

Phased Return to the Learning Culture of School

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COVID-19 created a situation in which we realised that education can only be partly digitised. The result was that private schools maintained appearances and some semblance of learning, which was essential for their sustenance. Meanwhile, from the largest study^j done on government school students, we learnt that 80-90 percent lost at least one ability that they had gained in the previous year in both maths and language. The loss of specific abilities in these subjects ranged from 20-90 percent of students. While it is difficult to convert this exactly to the months of learning lost, it is fairly clear that it is more than the months that the schools remained closed, which, at the time of writing this, was 18 months! For perspective, a study in the United States showed students to be 4-5 months behind due to COVID-19-related closure (school closure in the US were much shorter than in India).

The idea of 'contingency planning', that is, having a Plan B for such circumstances, is common among businesses, but the education world was largely caught unawares. In the interim periods during late 2020, when school opening was planned multiple times, what was seen, was an approach that involved the tweaking of the existing plan by cutting a few chapters and bringing it down to what seemed doable in the remaining time. But then, as the 2020-21 academic year ended, this too could not be implemented. As a good part of the 2021-22 academic year also went by, it is clear that we need a different plan rather than just tweaking the old one.

This article focuses on the return to schooling in government schools in India and the focus is on primary schools.

Loss of 'learning culture'

Such a long absence from school without any supplementary learning happening at home is not to be seen simply as a learning loss. It is the loss of a *learning culture* that the school invites the student into. For the primary class students in government schools, there is a vast gap in

the learning culture of the school and their homes. The school offers a culture of a type of learning that is missing at home, which is not the case with the children of the middle or the elite classes. Therefore, the problem is one of returning to the learning culture of the school. This is a much larger view of the problem than seeing it merely as fixing learning losses.

Solution – a phased return

The overarching idea is that a return to the learning culture cannot happen in a linear fashion, but needs to be done in a phased manner, where there may be non-linear jumps in certain kinds of activities between the phases.

What follows is a menu of suggestions and ideas, rather than one tightly-created action plan. Since the design in each state should factor in the local context, a menu of ideas to pick from could be more useful than giving one plan which fits only one context.

Phase 1

To take the entire scenario into perspective, let us start from the time when schools closed, and students were not allowed to come into school. In 2020-21, this phase was largely wasted in many states. Much more could have been done in this phase to restart learning. The key factors in this phase could have been:

- Use of worksheets
- Assistance from the educated-young from the community
- Use of broadcast media, like TV and *YouTube* and interactive media, like *WhatsApp*
- Teacher support for all of the above

The idea is not to orchestrate or control the phenomenon as the activities in this *phase cannot be controlled*. Instead, the focus should be on providing carefully designed resources by local volunteers, supported by the teacher. By the time of publication of this article, we may have passed this phase, but this might be useful for future reference.

The important aspect in this phase is that it is better to not bring regular education into the homes using technologies. Instead, we would need to take into account the current learning levels of the students, the learning objectives that we have set, the capacities existing proximate to each child and carry out the teaching-learning process as best as we can, given the constraints of the (any such critical) situation. As we have seen, the key problem in this phase has been the equity of access.

There are five areas, each of which are needed to tackle this phase holistically:

1. *Delivery of classes through broadcast media*

The government of Kerala's KITE VICTERSⁱⁱ *YouTube* channel is an example. It had 30 lakh subscribers during the lockdown period. There were grade- and subject-wise live telecasts on TV according to a timetable which were also available on the *YouTube* channel for later viewing. This achieves a basic delivery of lessons, even if they were not interactive. Taken together, the lessons on TV and the *YouTube* channel have a good reach, ensuring comparatively better equity of access, compared to lessons over smartphones or laptops.

2. *Worksheets for learning activities*

The worksheets created by the Azim Premji Foundation and a few other organisations are good examples of this. The idea is to get children to do activities that are designed to fit the expected learning outcomes for different classes, on a regular basis, wherever they are. However, the worksheets have to be level-appropriate and not class-appropriate.

Also, these worksheets need to be made easy for the volunteers to deal with. These are different from the usual workbooks, which were designed to complement teacher-led classroom activities. Although worksheets are not ideal for introducing new concepts, they can complement broadcast classes well, as with these the child is engaged in doing activities, as against listening or watching. Of course, the printing and distribution of worksheets will remain a challenge as the children may be located in different places, as, for example, in the case of children of migrant workers.

3. *Support from volunteers*

As teachers cannot be with every child to help in this phase, anyone with some level of education proximate to the child, a parent or educated youth in the neighbourhood, who are willing to volunteer

can support this work.

Education in the primary classes cannot happen without a guiding and motivating presence. This is similar to the recommendation of the National Education Policy 2020: 'Additionally, it will also be made far easier for trained volunteers - from both the local community and beyond - to participate in this large-scale mission. Every literate member of the community could commit to teaching one student/person how to read, it would change the country's landscape very quickly.... In this regard, the support of active and healthy senior citizens, school alumni and local community members will be suitably garnered. Databases of literate volunteers, retired scientists/government/semi-government employees, alumni, and educators will be created for this purpose.'

Was there a better opportunity to have made this database than during the COVID period?

4. *Role of teacher*

Teachers have to play a key role in enabling this entire mechanism of distribution and completion of worksheets, identification of volunteers with the help of the community and of regularly connecting with volunteers through *WhatsApp* groups or teleconferences for planning, review and support.

