

Engaging the Community in School Reopening

Mohammed Ali Rizvi

The setting

It has been almost two years since the outbreak of COVID-19. The country has seen a nationwide lockdown, two severe waves, lakhs of people dead, schools shut, jobs lost, businesses disturbed, and we are still uncertain of what the future holds for us; awaiting the third wave of COVID-19 which, the experts suggest, is imminent.

Now, in the lull after the severe second wave, life has returned to full swing. Shops, markets, *bazars* have resumed their businesses, jobs have resumed, and life looks normal except for schools. Primary schools continue to look desolate without learners as only teachers come in and a handful of learners in some schools. Teachers are under pressure to continue online teaching through the *Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement (SMILE)* programme. They are often found navigating the networks to check the new worksheets received. They also receive videos on which the worksheets are based, but in most of the cases, learners are made to complete the worksheets without even being able to watch these accompanying videos. It is a challenge for the teacher to teach the lesson or show the video as they cannot officially call learners to the school, and it is impractical to visit each learner to deliver the worksheets. Although teachers send the video links and worksheets to the parents, most learners do not have access to smartphones. The only phone in the family is with the father, who takes it to work. Learners who have a smartphone struggle with the unavailability of data packs and network connectivity. It would also take great motivation for the child to stick to watching videos sent by their teacher and complete the worksheets and not play mobile games or watch videos of their choice. In conclusion, online teaching in rural setups, like Barmer, is just an illusion for the teachers that they are teaching and for parents that their wards are learning. Many surveys and studies have been done on online teaching, including one by the Azim Premji Foundation, and the results speak of its ineffectiveness and limitations especially in rural setups.

In such a scenario, where we have seen a learning loss of almost two years, we need to think of concrete, feasible and safe school-reopening plans rather than just believing that learning is going on with online teaching. Many countries and Indian states too have already opened schools, though the opening of schools and their functioning in full swing also gives rise to the fear of the spread of COVID-19. That is probably why most of the states have not yet decided to open the primary classes.

This fear will remain unless we get a vaccine for our learners and all of them get vaccinated, which, in itself, will be a long and tedious task. So, what shall we do with the primary classes? Should we continue with the online classes or shall we think of ways of having face-to-face interactions with the learners, for which teachers in a few schools have worked out ways to start in small groups. A Panchayat Elementary Education Officer (PEEO) in a *panchayat* in Barmer decided to find a way to start regular classes in a safe and protected environment because we cannot just wait for the government to open the schools. We needed to find a way to organise in-person classes for learners and we did it with the help of the local community.

Community involvement

Teachers identified a group of children who live in proximity of each other, spend time and play together. The idea of having regular classes for the learners was shared with the community and they were involved in the planning of the classes. Each primary school could find two or three locations where the learners live in clusters. A location was identified for the classes; an open space or a large hall where learners could sit in compliance with COVID-19 protocols, which was easier to follow with a smaller group. The community also did not feel anxious as all the learners came from families that were relatives or were known to each other.

Rural Barmer is full of *dhanis*, clusters of houses usually belonging to a single clan or a family or people who tend to be very close to each other because of their caste or lifestyle. Our associates, who were

practice-teaching and supporting the teachers in panchayats, called these classes the *Dhani* Classes. The timings of the classes were kept from 7:30 to 11:00 a.m. considering the high temperatures in Barmer. The learners would assemble in time for the classes. Excitement ran high among them for getting to attend classes in an unusual setup and after a very long time. The classes were a refuge for the learners from the boring schedule at home which they had been following for the last eighteen months. For someone like Kheta Ram, a first-generation learner, who was gutted about the loss of two years of his school time, it was a matter of delight as he could study his favourite subjects from his teachers.

Returning to class

The classes posed various challenges for the teachers. The first major challenge was that they had to deal with multi-grade and multi-level (MGML) classes. Though this challenge may look big, in a way, it also helps in cutting short the preparations as one MGML lesson plan (with slight variations) could be worked out in almost all the *dhani* classes. The other difficulty was time management. The location of the classes could range from 2 to 5 km apart and some of the locations could only be reached by a sandy path or climbing a sand dune. To mitigate this situation, the teachers made a timetable as per the staff strength of their schools. For instance, if there were two teachers in a school

and they had to visit our *dhanis*, they would organise two to three classes a week. This might seem inadequate, but for learners who had been disconnected from formal education for so long, it is a great opportunity to bridge the losses and stay geared up for the regular opening of the schools.

It is also difficult to maintain COVID-19 protocols, such as encouraging learners to maintain distance and wear masks at all times. But with the involvement of the parents and community members, these concerns were reduced. The unavailability of water, washrooms, handling the students of classes I and II, who had never attended formal classes, were some of the challenges faced. These were worth the trouble taken in accepting and working around because there is immense relief and satisfaction in seeing children learning because of the efforts taken. Although the teachers put in a lot of hard work into the online classes, the intervention did not show substantial benefits for the learners.

Our learning

To make this idea work, it is crucial to involve the community in the planning of resuming the reopening of schools and returning to face-to-face classes. A little courage from the teachers and co-operation from community members enabled swift change to makeshift classrooms for the learners until the schools officially reopen. These lessons will be invaluable when that happens.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



Mohammed Ali Rizvi is a teacher-educator at the Azim Premji Foundation, Barmer, Rajasthan for the last five years. His area of interest is children's language learning. He has a master's degree in English Language Teaching from the Aligarh Muslim University. Horse riding, photography and exploring rural India are some of the things he is passionate about. Ali can be reached out at ali.rizvi@azimpremjifoundation.org