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Coming Back To School

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Impact of School Closure During the COVID-19 Pandemic

What Must Be Done When Schools Reopen

Nimrat Khandpur

Schools are slowly reopening across the country after almost 18 months of closure, which translates to about one and a half academic years. Roughly, states require about 200 school days in each academic year – so our schools have been closed for about 300 school days or about 50 school weeks. Even if high schools did open briefly, attendance was reported to be poor, and they were shut down again following the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alternatives to regular schooling have been available for some children, mostly through the use of technology. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that these modes have not resulted in learning.¹ A survey of teachers reveals that in no case has the curriculum been completed in entirety.² Worse, children have forgotten what they knew already, when schools closed.

A school-based system for regular tracking of recovery from learning loss and acquisition of class-appropriate abilities must be put in place.

This was due to the long disconnect. This ‘forgetting,’ along with the absence of the learning that would have happened if schools had been open, is being termed as ‘learning loss’.³ This learning loss is usually quantified in terms of the months or years of learning that children are ‘behind’ the class-appropriate learning.

This situation is not peculiar to our country. Schools have suffered either full or partial closure during the pandemic. While full closure indicates a situation wherein all schools are closed across the country due to COVID-19, partial closure refers to school closures in some regions or for some grades, or a blended mode with components of both in-person classes and remote learning.

However, in both situations, regular teaching-learning and the interactions that go on in schools and classrooms are missing. An ongoing survey of 143 countries⁴ revealed that in 2020, schools were fully closed across all education levels for 79 school days on an average. The duration of school closures ranged from 53 days in high-income countries to 115 days in lower- and middle-income countries.

Estimates of learning loss across the world also show a relationship with the duration of school closure. To illustrate, teachers surveyed in Japan estimated that there was less than a month of learning loss after 11 weeks of school closure. In the case of Brazil, with 57 weeks of school closure, a simulation based on available data showed that gains of the past many years had been lost. Children had regressed to a level of proficiency recorded four years ago (between 2015 and 2017) in language and three years ago in mathematics (2017) in terms of final elementary school grades. In Netherlands, after 31 weeks of school closure, children were estimated to have lost 8 weeks of learning. Children in South Africa, after 42

weeks of school closure, were estimated to have lost one entire year of learning.⁵

This loss is more severe in the case of children in their earlier years of schooling. For instance, school closure lasted 27 weeks in the United Kingdom, with an estimated loss of three months of learning. However, teachers reported that younger children had forgotten even how to hold a pencil when schools reopened. In Brazil, the ‘worst affected’ group was of children in elementary school.⁶

The signs that a large proportion of children are at risk of dropping out of school are already visible.

School closure has affected some children more than others. Irrespective of whether the country is high-, middle- or low-income, children from socio-economically disadvantaged communities have been disproportionately affected. Studies show that children from less-educated homes and students of color suffered greater losses of learning.

To illustrate, in the United States of America, students of color were three to five months behind, while white students were just one to three months behind in language and mathematics. In the Netherlands, losses were up to 60% larger among students from less-educated homes. In Brazil, the worst affected population groups were children of color, indigenous children, and children whose mother did not complete elementary school.⁷

So what are countries doing to address this situation? The academic year has been extended in some countries (e.g. through reducing vacations) while others have decided to focus on certain curricular areas or outcomes (e.g. language and mathematics in the earlier years). Some countries, mostly high- or upper-middle-income countries, are

planning to implement remedial measures to address learning gaps for primary and secondary school students when schools reopen. At the same time, while a large proportion of countries are not planning any adjustments to cater for school closure, some have made an investment towards addressing learning loss, with specific interventions being planned by schools.

These interventions include summer school during vacations, with particular focus on language and mathematics, combined with fun activities to motivate students; increasing staff; intensive individualized support as part of the school day; enrichment activities like interest-based projects in science and social science; special support measures for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; hiring additional specialized teachers; counselling for students; and special support measures for students in psychological distress.

Estimates of learning loss across the world also show a relationship with the duration of school closure.

As schools reopen, there is a lesson to be drawn from the past as well. The Ebola pandemic of 2014-16 impacted seven countries most seriously. A study conducted in two of these, namely Guinea and Sierra Leone, revealed that dropout rate post-Ebola exceeded the expected pre-Ebola value. The largest increase in school dropouts was among secondary school students from marginalized communities in rural areas in both countries.⁸

The signs that a large proportion of children are at risk of dropping out of school are already visible.⁹ While reports speak of increased enrolment in public schools as a result of private schools shutting down, or because of the inability of parents to pay fees, tracking learners who have not returned

to school must be a priority as schools reopen. More importantly, we also need to track learners who return to schools but then drop out as a result of the long period of disconnect from schooling and an inability to keep up with learning due to the learning loss they have suffered.

Studies show that children from less-educated homes and students of color suffered greater losses of learning.

The question now is – what should we be doing to mitigate the impact of school closure? First, we must ensure that children return to schools. Schools in turn must offer them a warm and inclusive environment. We must make sure that our teachers feel safe, and have the autonomy to plan how to engage with children. Teachers must decide how long they want to take to involve children in school and classroom processes gradually, till the old routines are established. They must be supported through suitable materials and the capacity to engage classrooms with a wide diversity of learning levels.

The curriculum cannot automatically switch from the online to the offline mode. It must be reset with prioritization of learning outcomes. At the primary stage, focus must be on languages and mathematics. In the middle school, this focus must continue with an integrated approach to achieving learning outcomes across subjects. At the secondary and senior secondary levels, core learning outcomes for each subject must be identified and be the focus of learning.

This must be a holistic exercise in curriculum revision, not done piecemeal for stages or simply by choosing chapters from textbooks. Teachers must be capacitated to make commensurate approaches to pedagogy and assessment. A school-based system for

regular tracking of recovery from learning loss, and acquisition of class-appropriate abilities, must be put in place.

We must also be ready for disruptions – children may be coming to schools in shifts or on alternate days, the school day may be shorter, subsequent waves of COVID-19 infection may cause school closure once again. Decisions on opening schools must be decentralized to the level of clusters or gram panchayats, and the community must be involved in this process.

All actions must be informed by the fact that what is at risk is not just the learning of the current generation of school goers. The gains we have made in the past and the learning of future generations is equally at risk.

Notes

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A Kindergarten in Japan

शिक्षा व कोरोना वैश्विक महामारी से मिली सीख

हृदयकान्त दीवान

कोरोना वैश्विक महामारी ने करीब-करीब सभी लोगों को परेशान किया है, परन्तु कुछ लोगों को अन्य की अपेक्षा कुछ ज्यादा ही परेशान किया है। इसने अलग-अलग तबकों के लोगों के सामने अलग-अलग तरह की चुनौतियाँ पेश कीं और सभी को उनके आलोक में अपने जीवन को ढालना पड़ा।

इनमें से प्रवासी मजदूरों और उनके परिवारों के सामने आई चुनौतियाँ भयावह हैं और उनके जीवन पर पड़े प्रभाव का आकलन करना भी अभी बहुत मुश्किल है। इसके अलावा स्वास्थ्य कर्मियों और उनके परिवारों के जीवन पर भी बहुत असर हुआ।

एक तरफ तो उनके काम को पहचान और सराहना मिली वहीं कुछ छिटपुट घटनाओं में मरीजों के परिजनों ने स्वास्थ्य कर्मियों के साथ बदसलूकी की। इक्के-दुक्के स्वास्थ्य कर्मियों का व्यवहार इस आपदा में भी संकीर्ण निजी स्वार्थ का रहा। धीरे-धीरे ही सही सभी परेशानियों से अब कुछ छुटकारा मिला है और स्वास्थ्य कर्मियों सहित अन्य अनेकों लोगों की जिन्दगी कुछ ढर्रे पर आई है।

शिक्षकों ने साथियों से ही नहीं, प्रशिक्षकों से भी सीखा और वेबिनार व ऑनलाइन प्रशिक्षण में भागीदारी का भी प्रयास किया।

कोरोना के दौरान समाज के एक तबके को ऐसे नुकसान हुए हैं जिनका असर अभी तक है। यह तबका बच्चों का है। कोरोना ने हर उम्र के और हर पृष्ठभूमि के बच्चों पर असर डाला है। वर्तमान में हमारे सामने सवाल यह भी है कि बच्चों को हुए इस नुकसान की भरपाई कैसे होगी और इसकी भरपाई करने के लिए जो तरीके सुझाए गए हैं, क्या वे सभी या उनमें से कोई भी कारगर है? क्या वे कुछ भी सकारात्मक प्रभाव डाल पाएँगे?