5. *Role of curriculum-creating bodies (like SCERTs)*

This phase should, in parallel, be utilised to design the modified curriculum for the next phases. Instead of taking parts from the existing textbooks/cards, what is needed is the following:

- Break down the key learning outcomes of each grade level to the next level in detail
- Create a trajectory towards these through a series of carefully-designed activities, either for the whole class or groups or individuals
- Given the multi-level scenario, it may be better to choose a card-based curriculumⁱⁱⁱ, than a textbook-based one

Phase 2

The second phase is the period when students are back but 'education as usual' is still months away. This phase should focus less on the speedy return to the normal and more on the psychological aspects of returning to stability for teachers, students and parents in a slow manner. This phase should not be hurried for two reasons – medical and educational. The key aspects during this period are:

- Being cautious so as to not precipitate a relapse to Phase 1

- Addressing the psychological aspects of return to the learning culture

This means focussing on rebuilding the teacher-student relation and the affective side through activities designed for this purpose. Meanwhile, some of the activities of Phase 1 can be revisited and taken forward depending on how much has been achieved earlier (and this will vary widely even within the same school).

Various organisations have produced literature on COVID-appropriate precautions including *WHO's FAQ on Schools*, the Ministry of Education's *COVID Action Plan*, and the Centre for Global Development's *Planning for School Reopening*. The three essential aspects of these are:

1. Being extra alert to symptoms
2. Vaccination status of the teachers
3. Ventilation of all areas within the (school) building

The more we do outdoors in this phase, the better. Let education return to under the tree or in open spaces within the school as much as is possible.

The other important aspect is for all stakeholders to be comfortable with returning to school - teachers, students and parents. Parents and the community need to be part of this to ensure that they feel that all precautions are taken at the school. In the case of anyone contracting COVID-19, the situation should be managed according to a pre-established protocol.

Educationally and emotionally, the child should feel comfortable in returning to learning activities. In all likelihood, children will be relieved to return to school and meet friends and play on the premises. However, the learning activities are of a different nature and there should be a phased entry back into it. Even if a month is spent on getting comfortable with this, it is time spent well. Following which a set of baseline activities could be done to identify each child's learning level. After this, the new card-based curriculum developed during Phase 1 can be slowly introduced.

Phase 3

The third phase is when we bring the focus back on learning outcomes. In this phase, the key is to design a curriculum that has a clear plan for taking students, who may be at multiple learning levels, to the desired level through a series of carefully chosen learning activities. The success of this phase is in ensuring that the cards or other material required

are designed in advance and the teachers are well-prepared before the phase begins. I mention cards because the highly-varied situation makes a card-based multi-grade, multi-level, (MGML) approach more desirable. However, there could be diversity on this across states. This approach is easier for a state like Karnataka where cards are already being used but may not be easy in other states who have not implemented this.

In this phase, the idea is to follow the new (modified) curriculum so as to achieve age-appropriate learning outcomes. After this is achieved, the usual curriculum could be followed with modifications based on what we learnt in the last two years. All these learnings can be factored into school education in this phase for the future:

- Teachers could focus on activities centred around learning outcomes. There is always scope to cut down the time on a few activities and give more time to the more important ones.
- The home environment can complement the learning in school. Local volunteers can work with groups of children post-COVID, for example, *Shiksha Mitras*.
- The introduction of concepts can now be done in the classroom, so we could revert from the worksheets of Phase 1 to workbooks that can focus on reinforcement and practice etc.
- Technology can play a role by providing practice and instant feedback. However, this needs higher investment and needs to be done in moderation to avoid excess screen-time, addiction, etc. However, the bigger role technology can play in the areas of in-service teacher training, data gathering and in faster and regular communication between teachers, parents and educational functionaries, even basic WhatsApp groups can work well.

Looking Ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic hardly produced any new social phenomenon; it only amplified the already existing ones. The children of parents from middle and elite backgrounds continued their education, albeit a highly impoverished one. Government schools initially waited and watched and then started some initiatives, with high variance across states.

What has been highlighted above is the work that can be done in a phased manner, beginning now until schools reopen, as well as after reopening until some semblance of normalcy returns. What

is also needed in the future is *to engage more positively with both technology and management in education*. We need better management in education, that focuses on solutions that may not be perfect, but work well towards children's learning.

Management is a highly contextual art that focuses on results. We do need management in business to be more balanced to its approach to society and the natural environment. But in education, we need much better management of the land, the building and facilities, people and the learning process. We also need much better utilisation of the regular feedback that comes in terms of both student assessment and the continuing drain of children out of government schools.

We also need a similar and more balanced approach to technology. For primary classes, we could look at non-student facing technologies, such as:

- Richer pedagogic content for teachers in all languages through portals like *Diksha*^{iv} (used for local workshops at both block and district levels)
- Faster and regular communication between all those concerned – teachers, parents and educational functionaries – facilitated by customised messenger apps that also manage the data collection needs of the government
- Formative assessment data analysed and fed back to teachers, indicating modifications that they can make in the upcoming learning activities.

Endnotes

- i Loss of Learning During the Pandemic, February 2021, Azim Premji Foundation. <https://tinyurl.com/86jhm6d>
- ii <https://www.youtube.com/c/itsvicters/featured>
- iii Card-based curricula like *Nali Kali* of Karnataka can be a great way to transact during the current bridge scenario. Cards help each child from whichever level they are to move at their own pace, until they reach a more common level, from where textbooks can take over.
- iv <https://diksha.gov.in/>



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