

Anticipated Challenges and Some Solutions

Vipin Kumar

A few days ago, I had to go to *Bassi Adda panchayat* (Banswara, Rajasthan) for vaccination-related work. At a tea stall, I saw a little girl working. She must have been 9-10 years old. I asked her for her name; she said it was Ritu. I enquired if she was going to school. She replied in her local language that she used to go earlier but not anymore. I asked her which class she is in, to which Ritu replied that she did not know. I thought she might be able to tell me which class she studied in when she went to school, but Ritu could not recall even that. Most children during this time have either been carefree, on their own or burdened by daily chores; whatever the reasons, it is a fact that they have drifted away from school. We can surmise from this that the anxiety of teachers regarding children's learning is not completely unfounded. I also spoke to Ritu about counting, addition and subtraction. She could not count properly. According to her age, she should be in class IV or V now.

Major challenges

I have been in constant contact with teachers and children in the Banswara district of southern Rajasthan during this pandemic. Here, the Aravalli Range ends due to which one can see both low hills and an island-like terrain. About 85 percent of the population of this district is tribal. Based on the geographical location and resources, four major challenges arise for the education of children in this area presently.

No resources for online learning

A majority of the population of the district resides in villages. People do not have the required resources for online learning – 80 percent of parents do not have Android mobiles. Even those who have one, do not get an internet recharge for their phones unless there is a dire need. In such a situation, we cannot even think of a way to connect with children through online mediums. The government did broadcast some educational programmes through TV and radio, but even these mediums are rarely used in the villages. Learning simply by listening to or watching a teacher online is a challenge in itself.

To say that the teachers have not made efforts would be wrong. Most children who come to school in this district are first-generation school-goers. In such a situation, even if some learning material is shared online, no one in the family can help them understand it. Overall, any online teaching-learning processes undertaken at the primary level under government programmes have been largely unsuccessful.

Scattered dwellings

Here, villages do not have *mohallas* or neighbourhoods. Houses are situated far from each other. The distance between two houses could be 50 metres, with the next dwelling 500 metres or even one kilometre away. So, it is challenging to teach children in groups by gathering them in one place. As a result, most children from most schools could interact with teachers only for a very short span of time. It has been the experience of teachers that in such efforts, it is only possible to teach one group for one or two hours at a time. The next day, they have to go to another place, to teach another group. Subsequently, both the interaction time and the regularity of the interaction are incommensurate.

Gap in extant- and grade-level learning

At the class level at which children are supposed to be learning multiplication, division, fractions and decimals, teachers will have to teach them counting and addition and subtraction. This indeed is a valid cause for concern for teachers. If we look at the NASⁱ and ASERⁱⁱ reports, we find that more than 50 percent of children in schools, even when schools run regularly, are not able to achieve grade-level learning outcomes in maths and language. In such a situation, a gap of 18 months has pushed primary education into deep darkness.

The biggest concern for science teachers is that it is now impossible to teach children through experiments and activities for science content as they did earlier. Conceptual understanding of new scientific terms requires constant dialogue with children which is difficult to do regularly through

mediums like *mohalla* classes.

Another concern of the teachers of science and mathematics at the upper primary level is that the concepts learned in the previous class at this stage are very important and require adequate time to learn. In the current situation when children have been promoted in two classes, it is a big challenge to even bring them to the normal level. Some experienced teachers have also shared that the content at this stage increases considerably as compared to the primary level because of which children's reading and writing skills become crucial. Also, children who cannot read and write properly are unable to complete their homework, resulting in their lagging behind even more. Despite these circumstances, teachers are making constant efforts to work with the children.

Return to school routine

When children come to the school after it reopens, teachers worry that another challenge will be to keep them engaged in the teaching-learning activities throughout the day after having spent two years free of a regimented school routine. Presently, children only spend sit 1-2 hours in *mohalla* classes because after having spent this much time, they feel hungry and *mohalla* classes have no provision for mid-day meals.

Some suggestions for teachers

Firstly, ensure regular attendance of children by talking to all the parents. Secondly, create a pleasant and joyful atmosphere in the school for children so that they come to school regularly and eagerly. Establishing an emotional connection with school

and teachers is important for learning and creating children's readiness to learn. Learning-level-wise assessment of children will be very important and the more interactive one can make this assessment, the better. Paper-pencil tests alone will not work. Perhaps a lot of children may find this challenging too, which can lessen their enthusiasm for coming to school.

In the beginning we should make groups according to the extant level of the children and try to bring everyone to their current class level. The groups should continuously change with the change in children's learning levels. The tasks laid out for us right now seem to be centred around fundamental skills in language, mathematics and environmental studies at the primary level and subject-specific basic concepts and skills at the upper-primary level. We will need to focus on this for at least two months. Only a continuous review will reveal if this needs to be extended further. After this, we may proceed by identifying children's class-wise needs.

For children promoted to the upper primary level who need remedial support, grouping 2-3 classes, that is, the multi-grade, multi-level mode teaching process may help. The walls of the school can be decorated with TLMs. This will increase children's exposure as well as the speed of their learning.

It is important to make additional efforts to provide subject-wise, systematic inputs for these possible solutions. If we prepare before schools open, the long road will probably be easier to walk on. What is significant is that teachers are concerned about this, and their efforts will surely change the picture of education after the pandemic.

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

Endnotes

- i National Achievement Survey
- ii Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)



Vipin Kumar has an M Sc in Chemistry from Sanatan Dharam College, Muzafarnagar (affiliated to the Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut). He has been with the Azim Premji Foundation for the last 7 years, prior to which he taught Chemistry in PG College, Bhaila, Saharanpur. He may be contacted at vipin.kumar@azimpremjifoundation.org.