इस पूरी अवधि में बच्चों ने दोस्तों के साथ, अपने वृहद परिवार के साथ, अपने शिक्षकों के साथ और अन्य अनेकों लोगों के साथ अन्तःक्रिया के बहुत से मौके गँवाए हैं। वे स्कूल नहीं गए हैं यह तो स्पष्ट ही है किन्तु उनमें से अधिकांश ने इस दौरान नई तो क्या कोई पुरानी पुस्तक भी नहीं देखी है, किसी कॉपी अथवा स्लेट पर कुछ लिखा नहीं है, कोई चित्र नहीं बनाया है, दोस्तों के साथ बातचीत नहीं की है और खेल नहीं खेले हैं। स्वायत्तता व स्वयं के आनन्द के लिए कुछ कर पाने के जो भी मौके उनके पास थे, उन्होंने वे सब खोए हैं।

इनमें भी व्यक्तिगत अपवादों को छोड़ दें तो गरीब और कमजोर तबकों के बच्चों और सभी श्रेणियों में लड़कियों ने सबसे ज्यादा नुकसान उठाए हैं। बहुत से अध्ययन हुए हैं जो इसके पुख्ता प्रमाण प्रस्तुत करते हैं कि बच्चे सभी तरह से घाटे में रहे हैं।

कोरोना के दौरान गरीब बच्चों का पोषण भी काफी हद तक प्रभावित हुआ है क्योंकि स्कूलों के बन्द होने की वजह से बच्चे मिड डे मील से भी वंचित रह गए। यह सच है कि इस दौरान बच्चों के लिए निर्धारित मिड डे मील स्कीम के तहत उन तक पोषण पहुँचाने के कई तरह के प्रयास हुए, किन्तु इनमें से अधिकांश प्रयास अपने लक्ष्य को किसी भी सार्थक हद तक पूरा करने में नाकामयाब रहे हैं। सूखा राशन देकर भी परिवारों तक पोषण पहुँचाया जा सकता है और परिवारों तक इसका पहुँचना सुनिश्चित करने के लिए एक सक्षम ढाँचा बनाने का प्रयास चल ही रहा है।

कोरोना के दौरान ऑनलाइन माध्यमों से कक्षाएँ संचालित करने के प्रयास किए गए। शिक्षा का ऑनलाइन प्रयास बच्चों और शिक्षकों के बीच सम्पर्क का असन्तोषजनक तरीका रहा है। बच्चों, शिक्षकों और पालकों सभी ने ऑनलाइन शिक्षा की अनुपयुक्तता के बारे में कई महत्वपूर्ण अनुभव व विचार रखे हैं। यह अनुभव उन सभी को अनुपयोगी व थका देने वाला लगा है जो इसमें शामिल हो पाए हैं। गरीब परिवारों के लगभग 80-85 फीसदी बच्चे तो इसमें शामिल ही नहीं हो पाए हैं क्योंकि कक्षा में शामिल हो सकने के लिए उनके पास स्मार्टफोन और लैपटॉप व इंटरनेट की पर्याप्त बैंडविड्थ व डाटा की उपलब्धता नहीं है।

इस दौरान हुए अनुभवों से कई सकारात्मक बातें भी सामने आई हैं जिनको नजरअन्दाज नहीं किया जाना चाहिए व उन्हें और सुदृढ़ किया जाना चाहिए। इनसे उभरी समझ को स्थापित मान्यताओं व रीतियों में बदलाव के लिए इस्तेमाल करना होगा। यदि हम सकारात्मक पहलुओं की बात करें तो इनमें सबसे महत्वपूर्ण है इस बात का प्रमाण मिलना कि गरीब परिवार से आने वाले बच्चों के माता-पिता भी अपने बच्चों की शिक्षा को लेकर चिन्तित हैं।

सरकारी स्कूल के शिक्षकों ने यह महसूस किया कि प्राइवेट और सरकारी सभी प्रकार की शालाओं में पढ़ने वाले बच्चों के माता-पिता ने अपने बच्चों की शिक्षा को लेकर चिन्ता जताई। उन्होंने अपने बच्चों का सीखना सुनिश्चित करने के लिए जो भी सम्भव था वह करने का प्रयास किया। इसी तरह से माता-पिता यह देख

पाए कि सरकारी स्कूल व उनके शिक्षक भी बच्चों की शिक्षा के प्रति चिन्तित हैं और उनमें से बहुत से शिक्षक अतिरिक्त प्रयास भी करने का तैयार हैं। इनमें ऐसे प्रयास शामिल हैं जो उन्हें बच्चों तक पहुँचाने और सीखने में उनकी मदद करने के मौके दें।

कोरोना के दौरान बहुत से शिक्षकों ने बच्चों की शिक्षा की स्थिति का जायजा लेने के लिए उनके घरों का दौरा किया या फिर फोन के माध्यम से उनके माता-पिता से सम्पर्क किया। इससे दोनों समूहों (शिक्षक एवं समुदाय) के बीच संवाद हुआ और परस्पर विश्वास भी बना। इस सहयोग, परस्पर विश्वास और संवाद को पुर्नबलित करने की जरूरत है।

इस सम्बन्ध में पहले भी कई तरह के छिटपुट प्रयास हुए हैं व अलग-अलग प्रयासों में विविध तरीके के ढाँचे उभरे हैं किन्तु कोरोना के इस कठिन समय के अनुभव ने परस्पर अन्तःक्रिया को स्वाभाविक रूप से उत्पन्न किया है। यह सम्भावना बनी है कि बच्चों के लिए घर में भी पढ़ने का समय हो, उनके माता-पिता किसी न किसी तरह सीखने में उनकी मदद करें और स्कूल में सिखाई गई अवधारणाओं का अभ्यास घर पर भी करवाया जा सके।

पालकों और शिक्षकों के आपसी सामंजस्य से स्कूल में सीखी हुई बातों की निरन्तरता घर पर सुनिश्चित की जा सकती है और इससे बच्चों को सीखने में मदद मिलेगी। सवाल यह है कि इस निरन्तरता को बचपन केन्द्रित व दबाव मुक्त रखने का काम किस प्रकार होगा? इसके लिए यह आवश्यक होगा कि स्कूल और घर दोनों जगह बच्चों पर ध्यान तो दिया जाए किन्तु उनकी क्रीड़ा व स्वायत्तता छीनकर और उन पर अत्यधिक दबाव डालकर नहीं।

कोरोना के दौरान वर्कशीट का प्रयोग काफी प्रचलित रहा। स्थानीय स्तर पर वर्कशीट बनाकर बच्चों के छोटे समूहों के साथ वर्कशीट आधारित शिक्षण के प्रयास किए गए। इससे शिक्षकों, पालकों और बच्चों ने कुछ हद तक इन वर्कशीट का अर्थ समझा व बच्चों द्वारा सवालों को स्वयं हल करने के मौके बने। ये वर्कशीट मिली-जुली गुणवत्ता की रही हैं। इनके प्रयोग से पूरे शिक्षा ढाँचे में कुछ हद तक यह समझ बनी कि बच्चों को सभी सवालों के जवाब पहले से बता देने की जरूरत नहीं है। सीखने वाले स्वयं सवालों को हल करने का प्रयास कर सकते हैं और समूह में मिलकर भी सवालों को हल कर सकते हैं। समूह में सीखने को अँग्रेज़ी में 'पीयर लर्निंग' यानी 'साथियों के साथ सीखना' कहा जाता है।

इस दौरान शिक्षक और माता-पिता समूह में सीखने के फायदे समझ सके। इन दोनों ही को प्रोत्साहन देने की जरूरत है। यह सम्भव है कि सभी वर्कशीट अच्छी न बन पाई हों, यह भी सम्भावना है कि उनमें से कई में जानकारी का दोहराव ही हो,

किन्तु यह स्थानीय स्तर पर वर्कशीट बनाने की शुरुआत है। पहली बार ऐसा हुआ कि वर्कशीट अथवा पाठ राष्ट्रीय व राज्य स्तर पर बना कर निर्धारित रूप में नहीं दिए गए। सम्पूर्ण तन्त्र इस बात के प्रति सचेत था कि इस प्रक्रिया में वह अलग-अलग कक्षाओं व अलग-अलग स्तर के बच्चों के मिश्रित समूह के साथ अन्तःक्रिया कर रहा है इसलिए ये वर्कशीट विशेष कक्षाओं के विशेष पाठों को ध्यान में रखकर नहीं बनाई गईं।

इससे एक लाभ यह भी हुआ कि बच्चों को पहली बार बगैर भय के स्व मूल्यांकन का मौका मिला। इस प्रक्रिया में वे स्वयं अपनी गलतियाँ खोजने व उन्हें सुधारने के प्रयास कर पाए। एक प्रकार से यह एनसीएफ 2005 (National Curriculum Framework, 2005) की एकीकृत दृष्टि व एनईपी, 2020 (New Education Policy, 2020) की बुनियादी भाषायी व गणितीय क्षमता पर जोर की माँग को पूरा करने का व भयरहित आकलन के प्रयास की ओर एक छोटा कदम था।

इस दौरान स्कूलों के बन्द होने के कारण मोहल्लों में कुछ जगह बनी, बच्चों के कुछ समूह बने जो साथ बैठकर कार्य करते थे। इनमें से कई जगह लोगों की व्यक्तिगत जगह थीं पर कई जगह सामुदायिक स्थलों का भी इस्तेमाल किया गया। इस अनुभव ने समुदाय को ऐसी जगह उपलब्ध करवाने की सम्भावना के प्रति भी चेताया। कई जगह तो इस दौरान छोटे-छोटे पुस्तकालय भी बनने लगे। स्कूलों के पूरी तरह चालू हो जाने के बाद भी इन सबको जिन्दा रखना व आगे बढ़ाना उपयोगी होगा।

**महामारी के दौरान शिक्षकों का
टैक्नोलॉजी के प्रति रवैया भी कुछ हद
तक बदला। जो लोग इससे घबराते
थे अथवा कुछ अन्य कारणों से इससे
दूर रहते थे, उन्होंने मजबूरी में इसका
उपयोग किया।**

