

# Multi-grade, Multi-level Teaching is the way Forward

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The COVID-19 situation has affected every aspect of our normal day-to-day activities, functioning of institutions and service-delivery mechanisms across the country and the globe. At present, schools are closed for children, though some states are moving forward in the direction of reopening, even as there is some uncertainty after the second wave of COVID-19. In these eighteen months, state governments have experimented with customised approaches to facilitate the teaching-learning processes by leveraging online and mass-media platforms. Although teachers tried their best to implement these modes of engagement in government schools in rural India where there are regional and geographical disparities, inaccessibility and unavailability of resources, and a huge digital divide, there were many problems. This issue of the limitations of virtual and online learning has been well-documented by many studies across the world.

We have identified some major areas about which we need to think deeper in our upcoming work when the schools reopen. Through our scheduled sessions and workshops, these areas have been discussed with all those involved: teachers, head teachers and parents. Our teachers have shared their preliminary understanding of the upcoming challenges, as well as mitigation plans and strategies. In their words, this gap in the school life of children will have a long-lasting effect on the overall learning of children. While the closure of school has limited classroom interaction, it has also distanced teachers from effective practice.

These issues are discussed below. I am highlighting how all of us are preparing for better teaching-learning processes by visualising and readying for the reopening of schools. We consider what can be done, how we can move forward in the present context, and plan for the achievement of our goal of bridging the learning gap and moving back to the

normal functioning of schools.

## Children and lost time

For a child, this so-called 'new normal' has invaded every aspect of their life – no school, no examination and now a long wait for the opening of schools. In these one-and-a-half years, children have suffered at many levels -- from psychological to social – due mainly to the limited opportunities for socialisation. There are major changes in their daily lifestyles, routines, and overall social behaviours. In our district (Banswara), a majority of the inhabitants live in rural areas and the sudden emphasis on health- and hygiene-related aspects in regular rural life has caused fear and anxiety.

Our teachers have noted all these factors in their day-to-day interaction with children in the community. One of our teachers, Dharmistha Pandya, says, 'Once the schools open, we teachers must take the first steps toward understanding the needs of our children. These needs are not limited to academics, but cover a wide range of lived experiences, feelings and thoughts of vulnerability'. She further adds that, to begin with, she has already started interacting with children about their day-to-day experiences, paying attention to the narrative of each student in her school – what they like or dislike, in what ways they get engaged, and for how long they are able to pay attention to any purposeful engagement. Once a child is assured of the continued welcome and engagement by the teacher, they slowly open up, start taking part in the school activities and the teaching-learning processes. This approach has further helped in understanding the academic needs of children. Through well-thought-out games, activities and exercises, Ms Pandya is taking note of the learning levels of the children in early mathematics and language. This level of understanding and systematic capturing of the details of every child

will complement and complete her classroom processes and teaching. It will also ensure that the children in her class will learn more effectively.

### **Teachers' practice and capacity-building**

Shifting from real-time, face-to-face classroom interactions and teaching-learning practices to the virtual mode of engagements, *mohalla*/community classes, door-to-door home teaching and many more contextual and customised approaches has been a learning experience. Our teachers have tried different ways and strategies to engage with the children through their own or state-run programmes. For them, getting back to normal classroom teaching will require more well-planned approaches and a change in practices as well. Highlighting this, Vijay Prakash Jain, a teacher from Government Upper Primary School (GUPS), Mediya, Dhindhore, says, 'As teachers, it is necessary for us to prepare ourselves to adapt to different academic as well as pedagogical approaches.' He teaches language to the early classes and engaged proactively with fifty children of his school during this lockdown period. In his experience, one cannot confine oneself to one's subjects. A more integrated approach would be needed in the real-time classroom teaching process. While working on language, he has understood the abilities and skills of his children in numeracy as well and accordingly, he plans his daily teaching. Also, since the children have been promoted to the upper grades, now greater challenges are lying ahead in the classroom once schools reopen. He cites the example of Sonia, a student of class V, 'She was in class III when this pandemic broke out and now, she has been promoted to class V. I know her learning level in both subjects. I have to work on the required skills and help her achieve class-appropriate learning outcomes.'

This will require a keen understanding of the learning levels of every child in the class, designing and planning teaching processes with a more integrated approach so that there can be effective work, for example, on Sonia's learning loss. Classes will now have groups that are at different learning levels, hence, as a teacher, he will have to adopt the multi-grade multi-level (MGML) mode. Many of us lack adequate practice in the understanding of

MGML teaching, so capacity-building of teachers on this front is required. Such training and workshops will help us draw from our previous practice and experiences to build new capacities that will suit the diverse needs of our students in the coming time.

### **Getting back to normal**

Although schools are closed for children, our teachers are coming to their respective schools as usual. This situation is completely different from before the lockdown when there was excitement, routine classroom interactions and engagement with children. Now getting back to normal functioning will have new components of ensuring health and hygiene awareness and practice both inside and outside the school. Throughout this COVID-19 situation, the whole community has been working together with the school administration and teachers, who also served in various roles and completed their duties as assigned by the state governments. Once the schools reopen, classroom teaching, management and functioning of teachers and administration will change.

In two of our scheduled three-day workshops with eighty head teachers of the Banswara, Talwara, Arthuna, Gadhi, Choti Sharvan and Bagidaura blocks, we discussed and tried to understand the present challenges and plan how head teachers will work on identified needs and goals to ensure better learning in children and adopting better ways of teaching by teachers. The participants highlighted the immediate need for understanding the current situation at the level of the community and emphasised the importance of systematic work towards the community's needs and challenges. Understanding and sensitivity toward the community will play a crucial role in ensuring children's regularity in school and will prevent dropouts. Instead of directly going ahead with academic processes, the schools will have to work on creating an empathetic environment that welcomes and accommodates each child and respects the reality that children have been away from the daily routine of school, and many may have faced emotional and financial trauma.

Therefore, bridging the learning loss, firstly, requires identifying the learning gaps by assessing the children. For this, we need to think closely about

understanding their basic skills in different subjects. It is important to understand the individual needs and learning levels of each child so as to provide them with the best type of support and guidance

(remedial work/bridging course). Hence, we plan to identify and work towards two important goals – ensuring the learning of children and facilitating effective teaching practices.

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



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