

Sustaining Meaningful Ways of Engaging with Students

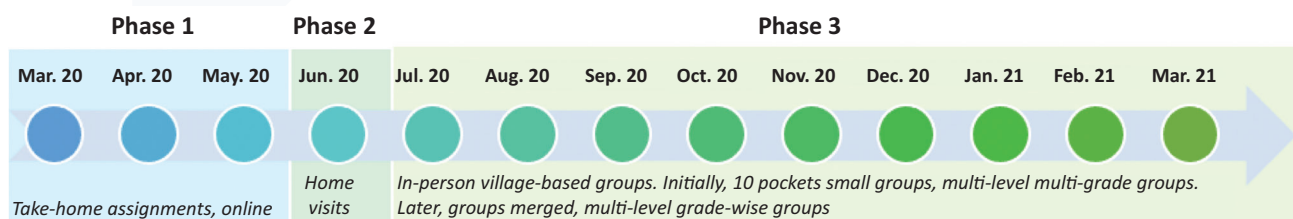
Malavika Rajnarayan and Jitandra Sharma

Focus of the Azim Premji Schools

The Azim Premji Schools are an integral part of our overall work in school education in the field. The primary purpose of these schools is to demonstrate that good and equitable education is possible even when operating within contexts and constraints similar to those of rural government (or public) schools. This is done not only to contest the generally-held belief that children from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot learn, but also to offer specific practices that public schools could adopt to improve equity and quality. Our continuous efforts are towards the majority of our students achieving grade-level competencies as well as other relevant, age-appropriate skills/abilities, such as communication, crafts and working with teams and dispositions/attitudes, such as resilience and sensitivity to others.

This article reflects on the experience of the eight Azim Premji Schools operational in the districts of Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and

Uttarakhand, which have addressed the educational needs of children from nearby villages and towns during the COVID-19 pandemic. All our schools are located in some of the most disadvantaged geographies of the country, where digital learning is not viable. In the initial phase when the online mode was explored, we could only reach 40 percent of our students and even with them, we could see that this mode was proving to be ineffective. This led the school teams to rethink several details of the teaching-learning process and devise their student engagements through multiple modes. We started looking for meaningful ways of engaging students with the core objective that they sustain their learning without forgetting what they have learned so far due to their context. Therefore, all our efforts were organised around – a) ensuring that all our students have a reasonable competency level in foundational literacy and numeracy across grades and b) optimising the use of all possible methods and available resources for maximum learning.



Timeline of student engagement in Tonk, Rajasthan

Different modes of student engagement

Online mode

With many of our teachers not having personal laptops in 2020, adapting to any online mode of research or material preparation became a great struggle. This led to teachers collaborating and learning from one another. A review of the online mode during the first phase of student engagement revealed that the access to smartphones, network connectivity, resources for data recharge, sharing of devices with siblings were all factors that made online learning less feasible and excluded many children.

Worksheet-based engagement

Worksheets are normally given to learners after they have been introduced to a particular concept. The idea of designing self-learning worksheets, where the teacher support is minimal, was entirely new to the teachers. To add to the challenge was the issue of customising it for students with varying competencies. And what would one do for students struggling with basic literacy skills, or for subjects like music, arts and physical education? After about eight weeks of designing, distributing and reviewing children's responses to worksheets, teachers found multiple problems in this mode. Ranging from

children's inability to read and understand the content, the paucity of time for teachers to explain the worksheets, to parents and siblings filling the worksheets for the children— teachers concluded that the amount of effort being put in designing worksheets was not resulting in student learning.

Working in community pockets with multigrade groups

When in-person engagement began, it was in very small, multigrade groups of 10-12 students. Emphasis was placed on developing and furthering foundational literacy and numeracy skills irrespective of what subject a teacher specialised in teaching. This led to all teachers planning learning around specific themes that addressed concepts from different subjects while keeping the core focus on reading with comprehension and writing fluently. The use of library books also aided in generating interest among children towards reading.

Generally, schools had to resort to multiple modes in order to reach out to all the students. When circumstances did not allow community classes for all, a mix of methods was tried. For example, in our Udham Singh Nagar school, teachers tried five different modes, namely, video calls, *WhatsApp*-based sharing, worksheets, individual home visits and community classes to reach class I and II students. Some students were able to connect in two to three modes but for those who could not be reached, home visits for community classes for a very small group was the only option. All this meant very hectic and tiring days for our teachers without substantial gains in terms of student learning.

A typical day in our life last year

In Tonk, when we started in-person village-based group studies, we had ten spots to cover. The students gathered in small primary and upper-primary groups for around one-and-a-half hours daily for:

- Daily sharing of diary reading, other local updates and sharing of the day's plan.
- Common large-group activities – using library books, discussion on a chosen theme or topic
- Small group tasks were either based on the common activity or on the competency level of the students
- Closing with some art activities, like drawing, craft, singing, drumming, etc.