अब तक की बातों के आधार पर हम यह कह सकते हैं कि इस दौरान सीखने-सिखाने की प्रक्रिया के बारे में जो समझ बनी उसे स्कूल में भी जारी रखने की जरूरत है। इन पहलुओं में समूह कार्य व साथियों के साथ सीखना, दबावमुक्त, स्व आकलन, बुनियादी क्षमता केन्द्रित वर्कशीट, स्व अध्ययन में शिक्षकों व पालकों की मदद व प्रोत्साहन, अपनी गति से सीखना, स्वयं करने का प्रयास आदि बहुत से सकारात्मक पहलू शामिल हैं। इसके साथ-साथ अनेक जगहों पर शिक्षकों व पालकों के बीच पैदा हुआ परस्पर विश्वास व सहयोग भी बहुत उपयोगी सीख है। इससे कुछ ऐसे पहलू भी सामने आए जिन पर आमतौर पर हमारा ध्यान नहीं जाता। उदाहरण के लिए जब बच्चों और वयस्कों के बीच संवाद होता है या जब बच्चे साथियों के साथ खेलते

हैं, संवाद करते हैं और सहयोग करते हैं तो उनकी भावनात्मक आवश्यकताएँ भी पूरी होती हैं, इससे यह समझ बनी कि हर तरह की अन्तःक्रिया महत्वपूर्ण होती है। इसके साथ-साथ स्कूल व शिक्षक बच्चों के जीवन के ढर्रे से भी कुछ हद तक रूबरू हो पाए हैं। इस सबको स्कूल खुलने के बाद और ज्यादा सुदृढ़ करना होगा और स्कूल के ढाँचे व दिनचर्या में भी शामिल करना होगा। यह स्कूल की संरचना व कार्य पद्धति दोनों को बदलने की माँग करेगा अर्थात् स्कूल व प्रशासन के रिश्ते, शिक्षक की एजेंसी व स्वायत्तता सभी के बारे में एक नए सिरे से सोचना होगा।

इससे एक लाभ यह भी हुआ कि बच्चों को पहली बार बगैर भय के स्व मूल्यांकन का मौका मिला। इस प्रक्रिया में वे स्वयं अपनी गलतियाँ खोजने व उन्हें सुधारने के प्रयास कर पाए।

महामारी के दौरान शिक्षकों का टैक्नोलॉजी के प्रति रवैया भी कुछ हद तक बदला। जो लोग इससे घबराते थे अथवा कुछ अन्य कारणों से इससे दूर रहते थे, उन्होंने मजबूरी में इसका उपयोग किया। इस दौरान अधिकांश ने यह भी महसूस किया कि विवेकशील ढंग से टैक्नोलॉजी का थोड़ा बहुत व सोचा-समझा उपयोग सीखने-सिखाने की प्रक्रिया में कुछ हद तक मदद कर सकता है।

उदाहरण के लिए जिन विद्यार्थियों के पास संसाधन (स्मार्टफोन या सामान्य फोन) उपलब्ध थे उनके लिए शिक्षकों से अपने विचार, सवाल, अनुभव साझा करना कुछ हद तक सम्भव बना। हालाँकि जमीन पर यह कितना हो पाया यह स्पष्ट नहीं है। यह भी सही है कि इस दौरान कई जगहों पर बच्चों की ऑनलाइन कक्षाएँ करवाने के गम्भीर प्रयास किए गए किन्तु इन ऑनलाइन कक्षाओं में एक बड़ी अड़चन कक्षा के समय स्मार्टफोन या लैपटॉप व बैंडविड्थ की उपलब्धता थी, इनके बिना सीखने वाले कक्षा में भागीदारी नहीं कर सकते थे। इनके अभाव में बहुत से बच्चों के लिए रिकॉर्डेड सामग्री तक पहुँचना व उसका इस्तेमाल कर पाना भी सरल नहीं था।

शिक्षकों के साथ बातचीत भी उन बच्चों के लिए ही सम्भव हो सकती थी जिन्हें दिन में किसी उपयुक्त समय पर स्मार्टफोन या लैपटॉप उपलब्ध हो। कुल मिलाकर संसाधनों के अभाव में जिन बच्चों को सबसे ज्यादा जरूरत थी वही ऑनलाइन कक्षाओं और शिक्षक से सम्पर्क की प्रक्रियाओं से महरूम रह गए।

टैक्नोलॉजी के कुछ फायदे भी नजर आए। व्हाट्सएप और फोन की बदौलत शिक्षक और पालक का एक दूसरे के सम्पर्क में रह

पाए और बच्चों की शिक्षा के बारे में चर्चा कर सके। जाहिर है व्हाट्सएप वाले फोन की तुलना में एक सामान्य फोन में काफी कम सम्भावनाएँ होती हैं किन्तु महामारी ने कक्षा व स्कूल की चारदीवारी के बाहर संवाद के जो माध्यम खोल दिए हैं, इनका सार्थक उपयोग शिक्षा की गुणवत्ता में बहुत बड़ा योगदान दे सकता है।

इन माध्यमों की मदद से बच्चों के सीखने-सिखाने को लेकर इसी प्रकार के संवाद शिक्षकों के बीच भी शुरू हुए हैं। इस परेशानी के समय शिक्षकों ने स्वयं भी संसाधनों को इधर-उधर से ढूँढ़कर इस्तेमाल करने का प्रयास किया और साथ ही अन्य शिक्षकों के अनुभवों व उनके द्वारा इस्तेमाल किए तरीकों को भी जानने व समझने का प्रयास किया। शिक्षकों ने साथियों से ही नहीं, प्रशिक्षकों से भी सीखा और वेबिनार व ऑनलाइन प्रशिक्षण में भागीदारी का भी प्रयास किया।

हालाँकि प्रशिक्षकों व शिक्षकों के बीच और शिक्षकों में आपस में अन्तःक्रिया होना लाजमी है व उसे जल्द से जल्द शुरू करने की आवश्यकता है, फिर भी महामारी के दौरान हुए प्रयासों ने यह दिखाया कि ऑनलाइन प्रशिक्षण के कई लाभ भी हो सकते हैं। वेबिनार की बदौलत शिक्षक कई ऐसे लोगों से रूबरू हो पाए जिन तक उनका वैसे पहुँचना मुश्किल होता। इसमें प्रशिक्षक, शिक्षा विशेषज्ञ व अन्य जगह पढ़ा रहे शिक्षक शामिल हैं। इस पूरे अनुभव ने एक ओर तो शिक्षा में टैक्नोलॉजी के उपयोग की सीमाएँ हमारे सामने रखीं पर दूसरी ओर उसके उपयोग की सार्थक सम्भावनाएँ भी रखीं। कई शिक्षकों में स्वयं खोजने व जानने की इच्छा जागी व उनका टैक्नोलॉजी के साथ ज्यादा यथार्थपूर्ण सम्बन्ध बना। इस प्रकार उनका डर भी कम हुआ और टैक्नोलॉजी की चकाचौंध भी।

कोरोना के दौरान गरीब बच्चों का पोषण भी काफी हद तक प्रभावित हुआ है क्योंकि स्कूलों के बन्द होने की वजह से बच्चे मिड डे मील से भी वंचित रह गए।

जब हम आगे के समय के बारे में सोचते हैं तो यह समझ आता है कि आने वाले समय में हमें बच्चों, उनके बचपन, उनके विकास के सभी पहलुओं और उनकी खुशी को नजर में रखना होगा। इसके लिए हमें इस वैश्विक महामारी के अनुभव, इसमें हुए प्रयासों, अलग-अलग तरह के लोगों की भागीदारी, उनके योगदान व उनके द्वारा ईजाद किए गए तरीकों को ध्यान में रखकर ही आगे की योजना बनानी होगी।

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Reflections from the Ground on School Reopening

Malaya Padhan



Patang

The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges around the globe with lakhs of lives lost, and disruptions of everyday life situations in myriad ways. Children are one of the most affected groups in this pandemic. It is about 75 weeks (more than one and a half years) since March 2020; schools mostly remain closed.

Although lockdowns have been eased in many areas - like reopening of markets, transport system etc. - children are still under lockdown for all practical purposes. We, the adults, have already started redoing our things and coming out of our isolation. Children, whose job it is to play and learn and need to interact with the world, are being restricted in their mobility.

Where digital solutions have been provided for children's learning, there is a huge disparity with regard to access to smart phones, connectivity, internet packages, electricity etc. The digital divide is real and wide; there is a gender divide with respect to access to smart phones as well. Children with Disabilities (CwDs) also have comparatively less access to such resources. Could calibrated reopening of schools be an alternative?

Ensuring the Rights of Children: A Critical Issue in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised significant challenges against child rights - especially the rights to survival, protection and development. We found that many children are engaged in work as child labor - e.g., beedi making at domestic level and in wage earning labour work outside home, such as working at construction sites, agricultural fields, bringing sand and stones through tractors and trolleys etc. - that pose risks for their lives.

According to the Child Welfare Committee, CHILDLINE, and our direct interactions with adolescent girls, many child marriage cases have been reported during the lockdown period. Many child abuse cases and suicides among teenagers have also been found. Issues like domestic violence against children, cases of run-away children, and teenage pregnancies have been witnessed as well. Besides, there are increased cases of substance abuse among boys.

In interactions with around 1800 adolescents so far (survey-cum-wellbeing sessions) in the last two months, we found that around 60% of them have experienced decreases in food intake as compared to the pre-pandemic period - especially with respect to milk, vegetables, pulses, eggs, meat, fish etc. Around half of their parents lost work and struggle for livelihood.

