

# Competency-wise Grouping for Level-appropriate Learning

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The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted everything around us. Though it has had a deep impact on our economy, emerging from it is relatively easier. Its impact on education and children's learning, however, is profound and we will see its consequences for generations to come. Amid an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, schools were shut, and in the initial months, the lack of resources made it impossible for teachers to communicate with their students. This long period of school closure has affected the learning of children in two ways: not only did their regular learning get interrupted, but it also came to a sudden halt; secondly, due to schools not functioning regularly, they have begun to forget some of what they had learned earlier. Here, an attempt is made to understand this with an example.

In March 2020, Kareem had passed class I. In class I, he had learned to count up to 50, identify Hindi and English letters, identify simple words in Hindi that had no *maatras*. He could also read chapters from his textbook *Rimjhim*. He could do simple addition and subtraction sums without carryover. He had also memorized some multiplication tables. He could read some easy texts in Hindi both from and outside of his textbooks. He had also learned to write capital and small letters in English. He could read and write words, such as 'cat', 'mat', 'hat', 'rat'. He could also understand formulaic or instructional/imperative sentences made of simple words, such as 'sit down', 'stand up', 'come in' etc. He had memorized some English nursery rhymes.

In the academic session of 2020-21, he became a student of class II without any formal assessment. He did not come to school because schools were shut, and he was unable to participate regularly in whatever teaching-learning work that had begun at the community learning centres in the month of August. Meanwhile, his village was declared as a containment zone twice and he could not visit

the community centre during this time, as well. Classes in community centres were held for just two to three months during the year and Kareem could only devote 20-30 percent of his time to formal learning/schooling. When he was attending class II lessons held at the community centre, he realized that he had forgotten much of what he had learned in class I and what was being taught in class II seemed difficult to him. It was impossible for Kareem to connect with his teacher online as his household had only one basic phone which was with his father all day.

Each day that Kareem attempted to study/read class II level lessons was a painful reminder to him that he should have tried harder to understand all the topics he had missed in class I. He found it difficult to solve carryover addition and subtraction sums and multiplication and division sums. It was difficult to understand text-based questions. The problem of text-based questions was not just a mathematical one, but a linguistic one too.

He has been promoted to class III in April 2021. It is extremely difficult for him to use what he learned in class I as a base for learning in class III, which is even more difficult. Kareem is clearly not prepared for the requirements of learning and understanding the content that class III demands. He still has only half the skills of class I. Also, environmental studies (EVS) has been added to his class III curriculum. This includes many topics and concepts that he has zero familiarity with.

## Challenges teachers face

All kinds of challenges came to the fore for the teachers as well. Many a time, a village or locality was converted into a containment zone and the community did not allow the gathering of children for classes and parents too refused to send children to community classes. Still, teachers continued to make every effort to ensure the learning of children

in whichever way they could. But we know that there can be no substitute for continuous and regular five to six hours of daily teaching-learning in a classroom. The work done in the classroom helps children initiate dialogues with each other and the complete ecosystem of the classroom helps them learn. When a child shares her life experiences during a classroom discussion, she not only helps herself to understand various notions better, but other children who are listening to her are also able to relate to those experiences and in the process, they too develop an understanding of the said notions.

Kareem's example is of a primary level student but the experiences we will need to address further are of upper primary level students. Many children who were in class IV in March 2020 are in class VI now and similar challenges are coming to light in their case too. They too show similar learning gaps as we saw in Kareem's case. They may have had a longer exposure to schooling as compared to Kareem, but they are not far behind when it comes to forgetting concepts. Essentially, we currently have the opportunity to work directly and continuously with upper primary students only. Similar work is being done with primary level students in community centres but there is still a problem of regularity there.

### **My experiences in schools**

My personal experiences are related to schools in two places - Dhamtari (Chhattisgarh) and Dineshpur, Udham Singh Nagar (Uttarakhand). Teaching-learning processes are being carried out at the upper-primary level at both places.

Schools have not formally opened in Dhamtari, but efforts were continuously being made to work with children to continue the teaching-learning process. At the primary level, teachers continued to work with the children in their homes or in the community, making worksheets based on each concept and lesson, ensuring that the worksheets reach the children and reaching out to the children at regular intervals to understand the difficulties faced by them in filling the worksheets and solving problems together.

Despite this, when schools opened after 17 months, we saw that children had forgotten a lot of what they had previously learnt. This issue is clearly visible in the upper primary level classes. Basic operations in mathematics, fractions, decimals and all such concepts are either completely forgotten

by students or they are making common mistakes in these operations. Similarly, their reading and writing skills are marred by problems in the recognition of words and script. This problem is more in English than in Hindi.

### **Identifying challenges**

To address this situation, an attempt was made to create a rubric of language and mathematics learning outcomes. Based on this rubric, a student can be tested on what she has successfully learned and the areas where she needs more attention.