A session for class II students

After the initial COVID-19 safety protocol procedures, the session typically began with warm-up, physical activities such as jumping on the spot, yoga and stretching or a simple game. This was followed by a short meditation and recall of the previous class. After this, all students would sing Hindi/English rhymes (storytelling on alternate days) followed by a bilingual conversation/dialogue about the story, rhyme, their experience or a picture. Sometimes, the teacher used audio/video resources related to a subject to draw the interest of students into learning. Children also got some reading time with storybooks and children's literature in both Hindi and English. Some games were also used in making the session interesting, such as language and mathematics cards or pictorial games where children write short sentences about the picture.

Learning during the pandemic

Despite the efforts of the teachers to use these multiple modes, every school found that around 20 percent of the class did not receive sufficient learning inputs when compared to the rest. There were multiple reasons for this: children moving to their native villages, parents not having phones or devices to access online material, homes being remote and having poor network connectivity and difficult family circumstances, etc. If parents or other elders in the family were not literate or available to provide study support, children found it more challenging to have academic continuity in a meaningful way.

We have found that the pandemic has increased the gap between those who were already struggling with grade-level competencies and those who were performing well. All those who had not acquired foundational literacy and numeracy were more at a disadvantage as it was difficult to engage them through material requiring reading-writing skills. Similarly, it was very challenging to engage children of pre-primary and classes I and II. To state the learning loss in concrete terms, we noticed that many of them have lost fluency in reading the class-level text, some cannot identify and pronounce alphabets. If they were creating their own sentences and stories earlier, they are struggling now. In maths, many are struggling with number sense, concepts like place value, carry,

borrow, decimal, etc., and all this needs to be revisited for the identified students.

We carried out a learning-level comparison of our students, keeping their March 2020 learning levels as reference. The data in the following tables shows that we have succeeded in reducing the number of students in Level 1 (below class level) and at least maintained or slightly improved the other levels. This is considering the fact that we maintained some level of academic connect with the majority of our students. One can imagine learning loss for students where there is discontinuity of studies for the past 18 months. We have categorised the levels as such:

Level 3 - Those who are doing class-level work.

Level 2 - Those who require teacher guidance and support to be able to do class-level work.

Level 1 - Those who are below class-level and so need to first work on their previous grade competencies.

Apart from the loss in cognitive learning, the school teams have also noted behavioural changes in some children due to being away from a regular healthy routine and safe school environment. These include a decline in personal hygiene practices (like cutting nails, combing hair, and attending to wounds and injuries), decline in attention, rise in aggressive and discriminatory behaviour, inability to manage emotions, and so on. Some students also picked up abusive language, habits detrimental to their health and wellbeing, so, this is another area which

schools would need to focus on.

Teachers' learning and insights

The different modes of engaging with students presented the teachers with several learning opportunities and also gave the school teams a good idea of the pedagogies that resulted in maximum effectiveness in student learning. Several insights from these experiences have not only helped us in the current disrupted scenario but will also be useful once regular school commences. These could lead to more resilient and sustainable pedagogies in the longer run. Some of the insights are mentioned briefly below.

Planning sessions for a multi-level, multi-grade classes

Teachers aim to address a range of language competencies by anchoring the class on a common topic or a set of selected library books and through the use of graded worksheets. While the teacher may have a common plan for the entire class, the worksheets are used to assess each learner's competency level, so that specific tasks can be added to the subsequent worksheets, especially for students who require additional support.

Using an integrated approach to teaching foundational literacy/numeracy

All subject teachers integrate learning outcomes of foundational literacy in their regular lesson plans for their respective subjects. For instance, an EVS teacher of class V also ensures that her students

Class 5 (who were in class 3 in March 2020)					
Subjects	As'ment month, year	Total Students	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Hindi & Kannada	March, 2020	214	50	41	93
	Aug, 2021	213	30	64	89
Maths	March, 2020	214	49	48	86
	Aug, 2021	213	36	59	88
English	March, 2020	214	72	53	58
	Aug, 2021	213	62	61	60

Class 8 (who were in class 6 in March 2020)					
Subjects	As'ment month, year	Total Students	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Hindi & Kannada	March, 2020	194	44	93	57
	Aug, 2021	192	42	94	56
Maths	March, 2020	194	69	73	51
	Aug, 2021	192	44	86	62
English	March, 2020	194	104	63	31
	Aug, 2021	192	99	56	37

can understand the text related to EVS, summarise it in their words and comment on it in a systematic way – these are learning outcomes of language. In this way, students apply and practise their language skills in all subjects.

Learning history from stones

In the Azim Premji School, Matli, Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand, teachers are integrating subjects at all levels. Recently, they used stone art to teach a history lesson to class VI students. Using natural material and objects around them, students carried out creative experiments eagerly and were excited to share their processes both orally, and in writing, while learning facts about history.