Some of these adolescents have lost their near and dear ones, including parents, in this period. One-fourth of these children were sad, angry, depressed, stressed and

anxious. During wellbeing sessions with them, it was found that almost all children were experiencing some form of mental stress due to various reasons. This has had tremendous negative impact on the growth and development of these children.

Thus, it is not really life verses learning for these children. Their survival requires learning to live. Some parents shared that their children are feeling anxiety, irritation, and boredom in online classes. These children were also reported to lack concentration, and they hesitate to let go of their mobile phones. School closure with lockdown is not merely about loss of learning but also loss of life skills, socialization and socio-emotional development of children. Their interactions with peers, parents, teachers and relatives have lessened. Some of them shared that with no real interactions, they do not have real friends.

Regaining Loss of Learning and Childhood: A Big Challenge Ahead

In this pandemic, digital learning emerged and spread as an alternative to regular schooling processes. Both government and non-government organizations like Patang looked for various alternatives to physical classess, in Radio and TV channels, online and teleconference classes, SMS, IVRS (Interactive Voice Response System) in voice, text, picture and community classes and community and youth led approaches etc.

But the fact remains that the school system, especially many teachers at elementary

levels, as well as the community system, mainly comprising of parents, suffer from digital illiteracy to a large extent. Patang, in partnership with Quest Alliance, IBM, and Department of Education, Government of Odisha, has been undertaking capacity building training on online platforms for digital engagement with thousands of teachers. This has led to greater use of digital platforms for children's learning.

“We found children are not growing properly as per their age wise weight. Though children are provided with dry ration, they are not taking cooked meal at home.”

-Anganwadi Worker, Burda, Sambalpur

Department of Education initiated online classes and YouTube classes; but very few children access these. One headmaster says, “Out of 50 children, having 17 whatsapp numbers till now and only 4-5 children responded in the group. And with daily follow-up, a maximum of 5 children attend YouTube classes.” The viewers expected is gradually in a diminishing order rather increasing especially at the elementary level.

Over the last year, access to smart phones has increased for some households. Among these households, most of them have only one mobile phone which again limits online learning of children. However, there is still lack of digital infrastructure like network and electricity. Recharge is also an issue in many pockets of rural areas.

Parents from four poor, working class families from Meghpal village were highly concerned about their children's learning. When they found out that there would be classes on smart phones, they bought smart phones from the market with their annual



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savings and some borrowed money. It was unfortunate that in their village there is no network. They found this out only after having bought the phones.

Another thing we observed with the introduction of YouTube classes was parents' struggles as neo-digital literates and first generation school goers with regard to handling mobile phones.

Because of all these challenges, there are significant learning losses observed in children, especially related to the basic skills of reading and writing.



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Way Forward

School reopening could potentially alleviate the gaps in socialization and learning, connect children to the wider world, enhance their social and mental wellbeing, and contribute to physical development through nutritional intake through mid-day meals. It can also contribute towards delaying the age of marriage and protect children from hazardous work.

But we still have apprehensions and anxieties related to the threat of third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are yet to have any vaccination program for children. Maintaining COVID appropriate behaviour such as social distancing and ventilation in classrooms is also a challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic is uncertain and the nature of the virus is changing. With regard to school opening and working with children, it is important to take expert guidance of health professionals.

Now we have some data from the process of reopening of certain classes in secondary schools. Prachi Mandekar, a student of class 10 from Nanakram High School says, "I am very happy with school opening and meeting friends; we did not study for around two years in the name of COVID. My parents are also so happy with me going to school." Similarly, Arati Sahu, a student of Government Girls High School, Kuchinda, says, "I couldn't even meet my friends and am so happy meeting them. My education has been severely affected. Now I am slowly trying to get back to the old rhythm."

"Most of the children did not know which class they are in. We observed that most of the children who were good in reading and writing, they have forgotten to write their names and some children cannot identify the alphabet also".

- Marinus Kandulana, CRCC of Meghpal

As data from our experience of working with 127 selected secondary schools shows, the average range of regular attendance rate is 65 to 85 percent, as compared to less than 30% through the online mode before school reopening. And it is increasing day by day. There are schools which have 90% attendance on some days. This happens with the confidence and ownership of parents and teachers and local administration.

In this context, Gita, a teacher from Brajmohan high school says, "It has been a very good experience to have offline classes indeed. Direct interactions with students are really very fruitful. Students not having android sets at their home are getting the most through offline classes." Phulamani Majhi, HM of Bamra Girls High School, says,

“Coming to school and teaching is a valuable part of my daily life. After one and half years, students are back to their proper place. The situation of teaching learning and our connection with students has improved. I’m really happy about it.”

Parents are also quite happy with school reopening, though there are a few who have safety concerns. According to Bijay Kumar, a parent, he is very happy that the school has reopened. His daughter was severely affected educationally and socio-emotionally. She is now focusing on her studies. In a similar way, mother of Snehamayee from Budharaja High School shared that online classes were not fruitful. Her daughter is now taking part in various school activities directly. And this engagement has made her happy and better engaged in learning processes.

Reopening of schools could be better coordinated through decentralising school plans like the way Panchayati Raj Institutions handle zone-wise COVID-19 protocols, lockdown and shutdown etc. In this context, Rina Das, teacher at Barpali Girls’ High School says, “Students have suffered a lot in the pandemic. Their study became stagnant. Though there was fear, we were happy with school reopening. Face to face contact between teachers and students make teaching more effective. Students are happy to come to school. We obey COVID-19 rules. Students from other classes are also eager to come back to school. They should do so.”

In this regard, trust, confidence, and consent of parents, and accountability of school management committees and school personnel would be highly essential. School infrastructure like classrooms, toilets, water systems etc. must be upgraded to meet the challenges of the pandemic, and the required renovations must be made. In order to ensure (re)enrolment in schools, back to school campaigns and drives can be one of our strategies.

Facilitating learning at Community Centers can be a part of this process. Wherever possible, the use of arts, crafts and music can also help children in reintegrating back into the school system.

The dominant narratives with regard to reopening of secondary and higher secondary schools related to Board examinations and pressurizing children to perform for marks are perhaps not a very appropriate way to think about reopening of schools.

Like the welcome ceremony for Class I, all students need to be welcomed in a joyful manner. The learning environment needs to be fun-filled as children are coming back to school after a long time. There is also a need to focus on wellbeing sessions when schools reopen. We need to rethink our pedagogic strategies. It may require diverse approaches and methodologies, and facilitating hybrid/ blended learning processes for those not eager to come to school.

However, as we learnt during the pandemic, education and learning need not be limited to school campuses or textbooks. We always remember the thoughts of Bini while working with out-of-school children; she said, “I am unable to learn the way you teach, could you teach the way I learn?” This reflection has been crucial to us in centre-staging children in thinking, planning and strategizing with various stakeholders - parents and community, school teachers, education department and local governance institutions.

Malaya Padhan, one of the co-founders of Patang, is a development practitioner working in education and youth development. Patang works with children and young people through innovative programs.

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क्या बिना बच्चों के किसी विद्यालय की कल्पना की जा सकती है?

एक शिक्षिका के अनुभव

रीता कुमारी

कोरोना' यह एक ऐसा शब्द है जिसे हमने पहले कभी नहीं सुना था। इस बीमारी का पहला मामला चीन के वुहान शहर में मिला उसके बाद यह और भी देशों में तेजी से फैलने लगी। हमारा देश भी इसकी चपेट में आ गया। इसने बहुत ही तेजी से हमारे देश से राज्य में, राज्य से जिले में, और जिले से गाँव में पाँव पसार लिया। जब कोई बीमारी एक साथ बहुत से देशों और लोगों के बीच तेजी से फैलती है तो इसे 'वैश्विक महामारी' (pandemic) का दर्जा दिया जाता है इसीलिए कोरोना को वैश्विक महामारी घोषित किया गया।

कोरोना के पश्चात विद्यालय खुलना बहुत चुनौती भरा था। बच्चे इस बात को लेकर उलझन में थे कि वे किस कक्षा में बैठें। हमने बच्चों को उनकी पुरानी कक्षा में ही बैठाया और उनके सीखने में आई कमियों को दूर करने की कोशिश की।

मार्च 2020 की बात है। होली के शुभ अवसर पर हमारा विद्यालय बन्द था और उसके बाद 21 दिनों के लिए पहली बार पूरे देश में लॉकडाउन लगा जिससे जो जहाँ था वहीं फँसकर रह गया। इस दौरान भारी संख्या में प्रवासी मजदूर दिल्ली, मुम्बई, उड़ीसा, आदि शहरों से पैदल ही अपने घरों की ओर चल दिए थे। उस समय चारों तरफ कोरोना की ही चर्चा थी। सभी लोग अपने-अपने घरों में कैद हो गए थे। दोस्तों से भी मिलना बन्द हो गया था। उस समय यही एहसास हो रहा था कि ये कैसी बीमारी है, जो लोगों को अपने ही घरों में कैद कर दे रही है। लोगों को अपनों से अजनबी की तरह मुँह पर मास्क लगाकर दूर से ही बातें करनी पड़ रही थीं।