Baseline assessment of children was carried out based on such clearly-outlined learning outcomes and abilities. It was found that about 35 percent of children have some or the other difficulty in basic abilities/skills. Either they could not develop grade-appropriate abilities/skills, or they forgot them for want of regular practice during the lockdown. To address this, groups were formed based on the ability/skills/level and challenges of the children.

### **Competency-wise grouping**

The first group for Hindi language consisted of 11 children who faced difficulties in basic language skills, i.e., a crisis of letter recognition and reading and writing fast, without a pause. The second group was made up of 12 children who did not face problems in basic abilities but in writing skills, finer phonemic awareness and meaning-making. This group also included children whose first language is not Hindi and who found the sounds ष and ष or र and र unfamiliar.

Similarly, in mathematics, one group was formed of 12 students who had problems with basic mathematical skills, such as number recognition, understanding the number pattern, basic operations etc. The second group was made up of children who faced challenges with class III-V level skills. Besides this, they also had linguistic challenges due to which they faced difficulty in text-based questions.

Keeping these groups in mind, teachers prepared a teaching-learning plan. All the teachers of the upper primary level were engaged in this work. Each teacher was working in a focused manner with two or three children to understand and address the individual problems of students. During this process, we understood something fascinating about students: they have a deep

passion for learning! But amidst the school routine, with so many other students and for various other reasons, this learning is not ensured. But this is a tale for another time.

The problems were almost the same in both the Dhamtari and Dineshpur schools. Therefore, almost the same method and scheme were used in both places. Almost two months have passed since this method was adopted and its progress can be gauged from the fact that more than 50 percent of students have overcome their challenges.

The first attempt involved 23 children who faced a challenge with basic abilities/skills such as numbers, place values, basic operations, letter recognition, reading ability, and the ability to write what is heard. After two months, about 17-18 of these students have either overcome these challenges or are in the final stages of doing so. Some children are still struggling with these challenges for various reasons, but a change has been visible in them too and we expect them to acquire these abilities soon.

### Teaching-learning process

In the language group, one of Digantar's<sup>i</sup> old package *Sahaj Pathan* was used. In this package, various reading and writing activities are built around six stories. Although this package is for the students of classes III, IV and V, we used it for our purposes with some modifications. Some stories were changed, some new ones added, and some exercises were added too. It was seen that all 11 students took interest in these stories. Through this, they quickly acquired the skills of letter recognition, reading without pauses and writing.

In this package, a poster of each story, a strip of each sentence of the story, each word card was used. On a regular basis, the story was first narrated, then finger-reading was done with students, then sentences of the story and word cards were arranged in the correct sequence to recreate

the story. This process of reading and arranging the story was an almost daily process for all the children individually. Apart from this, students also solved worksheets based on the story. In the worksheet, some words of the story were omitted, and students were asked to fill in the blanks with those words to complete the story.

Word cards from each story were used to form sentences that were not already in the story. The children took great interest in identifying both known and new words, writing them down, distinguishing the sounds of words, associating those sounds with the visual symbols used for them and forming new words. After a gap of two months, 8 out of 11 children can easily read level IV texts of the *Barkha* series and answer the questions based on them. With the remaining 3 children, the challenge of not being able to attend school regularly, not being able to concentrate fully and continuously in class and forgetting concepts remains.

There were 12 children in the other language group. Their problems were of a different kind. For example, children with a different first language had to be given more practice with the rules of grammatical gender. To do this, teachers have focused on one or two children and tried to remedy their individual problems through exercises and worksheets. Even in this endeavour, about 50 percent of the problems seem to have been resolved in the last two months.

### In summary

Based on the experience of the last two months, it can be said that if inputs are given in a clearly defined, planned and continuous manner, that is, by identifying learning gaps and working on them, most of the learning gaps can be filled soon. As to our approach with students of classes VI, VII, VIII, planned inputs will be given to meet challenges ahead. It is expected that by the end of this term, all students will be at grade-appropriate levels.

<sup>i</sup>Names have been changed to protect children's identities.



एक चिड़िया थी। एक दिन वह डबरे में पानी पीने गई। वह पानी में गिर गई। तभी वहां एक बिल्ली आई। चिड़िया बोली- "बहन, मुझे यहां से निकालो।" बिल्ली बोली- "निकाल तो दूगी, लेकिन मैं तुझे खाऊंगी।" चिड़िया बोली- "पहले मुझे निकाल, सुखा और फिर खा लेना।" बिल्ली ने उसे पानी से निकाला। सूखने के लिए मैदान में रख दिया। बिल्ली पंख सूखने का इंतजार करने लगी। पंख सूखते ही चिड़िया उड़ गई। बिल्ली देखती रह गई।

#### Acknowledgements

Pushpa Bora and Shipra Agrawal from the Azim Premji School, Dineshpur have worked with children along with me and they are committed to carrying this forward.

#### Endnotes

i Digantar Shiksha Evam Khelkud Samiti is a non-profit organisation in Jaipur working in the field of education since 1978.



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