Other strategies

A full session is anchored in the library for purposeful reading and writing, in which students are free to choose any book to read and then take up assignments accordingly.

This allows them the freedom to choose what they read, work on and this also caters to the varied interests of children.

Improving and practising writing through open-ended tasks could be in conjunction to their library class/sessions located within their context. Students can choose to write about any book that they have read or any observation they have made while doing their projects, maintaining a journal and then sharing it with peers for feedback on thoughts and ideas (and not grammar).

Situating lessons within their local context and using local resources to make lessons more relatable is very effective; for instance, learning profit and loss by understanding local businesses of their liking, such as the business of a *chaat* hawker.

In Yadgir, students were given the task of documenting their local folk traditions that included songs and stories. Children interviewed artists in their family and community to uncover the histories of these living traditions— how their elders learnt these in their childhood, and how they cherish them as adults today. This further deepened the children’s regard for their parents and elders in the community.

In Barmer, students were encouraged to create rain harvesting systems using available resources during its short monsoon period. This activity was followed up with a worksheet by letting them observe the water cycle and understand the process of rain.

Other insights

It is essential to better the relationship with students, their parents and the community because this directly affects students’ continuity and learning. During the pandemic, we saw that when people realised that their own house or street could be a place of education, their whole attitude towards the school and teachers changed. There was more trust, sensitivity in interactions and cooperation in efforts, all leading to a better learning environment for the students.

Another insight has been that keeping our alumni engaged has its advantages. They are our resident representatives in the community, hence, help us in mobilising the community. Their success inspires younger students.

It is interesting to note these pedagogical insights are actually general expectations from all good teachers, but we know that not many teachers follow these suggestions. The COVID-19 pandemic created circumstances for us to go beyond the comforts of the textbook- and classroom-centred teaching. As we reflected on all that we have learnt, we realised that the approach and methods we employed are good for any normal school day teaching as well and can continue to be used when schools reopen.

Looking ahead

Being in regular touch with our students and having engaged them academically in different modes gives us a certain advantage. The COVID-19 period has also helped teachers become better equipped to handle diverse learning levels. The larger question is to understand the learning gap in detail and to have fast-paced measures to fill these gaps in an engaging way without pressurising either teachers or students unnecessarily as it would be counterproductive to do so.

We have the following plan for our students:

1. Re-orient all the children into regular school practices and structured learning routines slowly. This is important as they are finding it hard to sit and work for long hours.
2. We already have a good sense of their learning loss, particularly in language and maths, so all teachers will now undertake a more rigorous exercise to understand in greater detail what has been retained and what has been lost. This

is needed more for social science and science subjects on which we could not focus much during the pandemic period.

3. We have begun 'syllabus revision' exercise for different grades and subjects for the remaining academic term this year. On the one hand, this exercise refers to the learning outcomes expected for a subject/class, on the other, it refers to the current learning levels of our students.
4. This revised syllabus will guide teaching work. The initial emphasis for a few months will be on revisiting/teaching concepts and skills from the previous classes. For some students, it will be a revision and they will assist teachers in helping those who are lagging behind.
5. For the primary level, we had developed worksheets as per subject Learning Objectives (LOs) and aligned them to textbook chapters. These will be handy in ascertaining the learning levels of children and refreshing their memories about what they had learnt in the previous classes. For instance, a class V student, can start with a class III worksheet and slowly move up to class V level.
6. We have also identified students who are struggling in foundational literacy and numeracy, so for them, the focus would be on gaining these skills, both in regular class as well as in additional remedial classes for a few months.
7. Similarly, we have students who joined the school either in 2020 or 2021 in pre-primary or classes I and II. Not much work has been done with them, so there is a need to plan differently for them.
8. For students who can work to some extent at the current class level, we will go ahead with the class syllabus. The assignments for this group could be more group-project based as well as the self-learning mode of worksheets.
9. Addressing the children's socio-emotional needs through dedicated time for dialogue, journaling practices, arts, music, drama and physical education will play an important role in this exercise.
10. We will also have to be ready for any school closure due to COVID-19 in the coming months. Our learning from the previous lockdowns will be useful if that happens, as we can quickly go back to our multiple modes of engagement.



Community class near a pond



Stone art by students



A temple being used for community classes



Malavika Rajnarayan is a visual artist based in Vadodara, Gujarat. She joined the Azim Premji Foundation fellowship programme in 2017. She currently works as a Resource Person for art and music across the Azim Premji Schools and is also continuing her own art practice in Vadodara. She likes to write on both, art and education. She can be reached at malavika.rajnarayan@gmail.com



Jitendra Sharma coordinates capacity-building efforts in the Azim Premji Foundation and provides academic coordination and support to all Azim Premji Schools operating in several locations. He comes with many years of experience as a teacher and teacher-educator. He loves to work with both children and teachers. He may be contacted at jitendra.sharma@azimpremjifoundation.org