जनवरी 2020 में शिक्षकों की हड़ताल के कारण वैसे भी विद्यालय में पठन-पाठन का कार्य प्रभावित हो गया था क्योंकि बच्चे तो आते थे पर पढ़ाई नहीं हो पा रही थी, लॉकडाउन में हालात और भी खराब हो गए। हमारे विद्यालय को क्वारंटीन सेंटर बनाया गया था, विद्यालय में बच्चों की जगह बाहर से आए हुए लोग रह रहे थे। सबसे बुरा तो हमें तब लगा जब 15 अगस्त 2020 को बच्चों की उपस्थिति के बिना ही झण्डा फहराना पड़ा। आजादी के बाद ऐसा शायद पहली बार हुआ था। 385 विद्यार्थियों वाले हमारे विद्यालय में उस दिन एक भी बच्चा नहीं था। इस सब की वजह कोरोना था।

इस दरमियान (कोरोनाकाल में) बच्चों की पढ़ाई सबसे ज्यादा बाधित हुई। ऑनलाइन क्लास तो चल रही थी लेकिन यह सन्तोषजनक नहीं थी। बहुत से बच्चे इसमें शामिल नहीं हो पा रहे थे क्योंकि सरकारी विद्यालयों में गाँवों के बच्चे आते हैं और गाँव के घरों में स्मार्ट फोन, लैपटॉप की सुविधा नहीं होती। शहरों से लेकर गाँवों तक हर प्रकार का काम-धन्धा पूरी तरह ठप्प हो गया था। लोगों के पास आमदनी का कोई स्रोत नहीं बचा था। ऐसी स्थिति में जबकि बच्चों के माता-पिता अपनी दैनिक जरूरतों को पूरा करने के लिए संघर्ष कर रहे थे, उनसे यह अपेक्षा करना ही बेमानी था कि वे स्मार्टफोन खरीद पाएँ और 150-200 रुपए इंटरनेट पैक भरवाने पर खर्च कर पाएँ।

इस अवधि में एक शिक्षक के तौर पर मुझे भी अपने काम से सन्तुष्टि नहीं मिली। हम विद्यालय तो आ रहे थे लेकिन विद्यालय सूना था, न तो बच्चों के खिलखिलाते चेहरे नजर आते थे और न ही उनकी शरारतें और न ही उनका तोतली आवाज में अपने सहपाठी की शिकायत करना। ऐसे में विद्यालय में रहना बिल्कुल भी अच्छा नहीं लगता था। कभी-कभी तो हमें ऐसा लगता था कि ये बीमारी पता नहीं कब खत्म होगी? पता नहीं कब सब कुछ पहले की तरह सामान्य होगा और पता नहीं कब हँसते-चहकते हुए बच्चों से विद्यालय फिर से गुलजार होंगे?

धीरे-धीरे बीमारी का प्रसार थोड़ा कम हुआ और स्थिति थोड़ी सामान्य हुई। यह खबर आई कि विद्यालयों को सरकार के द्वारा जारी किए गए दिशा-निर्देशों का पालन करते हुए खोला जाएगा, और विद्यालय खुल गए। मार्च 2021 में विद्यालय खुले और बच्चों की आवाज से मन खुशी से भर गया, पर विद्यालय खुले हुए अभी कुछ ही दिन हुए थे कि इस बीमारी की दूसरी लहर आ गई और विद्यालय फिर से बन्द हो गए। इस बार तो बीमारी का खौफ पहले से भी अधिक था क्योंकि मौतों का सिलसिला शुरू होने के साथ ही बहुत से परिचित लोगों के गुजर जाने की खबर भी आई। जब इसका प्रकोप कम हुआ और स्थिति सामान्य होने लगी तो सरकार के दिशा-निर्देशों का पालन करते हुए अगस्त 2021 में विद्यालय पुनः खुल गए और हमें थोड़ी राहत मिली। सरकार ने शिक्षकों को भी कोरोना वारियर के रूप में देखा और हम सभी शिक्षकों का टीकाकरण सुनिश्चित करवाया।

कोरोना काल में बच्चों की पढ़ाई काफी बाधित हुई और बच्चों का सीखना काफी प्रभावित हुआ। सीखने में आई इस कमी (learning gap) को दूर करने के लिए सरकार ने सभी शिक्षकों को एक प्रशिक्षण देने का निर्णय किया और सभी शिक्षकों ने उस

प्रशिक्षण में भाग भी लिया। इसका नाम “कैच अप कोर्स” था। इस कोर्स से मुझे बच्चों के साथ क्लास लेने में मदद मिली और मैं केन्द्रित होकर बच्चों को पाठ्यक्रम पढ़ा पा रही हूँ। इसके साथ-साथ जिन बच्चों पर ज्यादा ध्यान देने की जरूरत है उनके लिए भी मैंने एक अलग प्रकार की योजना को इसमें शामिल किया है।

कुछ बच्चों ने तो स्कूल आना शुरू कर दिया है लेकिन शेष बच्चों को स्कूल में वापस बुलाने के लिए हमारी कोशिशें जारी हैं। मुझे आशा है कि धीरे-धीरे सभी बच्चे नियमित हो जाएँगे, इसके लिए हमारे स्कूल के सभी शिक्षक प्रयासरत हैं।

कोरोना के पश्चात विद्यालय खुलना बहुत चुनौती भरा था। बच्चे इस बात को लेकर उलझन में थे कि वे किस कक्षा में बैठें। हमने बच्चों को उनकी पुरानी कक्षा में ही बैठाया और उनके सीखने में आई कमियों (learning gaps) को दूर करने की कोशिश की। लम्बे समय तक स्कूल बन्द होने की वजह से बच्चों ने जो भी सीखा था उसे वे भूल गए थे। इस लम्बे अन्तराल के बाद बच्चों को उनके स्तर से आगे का सीखने में किस तरह मदद की जा सकती है, ये हम सबके लिए बहुत बड़ी चुनौती है। कोरोना के दौरान बच्चों को घर पर पढ़ाने वाला कोई नहीं था, वे अपनी मर्जी के हिसाब से घर पर रहते थे। स्कूल खुलने के बाद भी बच्चों की उपस्थिति बहुत कम है। जिन बच्चों ने स्कूल आना शुरू किया है वे भी नियमित स्कूल आने की बजाए कभी-कभी स्कूल आ रहे हैं। ऐसा शायद इसलिए है क्योंकि उनकी स्कूल आने की आदत छूट गई है। अनुपस्थित बच्चों को स्कूल बुलाने के लिए स्कूल

के प्रधानाध्यापक ने सामुदायिक बैठक की और बच्चों से स्कूल आने के लिए अनुरोध किया। मैंने अपनी कक्षा के बच्चों को अनुपस्थित बच्चों को स्कूल लाने के लिए प्रेरित किया। कुछ बच्चों ने तो स्कूल आना शुरू कर दिया है लेकिन शेष बच्चों को स्कूल में वापस बुलाने के लिए हमारी कोशिशें जारी हैं। मुझे आशा है कि धीरे-धीरे सभी बच्चे नियमित हो जाएँगे, इसके लिए हमारे स्कूल के सभी शिक्षक प्रयासरत हैं।

इस कोरोना काल के दौरान बहुत से बच्चों के घर की आर्थिक स्थिति भी खराब हो गई है और बड़े बच्चे पढ़ाई छोड़कर काम करने दूसरे शहरों में चले गए हैं। इनमें से कुछ बच्चे ऐसे भी हैं जो कोरोना से पहले आठवीं में पढ़ रहे थे और अब वे पढ़ाई छोड़कर काम करने लगे हैं। ऐसे बच्चों में लड़के और लड़कियाँ दोनों शामिल हैं।

अभी भी मन में डर तो रहता है क्योंकि जगह-जगह से तीसरी लहर की सम्भावनाओं के बारे में सुनने को मिलता है और जब ये सुनने को मिलता है कि तीसरी लहर का सबसे ज्यादा प्रभाव बच्चों पर पड़ेगा तो यह डर और भी बढ़ जाता है। पर डर की वजह से हम हाथ पर हाथ रखकर भी नहीं बैठ सकते इसलिए मैं कोशिश कर रही हूँ कि सभी सावधानियाँ बरतते हुए बच्चों को शिक्षित करने का कार्य जारी रख सकूँ।

रीता कुमारी उत्क्रमित मध्य विद्यालय शेरपुर (सन 2014) में प्रखण्ड शिक्षिका के रूप में नियुक्त हैं। रीता कुमारी कक्षा 6 से 8 में सामाजिक विज्ञान विषय पढ़ाती हैं। उन्हें पुस्तकालय में बैठकर वहाँ की किताबों का अध्ययन करना बहुत अच्छा लगता है।

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‘प्रयोग’ संस्था गोपालगंज (बिहार) में बच्चों एवं शिक्षकों के साथ पुस्तकालय आधारित कार्य करती है। प्रत्येक विद्यालय में एक जीवन्त पुस्तकालय हो और बच्चों का किताबों से जुड़ाव हो, इसके लिए विद्यालय के शिक्षकों की मदद से हम ‘पढ़ने की संस्कृति’ (reading culture) विकसित करने के लिए प्रयासरत हैं। अच्छी बात यह है कि विद्यालय के शिक्षक भी किताब पढ़ने के सफर में बच्चों का साथ देते हैं, जिससे बच्चों को पढ़ने और समझने में सहूलियत महसूस होती है। इस पहल से न केवल अक्षर, शब्द और वाक्य को लेकर बच्चों की समझ मजबूत हो रही है बल्कि वे विविध प्रकार के बाल साहित्य से भी रूबरू हो रहे हैं।

