamuddin Basti was a containment zone but soon realised that this strategy was inadequate as an initial survey identified only around 250 children who had access to smartphones, which is less than 20 percent of all children covered under AKF's School Improvement Programme. However, currently, both online and offline modes are being used to bring down costs.

Initially, the AKF team sent assignments through *WhatsApp* and made videos to explain concepts so that the learning process could continue. However, it soon came to light that it was a struggle for both teachers and children. Engaging with children through technology requires a nuanced understanding of the way technology can be used, how to make it a *reciprocal* system, rather than teachers simply sending instructions/photos/videos. Another consideration was that, in most cases, children were able to access mobile phones only at night, when their parents (mostly the father) returned from work. High data charges, especially with shrinking incomes, would not allow many children to upload the assignments to send back to the teachers, which left the teachers in the dark about children's learning. This understanding of ground realities is something that government programmes seem to miss.

When it was clear that all the children could not be supported through an online programme, AKF decided to carry out community-based activities to promote learning. Community teachers carried out extensive surveys, with necessary precautions, to identify the children who were in need of support. As these are predominantly migrant localities, many children had gone back to their villages with their parents. Of those who stayed behind from the original survey (done before the children went to their villages), 700 children enrolled in three

primary schools and 120 children enrolled in seven *anganwadi* centres were identified for home and community learning.

The new methods adopted

Pre-COVID education modes, which were geared towards making learning engaging for children, included using activities and hands-on learning in the classroom and placing the children's experiences at the centre of learning. Children's learning processes do not change drastically even in unusual times, including the present one: they will learn when they are actively engaged in the learning process. So, the challenge now was to make parents and community members partners in the new form of online learning. This is what the teachers were trying to replicate in the children's homes.

The intervention began at the primary level with the providing of worksheets which could be completed by the children with support from parents. The children, or their parents, collected worksheets every week from the school where the community teacher discussed the work to be done. They also collected the previous week's worksheets to assess what each child had learnt. The worksheets were designed to strike a balance between *structured* and *unstructured* activities. For instance, if sums were given, children were also encouraged to put down their imagination on paper by making up a story and illustrating it or imagining themselves as a character in the story or creating puzzles with the given shapes.

Rafia (6) and Mariam (3) are enrolled in the school and *anganwadi* respectively. A story about a red balloon from NCERT's Barkha series was given to be read out. The children are encouraged to draw what they wish after hearing a story. Rafia read the story out to Mariam and encouraged her to draw. She wrote '*gubbara*' on Mariam's drawing as the teacher is always reminding parents to write whatever children say, a key activity for emergent literacy. Rafia practices her reading and writing while telling stories to Mariam.

Izan of class V and Noor Mohammed of class III are among two of the many children who sit in the park to complete their work as most homes lack enough space. Being older, Izan is able to help Noor with concepts such as 'carry-over' in two-digit addition. Work seamlessly transitions into play, both equally engaging.

A different strategy has been adopted for children enrolled in the *anganwadi* centres. The teachers visit every family on a fixed day each week to discuss the activities that they can carry out at home with their children and demonstrate to them by reading out a story or conducting activities with children. Parents are encouraged to spend some time each day 'working' with their children. The teachers also answer questions, provide clarifications and take feedback.

A range of materials, including colours, chalk, drawing paper and clay, is provided to the children to use for various activities. Each week, about ten activities are discussed with the parents who do two activities with the children each day. A booklet with a story, a rhyme and two worksheets related to the ongoing theme is also provided. The teacher explains this 'package' to a parent or an older sibling.

Parents are encouraged to turn to their immediate environment and pay attention to how it can help with learning. Utensils, vegetables and occasionally even footwear is used by the parents for seriation, matching, sorting and pattern-making activities. Counting is done while chapatis are being made or vegetables being sorted. The floor is utilised to make lines of all kinds to practise balancing skills. Parents are encouraged to tell stories from their experiences, as well as through simple illustrations provided to them along with the worksheets for emergent literacy.

Reflections

This is an ongoing programme – at least until the time educational institutions open. While this period has been hard for parents and children, we have also seen it as an opportunity to facilitate parents' engagement with their children – something that we had not been able to do successfully in the past – as well as their trust in the teachers. What has been heartening is the parents' enthusiasm to engage with their children, which dismisses the assumption that families from disadvantaged backgrounds do not give adequate attention to their children's learning.

Many learning practices are woven into the everyday lives and the teachers can play a part in expanding the scope of these. One example is parents working together with children of multiple age-groups with an older sibling helping the younger child, with or without parental supervision. There has been an instance where a parent visited the house of a teacher (who had been absent on the account of illness) to enquire about her absence on a given

day and to collect the activities for the week. Most parents sit with children to conduct the activities, signalling active engagement in their learning. The purpose of designing activities in this manner was also to reinforce the idea that formal literacy is not the only way by which parents can engage with the

learning of their children; that informal interaction and fun with children is also a way of learning.

While we look forward to the pandemic ending soon and schools and *anganwadis* reopening, we hope a legacy of these times will be that of parents actively supporting their children's learning.



Teaching parents to work with their children

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