

Learning is a lifelong process; however, the early few years are crucial for learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has spelt disaster for the education of children, and it is going to be very challenging to mitigate the consequences of this loss and bridge the learning gap. The initiatives taken by the government are not effective even in retaining primary school children's learning of the previous class. The Rajasthan state government launched the SMILE (Social Media Interface for Learning Engagements) programme on the *WhatsApp* platform for the sharing of worksheets, videos, quizzes and homework for students. There were many constraints in the implementation of this programme because of the unavailability of digital devices, poor internet bandwidth, the geographical setting of schools and children and issues concerning level-appropriate content/material, the requirement of continuous guidance from teachers and parents' awareness and concern about learning of their child and so on. Very few teachers could conduct *mohalla* (community) classes during the lockdown to the best of their capacity.

Children are being promoted to the next class without assessing their learning levels. Since March 2020, students have been out of school and have not learned the new class-level competencies. In fact, they have forgotten many things learned in the previous class. For example, a student who was in class III in March 2020 and is now in class V, may have remained at the class III level, and in some cases, may have even fallen to class II level, as he/she may have forgotten the fundamental concepts of a subject. Due to the closing of schools, regression is a trait now obvious in children.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 recommends 'student-centric' teaching practices. This is an umbrella term that covers many dimensions, right from classroom activities to study materials and parents' involvement. If all our processes had been student-centric, there would have been a possibility of better learning levels among students today. Here I am suggesting strategies at three levels to promote self-learning in students.

## At state government level

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends that primary education should be in the mother tongue, so the local context should be included in material developed at the state level. The state government should form a group of motivated, passionate and experienced academicians for research and development of high-quality study material. The study material should be self-explanatory so that students can learn by themselves with some guidance from teachers and parents. In effect, the government should develop self-learning workbooks for learners so that they can continue learning at home.

Health experts suggest that children are at low risk of COVID-19 infection as their immune system is robust. So, even during lockdowns, schools can be run with half or one-third capacity. As the spread of COVID-19 is not uniform across a state, there is no need of closing all schools simultaneously. There would be no harm in decentralising the decision-making of opening and closing of schools to contain the spread of COVID-19 at the district or subdivision level.

## At school level

We have never faced this kind of challenge before, so there are no prior experiences in dealing with this situation. In this hard time, many teachers have triumphed over circumstances and showed by example that work can be continued in some form or the other in changed conditions. Conversations with these teachers can give some direction to the efforts.

- a. There is no substitute for in-person classroom teaching, especially in primary classes where children need teachers' handholding. So, some extraordinary teachers talked with the parents and together with them, identified a common place where they could teach students from the neighbouring houses or communities. In these settings, students from multiple grades and levels studied together but teachers prepared well and tried their best to help each student.

- b. Student-centric teaching is very important. Teachers, from the very beginning, should focus on how to make students own their learning process. These teachers could help learners build the concepts on their own by letting them be actively involved in the learning process. For this, teachers have to prepare a scaffolding plan for each student by assessing their learning and analysing the needs and support they require.
- c. Many researchers and our experiences also show that each student is different from the other and that each learns differently. Moreover, you will find students at different learning levels in the same class. This is the reason that we cannot depend only on the prescribed textbook and workbook, which cannot suit the learning needs of all students. Teachers, in this case, prepared supplementary worksheets for each student to link their existing understanding of concepts/ chapters and work towards targeted learning outcomes.

#### At family level

It is a known fact that the family environment also affects learning. We can see that the learning gap is less in students whose parents are committed to their education in comparison with those whose parents are not. Many students are first-generation

school-goers and find no academic support at home, in this scenario, the role of teachers becomes crucial.

These teachers created awareness among parents regarding the importance of education and the role of continuous learning practices. After counselling, some of the parents started providing an enabling environment for their child's study at home. Teachers also identified, together with the parents, a few senior student volunteers in the community and motivated them to teach the students living nearby. When teachers visited the community, they guided the volunteers and helped them in preparing teaching plans.

#### In summary

The setback education of school children has suffered during the lockdown and indeed during the entire course of the pandemic (which is still looming) has been a learning for all of us to be prepared to deal with any adversity that we may face. The above-mentioned three pillars (government, school, and family) of a child's education should be ready to address all threats to it. In future, we have to be fully prepared and under no circumstances should the learning engagements of students be disturbed or discontinued.



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