कोविड के दौरान जब सरकारी विद्यालय लम्बे समय तक बन्द रहे तब भी हमने सामुदायिक पुस्तकालयों की मदद से किताबें पढ़ने का यह सफर जारी रखा। हमने यह सुनिश्चित करने की कोशिश की कि किताब के अभाव में बच्चों के पढ़ने-समझने और सोचने की प्रक्रिया में कोई बाधा न आए। हमारी इस पहल से बच्चों के परिवार भी पढ़ने के लिए प्रेरित हो रहे हैं क्योंकि जब बच्चे किताबें अपने घर ले जाते हैं तो उनके भाई-बहन और परिवार के अन्य सदस्य भी उन किताबों को पढ़ते हैं। इससे हमें अपने प्रयास को जारी रखने के लिए प्रोत्साहन मिलता है।

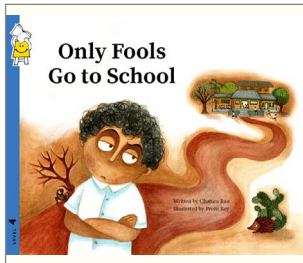
हमारे इस कार्य में हमें शिक्षकों का भी बहुत सहयोग मिलता है और कोविड के दौरान उनके और बच्चों के सहयोग से ही हम सामुदायिक पुस्तकालयों की स्थापना कर पाए। हमारे प्रयासों में सहयोग करने वाली ऐसी ही एक शिक्षिका रीता कुमारी हैं, जो उत्क्रमित मध्य विद्यालय शेरपुर में पढ़ाती हैं। यह लेख कोविड के दौरान बतौर शिक्षिका उनके अनुभवों को दर्शाता है।

- प्रयोग टीम (contact@prayog.org.in)

School...

Bookworm

The Bookworm team recommends a list of books on the theme of 'School'. We all have different memories associated with the word 'school'. The books listed below open up the lives and experiences of different individuals at school. The list includes picture books on this theme as well.



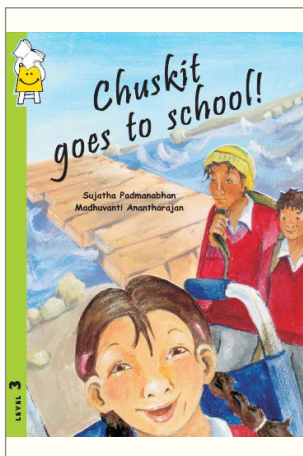
Only Fools Go to School

Author: Chatura Rao
Illustrator: Proiti Roy
Publisher: Pratham
Language: English, Marathi, Kannada,

Tamil, Hindi & Others

Recommended Age Group: 5-7 years

Sambha doesn't want to go to school, ever. He thinks school is for fools. One day, the teacher takes him to school. He secretly enjoys himself, but will he want to return the next day?

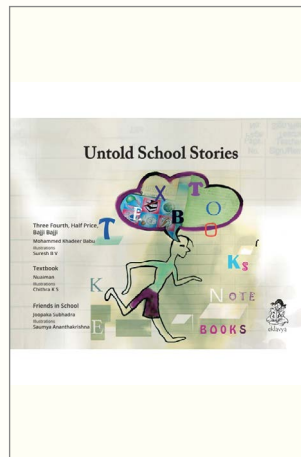


Chuskit Goes to School

Author: Sujatha Padmanabhan
Illustrator: Madhuvanti Anantharajan
Publisher: Pratham
Language: English, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Assamese & others

Recommended Age Group: 6-10 years

Nine years old Chuskit longed to go to school, to make friends, learn math and play games. But she could not... until Abdul decided to do something about it.



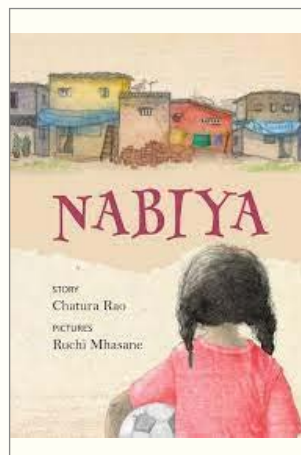
Untold School Stories

Author: Mohammed Khadeer Babu, Nuaiman, Joopaka Subhadra
Illustrator: Suresh B V, Chithra K S, Joolaka Subhadra, Saumya
Publisher: Mango D C Books & Eklavya

Language: Telugu, English, Hindi

Recommended Age Group: 9-13 years

This book is woven from a compilation of stories translated from Telugu. It is full of unique experiences happening among children in school life. These selected stories have subtle and poignant observations regarding children. These force us to think in a new direction after reading them.



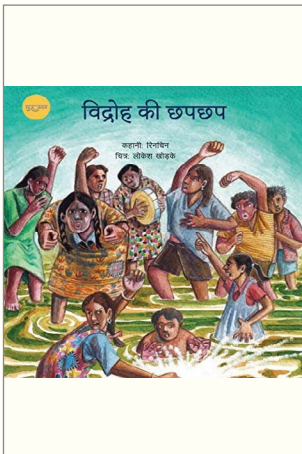
Nabiya

Author: Chatura Rao
Illustrator: Ruchi Mhasane
Publisher: Tulika
Language: English, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil and others
Recommended Age Group: 7-10 years



Bookworm Goa

A spirited young girl begins to engage with words and pictures in this sensitively told story. Using a collage of colors, textures and drawings, the illustrations evoke Nabiya's everyday world and the world of the imagination.



Vidroh ki Chap Chap

Author: Rinchin

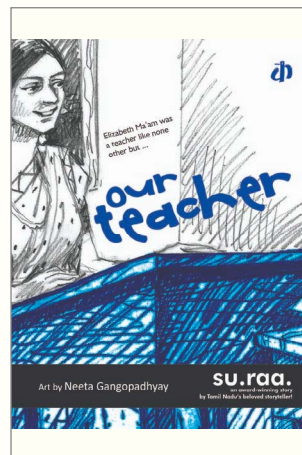
Illustrator: Lokesh Khodke

Publisher: Muskaan

Language: Hindi

Recommended Age Group: 9-13 years

This is a story about a group of children who raise their voice against villagers and remind their teacher about her role. This powerfully narrated story focuses on different issues of society such as freedom to access resources and freedom of speech. The illustrations capture the text and present the story in a comic form.



Our Teacher

Author: Sundara Ramaswamy

Illustrator: Neeta Gangopadhyay

Publisher: Katha

Language: English, Hindi

Recommended Age Group: 9-13 years

Our Teacher tells a heartwarming tale, translated from Tamil, about the value of education as it brings to life the students and teachers from a small school in Tamil Nadu.

Bookworm is a charitable trust based in Goa that works with library engagement and education. With a vision to inspire and develop a love for reading as a way of life, nurturing humane engagement in every girl, boy and others, Bookworm works with children, youth, adults and the larger community in diverse and varied contexts.

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‘Samuhik Pahal’ Resources Relevant for the School Reopening Process

Samuhik Pahal Team

In many states across the country, schools have started reopening, especially for the higher grades. Parents and teachers are often apprehensive about both learning losses due to the school closure, and the perceived risks of school attendance given that the COVID-19 pandemic has not gone away yet. In this context, we present before you a set of pieces from the ‘Samuhik Pahal’ archive that we feel are helpful in navigating the process of reopening of schools.

In Volume 1, Issue 2 of the journal we carried a notice of a report by Azim Premji Foundation (APF) titled [‘Schools in the Times of COVID-19’](#) that stays relevant even now. This report drew from years of field experiences across the country, and carries several annexures that carry well-supported and sometimes illustrated, recommendations. Annexures 2 and 3 are especially relevant in this regard.

In the article titled ‘Age-appropriate and Locally Relevant Nature Learning Modules for Schools’ in [Volume 1, Issue 3](#) of the journal, the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) team discusses relevant open-source resources produced by the organization that can potentially connect children with their environment. They also foreground the processes through which these were developed. These teaching learning materials are appropriate to the age of the learners and try to remain culturally relevant. These resources can also be made a part of learning processes related to existing ‘Environmental Studies’ (EVS) curricula in schools.

In the same issue of ‘Samuhik Pahal’ (1.3), the Shikshamitra team presents materials developed by them to support teachers, in a piece titled ‘Easy to use Teaching Learning

Materials (TLMs) and Books.’ These are in the domains of mathematics, languages, arts and crafts, and include props such as manipulatives, worksheets and flashcards.

In [Volume 1, Issue 6](#) of the journal, we carried a piece titled ‘How High Can a Ladder Climb?’ by Jyoti Ravichandran on challenges related to practicing social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools. In the Ground Zero section of the same issue we focused on figuring out how effective have the interventions of organizations from across the country been to alleviate distress in children through social-emotional learning programs during the pandemic. Both these pieces are useful for thinking about how to help children cope after they are back in schools by helping them build self-esteem, deal with learning anxieties, and learn skills critical to their developmental processes.

In the ‘Interview’ section of a special issue released during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Samuhik Pahal 1.9](#)), we published a conversation between educationist Jane Sahi, who founded Sita School in Silvepura, Bengaluru, and Thejaswi Shivanand. This conversation dealt with many aspects related to well-being of children in the pandemic. It stays relevant even now, especially now that some children are coming back to schools with large learning gaps and trauma induced by negative experiences during the pandemic. In the same issue of the periodical, we carried a booklist prepared by Bookworm Goa; it consists of notices of books that can act as anchors for both children and adults to cope with these sorrowful times.

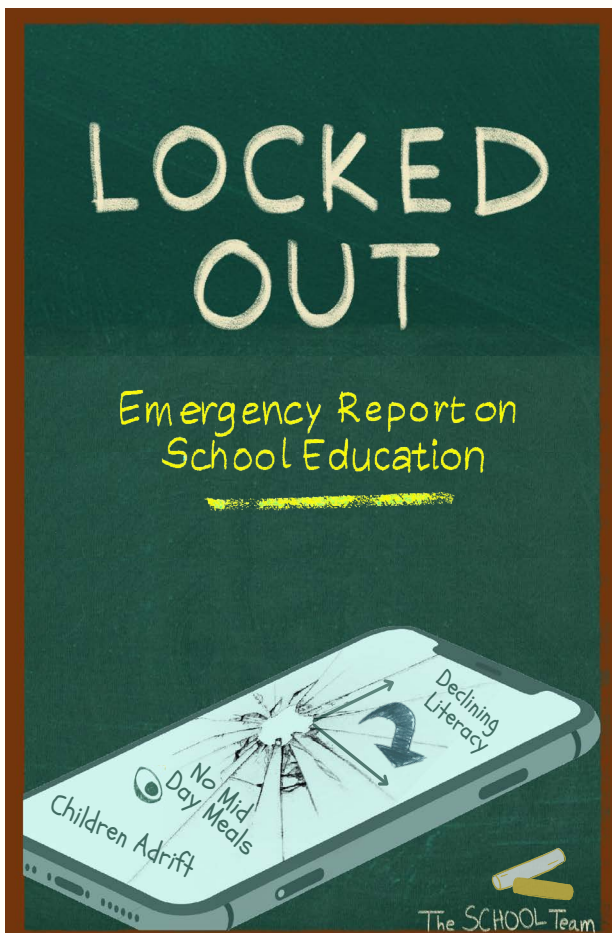
You may want to explore the ‘Samuhik Pahal’ archive [here](#).

Reopening Schools

A Way Forward

C Sutar

According to the report [‘Locked Out – Emergency Report on School Education’](#), published in August 2021 by development economists Reetika Khera and Jean Drèze, only 23% of children in urban areas and 8% of children in rural areas had ‘adequate online access.’ A total of 1,362 homes with at least one primary or upper primary school student were interviewed for the survey for this report. Among the states and union territories studied were Assam, Bihar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.



The survey’s outcome is an eye-opener. In urban regions, 76 percent of parents said their child’s reading abilities had decreased. In contrast, in rural areas, 75 percent believed their child’s reading abilities had deteriorated. Suspension of education services has had a long-term negative impact on India’s educational system.

Higher inequality and lower health outcomes are now more likely. ‘Locked Out’ emphasizes the importance of preparing the school system for a lengthy transition period for students to catch up on their education while also regaining their psychological, social, and nutritional well-being. Focusing on school renovations, safety guidelines, teacher training, and enrollment drives would only be the first steps.

Unfortunately, the extent to which children contribute to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is still unknown. But, international bodies such as WHO maintain that threat for community spread remain. Interestingly, parents in both rural and urban India have voiced a strong desire for schools to reopen. Parents in metropolitan areas favored immediate school reopening by as much as 90%. In contrast, parents in rural areas favored it by as high as 97 percent, according to this report by Reetika Khera and Jean Drèze.

Recommendations and Guidelines

Over the past year, organizations such as UNICEF, WHO, and the Azim Premji Foundation have released guidelines that offer well-thought recommendations for school reopening. According to the

UNICEF report, six main aspects should be considered during school reopening: policy, financing, safe operations, learning, and protection. To respond to the demands and situations of people living in densely populated places with limited resources, a [conceptual framework](#) for understanding and adjusting to local conditions will be necessary.

[WHO's](#) recent guidelines are a helpful primer for schools that are reopening in India. It is recommended by this international body that children stay at home if they are ill, and that if a case is discovered at school, the student should be given rapid assistance and initiate contact tracing in consultation with the local authorities.

Minimizing spread necessitates clear communication between schools, parents and children. Basic things like correctly wearing masks, avoiding crowded places, and watching out for small children who may not comprehend the dangers of playing outside in groups, are all part of their extensive advice.

At the school level, sufficient classroom ventilation, regular disinfection of common school facilities, and vaccination for teachers and school employees are all critical. WHO also recommends that teachers complete vaccination courses according to local norms and availability.

The report '[Schools in the Times of COVID-19](#),' published by the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) in May 2020, proposes that school administration be sympathetic to COVID-19-affected families. The pandemic has severely impacted many students and families in the last year — some have lost loved ones, others have become ill, and still, others have battled to find food after losing their jobs.

After schools reopen, schools and teachers will have to take proactive measures to combat the effects of this crisis. The APF report also recommends that open communication routes with parents be

established to reduce COVID-19-related fear and stigma.

This report recommends that classrooms be allowed to operate at only 72 percent of their full capacities, to allow for social separation with a minimum distance of six feet between each person and the avoidance of touch-based activities. Other suggestions include checking those who are cooking and serving the midday meal at the point of entry and exit, providing them with hygiene items to wash their hands, and requiring them to wear a mask at all times. Grain, beans, and other dry goods should be stocked to avoid going to the store regularly.

In dense, semi-urban, or metropolitan regions, schools with massive enrolments or a shortage of physical space can explore opening classrooms in shifts or holding assemblies on alternate days or within classrooms with due care for physical separation. The school administration could also enlist the help of district education officers in developing a school reopening plan that is tailored to the needs of the community.

In general, the APF report believes that face-to-face connection is the greatest way for pupils to learn and that students learn through a range of interactions with their peers and adults. They must collaborate, play together, and be together. They also require social and emotional support as well as mentoring. As a result, it is critical to get pupils to school, even if this goal is to be achieved through a diverse set of methods whose actual mix would depend upon the context.

Recovering from educational losses following the COVID-19 pandemic could take years of patient action. Given that schools in India have been closed for more than 18 months, education continuity is crucial. It is critical to rethink student learning outcomes, syllabi, examinations, and evaluation systems.

Reopening Schools After the COVID-19 Closure

Samuhik Pahal Team



Safety First

Children from Prathmik School (Ahmedabad) get their temperature checked and hands sanitized before entering the classrooms.

Back in Action



The Samerth team in a meeting with the Principal of Gagodar High School in Kutch.

Samerth believes in increasing accountability of the Public Education System (including schools and anganwadis) so that local government bodies can take positive steps to address issues related to inequality by ensuring the creation of a universal, quality public education system for children ages 3-14 years.



Awareness is the Key

Posters with instructions to wear masks and maintain social distancing have been put up at various places at Prathamik School, Ahmedabad.

Let the Learning Begin...



(Left) Classroom activities with children wearing masks - Kasindra School, Sanand, Gujarat.

(Right) A student makes different shapes using matchsticks in a session organized by Teach for North East in Manipur.



Making School Reopening Inclusive

Bangalore-based Shradhanjali Integrated Primary School (SIS) has designed a separate SOP keeping in mind the needs of Children with Disabilities (CwDs).

At the school, CwDs have easy access to sanitizers, masks, daily temperature checks, etc.

Shradhanjali Integrated Primary School (SIS) is a partner of The Association of People with Disability (APD), and supports inclusive education.



Most children with disabilities enrolled at SIS come from Below Poverty Line (BPL) and lower middle class families. Parents are happy to see the school reopen and are in constant touch with the school to make the reopening a safe experience for all.

Photo Credits: The Association of People with Disability (APD), RREA – Recognize, Rise and Empowerment Association, Shradhanjali Integrated Primary School (SIS), and Samerth Charitable Trust.

Coming Back To School

A Maggu

With the phased reopening of schools taking place across the country, there is nervousness about the threat to children's well-being and the learning losses over the past year and half. We spoke with non-profits to understand how various stakeholders are bracing themselves up and responding to these challenges.

Since March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a strict preventive lockdown was imposed across the country. From May 2020 onwards, lockdown was eased in a phased manner – initially on a set of essential services. School reopening was delayed as it was seen as putting children and school staff at risk and potentially accelerating COVID-19 transmission.

By the end of 2020, the number of active cases was low, and the nationwide vaccination drive was rolled out in January 2021. There were recommendations to let children return to schools. By January and February 2021, a few states had allowed children appearing for Board examinations and in high schools to return to school in a staggered manner.

In March 2021, the signs of the second wave were timely observed by the school authorities and the subsequent closure of schools ensured that children largely remained safe. However, the closure of schools has caused learning losses among children. Their social and emotional well-being has also taken a visible hit during the pandemic.

From August 2021 onwards, schools across the country have started reopening in a phased manner, especially for the higher grades. There is a prediction of an impending ominous third wave that could severely impact children. Parents and school administration are nervous about the safety

of children. The school system now has to evolve strategies to ensure that learning losses are bridged. The reopening of schools is being celebrated with caution.

Adopting an Individualized Approach for Children with Disabilities

The school reopening exercise is especially fraught with challenges for differently abled children. In this context, the work of Vision Empower (VE) assumes salience. VE is a not-for-profit enterprise that envisions making Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education accessible to students with visual impairment, irrespective of their socio-economic status.



Vision Empower

It works across five states – Delhi, Gujrat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Tripura. It focuses on capacitating sighted and visually impaired teachers and students with tools, devices, aids, and educational materials that aim to make STEM lessons interesting and impactful.

Supriya Dey, Co-founder of Vision Empower shares, “In March 2020, teachers and children in residential schools for the blind were sent home. Children found it difficult to continue with online classes. These children either did not have smartphones or if they did, they were uncomfortable in using them.

Braille textbooks are rarely available for these students even during normal times. Consequently, their academic development suffered.”

The news of the reopening of schools for the blind is welcomed with wariness by the VE team. Supriya adds, “If it is safe, then children should be in school. We are aware that it would be difficult to follow social distancing norms in these schools. The threat of Covid transmission looms as the children need tactile learning support.”

The VE team is aware that the educators would have to pick up the threads of lessons from before and it might prove to be a Herculean task. The children, especially those in grades appearing for Board examinations, are worried about the setbacks in their learning process.

Supriya adds, “The respite in this situation is that special schools for blind students have a focus on play-based learning. They are not pressured to compete against each other and classroom lessons for them are joyful. We have not conducted any rigorous assessment of the learning losses of visually impaired children we work with. Hopefully, the learning losses, if any, could be covered quickly.”

VE has specially designed Teacher Instruction Kits (TIKs), that are guidelines for teachers of students with visual impairment on accessible and experiential learning of concepts covered grade-wise in the curriculum.

The TIKs cover mathematics and science concepts from Grade 1 to Grade 7. These kits are introduced to both visually impaired and sighted teachers. Classroom training workshops on TIKs were halted in March 2020 and the VE team had to strategize to continue this online.

Many blind teachers were uncomfortable in using smartphones. Thus, enhancing their proficiency in digital literacy was prioritized. Once these teachers gained confidence

in using the digital medium to conduct lessons, the VE team resumed its initiative of capacitating the teachers with the Learning Instruction Kits in full swing.

The sudden order of reopening of high schools and hostels for blind students in September had taken everyone by surprise. The middle schools were opened in October. Attendance of children with visual impairments is dismal. Bringing a blind child back to school could prove to be challenging and requires concerted efforts by both caregivers and the school administration.

Supriya says, “With the decision of reopening of schools thrust upon them, the teachers are overwhelmed to adapt to face-to-face classes. For instance, in Tripura, teachers taking certain subjects were recently re-allotted different subjects. Now, we will work with the teachers again to familiarize them with the new TIKs. We will have to alter our training schedule and ensure that the teachers do not feel overburdened with our training. They are nervous about conducting their classes effectively and the safety of their students.”

As students and teachers return to schools, the VE team hopes that the transition is seamless and safe. An individualized approach to understanding the support required for each disabled child’s return to school could be adopted.

Leveraging a Hybrid Model to Deliver Quality Education in Remote Geographies

The reopening of schools in the Union Territory of Ladakh was welcomed by students and teachers. The schools in the region opened after a gap of almost two years.

After the winter break in December 2019, the schools opened briefly in March 2021. But the second wave put a pause on the resumption of classes. Students in the region started returning to schools in a staggered manner only in August 2021.



rZamba

rZamba, founded in 2017, is a non-profit working in Kargil and Leh districts to contribute to the fields of education, health, waste management, and leadership development.

Stanzin Saldon, who leads the organization, says, “The region witnesses harsh winters and consequently the schools get shut by December. The children from grades 6 to 12 returned to schools in August and September 2021.”

During the closure of schools, rZamba had launched Khangrtsa Yontan, an initiative that means ‘Learning at Doorsteps’ in Kargil and Leh districts. The youth in the communities and the teachers had stepped up to become Learning Facilitators at the community centers in their villages.

These centers operated from May 2020 till March 2021. When the second wave hit and resulted in the closure of schools, the rZamba team supported the administration’s efforts in providing learning resources and support to children. Context specific teaching learning resources were used to ensure that the learning of more than 4,000 children continued and remained joyful.

The reopening of schools in August 2021 started with the news of at least 56 students at a school in Leh district contracting

Covid-19. It prompted the administration to shut the schools in Leh for more than two weeks. There was an emphasis by the district administration on strictly following COVID-19 protocols. Since this incident, the teachers in the region have been on their toes to ensure the safety of children.

The closure of schools during the pandemic exposed the gaps in Ladakh’s education system – poor telecom connectivity, low access to quality education, and lack of devices to continue with online education.

Currently, the number of COVID cases has fallen to single and double digits; but the stress of an impending third wave lingers. In this context, the administration and the rZamba team remain committed to embracing the digital revolution in the education system as well.

Saldon says, “We are in talks with an Ed-Tech company for providing the students with subscriptions of mathematics and science resources. The administration has arranged for 10,000 tablets for students in grades sixth to twelfth studying in government schools of Ladakh that will enable our children to continue learning online. We are also very keen on developing a continuous engagement plan for supporting teachers to adapt to this hybrid learning environment which is here to stay and might be the new normal.”

Now that schools have almost reopened for all the grades, through their 'Whole School Transformation Initiative,' rZamba is looking forward to start engaging with the schools and support the primary and middle pilot schools with their library processes and project-based learning approach. Ladakh's harsh winters are almost here at the doorstep. The rZamba team is now preparing for Khangrtsa Yontan Phase 3.

The persistence of children, teachers, volunteers, community leaders, the administration, and the rZamba team to minimize learning losses is exemplary. One hopes that the community is better prepared now against future calamities.

Bridging the Learning Gap for Government School Children in Rural Bihar

Karunodaya Foundation is a not-for-profit organization that envisions ensuring equitable and quality education for children in elementary schools (grades 1–8) in Bihar.

They work with a range of stakeholders - government school teachers, education department officials, and the local communities, to address challenges related to quality education. Through innovative pedagogic interventions, they focus on improving retention and learning outcomes in government schools.

Schools in Bihar were closed in March 2020. They were briefly opened in January-March 2021. Due to the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic creating havoc across the country, these were again shut down.

Bikash, a co-founder of Karunodaya shares, "During the closure of schools, the response of the Bihar government was poor. In May 2021, they decided to initially broadcast classes for students from grades nine to twelve and later for grades one to eight on the DD Bihar television channel. The percentage of households owning televisions is just 14.5% in the state, which is the lowest in the

country. It did not come as a surprise that this initiative merely helped a few children."

Karunodaya worked with the District Education Department of Gaya to teach children online. Their approach involved designing content by putting together concepts of grades one and two, three to five, and six to eight together.

The videos designed for this purpose focused on simple activities for strengthening foundational concepts. These videos were circulated on WhatsApp groups through Block Resource Persons, Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators, School Headmasters and teachers of Gaya district. Through this initiative, they were able to reach 1500 children in around 120 government schools. In the meanwhile, only a handful of teachers continued to take classes via Zoom, Google Meet and WhatsApp every day.

Karunodaya facilitated the setting up of 50 community learning centers where a network of local women called *Shiksha Sahelis* conducted sessions daily for children in grades one to five. These two hours long sessions focused on minimizing learning losses. These tried not to overwhelm children with new concepts, most of the teaching was based on activity-based learning, storytelling and project-based learning.

Bikash shares, "Our activities focused on making learning enjoyable for the children, more contextual, and sharpen their critical thinking. We aimed at ensuring the emotional well-being of children, continuing their learning, and ensuring their foundational literacy and numeracy. For instance, number counting, addition, and subtraction were taught to children through activities using concrete materials such as sticks and stones. We reached out to more than 600 children."

Even with reopening of schools, the Karunodaya team has continued these sessions in the community centres to complement teachers' efforts as they might

otherwise feel pressured to rush with their lessons. Bikash adds, “The learning loss has been severe. We are trying to ensure that the learning gaps are holistically addressed, and children do not feel pressured to catch up without understanding foundational concepts.”

Bihar Education Department’s initiative ‘e-LOTS Web Portal and Mobile Application’ launched in May 2021 also proved to be helpful for children during the pandemic. It has digital copies of all the SCERT books and uploads of short videos explaining concepts. The access to these resources enabled a few children to resume their learning.

In Bihar, there was a bridge course for three months designed for children across all grades. Initially, it was set to be launched in March 2021, but the second wave thwarted these plans. With the recent reopening of schools, this bridge course would now be followed.

Bikash adds, “The bridge course, through a structured approach, would help in overcoming learning losses faced by children. Some parents were able to support their children with their lessons. But most of the children were left without any robust support.”

With the reopening of schools, the health of students remains the topmost priority.

Teachers were mandated to be fully vaccinated before they resumed classes. But poor adherence to social distancing norms and wearing of masks persists. Bikash shares that in each school one would witness merely 10% of the students wearing masks and adhering to social distancing norms. This could prove to be dangerous to the health of the children. The school administration needs to strictly follow COVID-19 protocols.

The Karunodaya team is worried about poor attendance by students. It has been mapping attendance levels to prepare a strategy to encourage children to return to schools. They believe that it would take coordinated efforts by all stakeholders to reach out to children and bring them back to schools.

In Conclusion

The positive news of launch of vaccines for children is rife. In the meantime, it is important to follow preventive COVID-19 protocols. It would be helpful if families and teachers communicate regularly with students to allay fears surrounding their well-being and school coursework.

Children are not a homogenous group. Their future is impacted by a multitude of factors – geographies they live in, socio-economic status of their families, physical or intellectual disabilities and the status of the education system.

There must be a systematic assessment of the learning levels and emotional well-being of children and an approach that responds to the unique needs of each child must be adopted. The years in school are essential for the holistic growth of each child. We cannot allow the difficulties of the past two years determine the future of these young minds.

You can reach out to the organizations featured in this story at - bikash7692@gmail.com (Karunodaya Foundation), rzambajkl5@gmail.com (rZamba), and meghna@visionempowertrust.org (Vision Empower).





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