



Restoring Childhood And Missed Schooling

Mitigating Losses due to Closure of Rural Primary School

August 5, 2020

In the last 3 years, Transforming Rural India Foundation has anchored integrated village development initiatives to bring opportunities to the poorest villages in Central and Eastern India. As a part of this, well known education NGOs have come together and partnered with the government to improve learning outcomes at primary level. The effort has grounded an innovative community-centred approach across 1098 villages in 17 sub-districts with 1164 schools in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. However, as the country came face-to-face with the COVID-19 pandemic, primary schools were closed as large congregation of children posed a threat to their safety. As digital learning is out of their reach, closure of schools has not only resulted in the loss of a space to learn but also deprived them an opportunity of joyful companionship. Based on the experiences of our partners, TRIF organised a webinar on August 5th 2020 to layout a community-led approach to reinvigorate schooling as well as restore childhood in the poorest villages. The webinar will also explore the opportunity of a new framework of neighbourhood resilience and engagement in the education. The following report has been written from the excerpts of the discussion with the distinguished panel – Dr. Hridaykant Dewan (Professor Azim Premji University), Dr. Vimala Ramachandran (Director, Education Resource Unit), Tultul Biswas (Coordinator, Eklavya Foundation), Mary Punnoose (Chief Functionary, Prajayatna), Satyajit Salin (Head-Education, Tata Trusts) and Neelima Khetan (Former Head CSR – Vedanta, Coca Cola).

CONTEXT OF RURAL PRIMARY EDUCATION AND OUR WORK

The quality of education for the underprivileged has been a challenge in India. In the past, various governmental and supportive non-governmental efforts to improve this situation have been primarily input driven – infrastructure, technology, materials, teachers' capacity building and so on. However, over the last ten years, we have realised that this approach is not sustainable. In order to ensure quality and sustainability, various civil society organisations have been working towards two main aspects. One is to provide opportunities for the community to engage in their children's learning process at home and the other is to motivate teachers who bring innovative methods to ensure learning in schools. Especially in the rural context, these two drivers are crucial. As most children are first generation learners themselves, they lack the support from their parents that is essential to supplement their learning at home. At the same time, teachers have been put under the spotlight without any agency, freedom, support or appreciation and were expected manage education as best as they could. To address these issues, the Education Sector Council at TRIF has designed pathways that emerged from our work with the community. The pathways have been created to ensure community participation in education through Self Help Groups and through the community reach teachers and schools. We have also worked extensively with the government to sensitise them to the possibility of community participation and enabling the teacher to express herself and her agency. Our work has revived the interest

among the teachers, parents and the community to jointly commit to ensure that learning happens and is a joyful experience for their children.

In Jharkhand, 80% of children go to government schools and mostly belong to marginalised communities. The schools are riddled with issues related to poor infrastructure, high dropout rate, demotivated teachers, lack of faith in schools and very low learning levels. In Jharkhand, our partner organisation Prajayatna, leveraged the social capital created by the strong SHG movement across the State and used this platform to address issues pertaining to education. Additionally, they have also worked in building institutional capacities like school management committees and gram panchayats to ensure proper management of schools. Particularly in Jharkhand, their efforts have also been geared towards connecting hindi-speaking teachers with santhali-speaking children while creating spaces where the community can also interact with the school. They have also worked with the district administration to ensure that the community has a say in the decisions made at the district level. Their cumulative efforts, built around the 5 TRIF education pathways, have led to improvement in overall infrastructure, better attendance/retention rates, better performance of teachers due to availability of teaching/learning materials, onboarding of more than 100 community volunteers (education change vectors), formation of community learning centres and more.

Similar efforts have been scaled up across 17 blocks in Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal as well. In Madhya Pradesh, TRIF has been working with Eklavya Foundation through three main social circles centered around the child – family, school and community. Their efforts have been to understand the interplay between these circles and create spaces for meaningful learning engagement through collaboration and support. This has been through SHGs taking initiative to promote education, collaborate with teachers, building school libraries and community-led learning centres that complement the efforts home space needs to give to complement the learning in schools.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON RURAL SCHOOLS

At onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were quickly identified as a safety risk for children and have remained closed ever since. Subsequently, schools were converted into quarantine centres and relief centres for returnee migrants. Invariably, schools shifted learning to various online platforms. There has been a lot of literature written on why technology is a poor substitute and needs to be complemented with face-to-face interaction for learning. Even in the most advanced countries, primary education does not rely on online education. This will not only compromise quality but also equity. Preliminary surveys have indicated that online learning has not reached majority of our children in both urban and rural areas due to low availability of smart phones. In an household with one smart phone and multiple children, the question then becomes who gets the privilege of using phones and where girls and smaller children lie on the priority list.

The closure of schools coupled with the limited reach of digital alternatives have led to children moving away from learning and missing their childhood. . Due to lack of schools, children, especially girl children, are engaged in doing household chores, looking after their younger siblings, etc. As the agriculture season is approaching in Jharkhand, 80-90% of children are engaged in agriculture work. In rural hinterlands in Madhya Pradesh, children who have been earlier enrolled in schools have been forced to work. Now, they are expected to bear the socio-economic stress that their families are going through. The closure of schools has taken away the space where they could learn, play, engage meaningfully with their friends. Most importantly, it has also taken away the space of respite where children could get away from the extreme stresses within their homes and share their hardships with their peers.

There were also a lack of tools that the parents could use to actively engage in their child's learning at home. From various surveys and field work, we also realised that there was high degree of concern from the parents as well regarding their child's education. There was a long gap in the active engagement of the children's learning due to the closure of schools and this needed to be focussed on to ensure that children were better prepared when the schools reopened.

OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE CRISIS

COVID-19 crisis created an opportunity to not only acknowledge the learning gap from the closure of schools but also elevate the work in education before the pandemic. The efforts among TRIF partners were focussed on building a learning environment within the house and within the community.

In order to engage parents at home, the TRIF education sector council created various tools to help them participate in their children's learning. The content integrated academic content along with rich local knowledge to help the parents connect better with the learning process. Different modules were created with parents as facilitators and different activities were designed around the child's immediate surroundings – conversations, audio-visual links, reading and listening. A blended approach was taken given the constraints posed by the pandemic. Online platforms were used to share audio-visual content and virtual worksheets where children also posted their learning progress. In the offline mode, physical worksheets were designed with the help of teachers. They were distributed by education change vectors, village organisations and youth volunteers. In the end, 3000 children were reached through 100 education change vectors & village organisation members, 100 parents, 88 school management committee members and 50 youth volunteers.

Parallely, there was also a need to build a decentralised learning centre which caters to the learning needs of the children in the immediate neighbourhood. To facilitate this, youth from the same neighbourhood were identified who were interested in engaging in the education of their younger siblings and can be oriented in this process. These learning centres ensured the ease of access for the child while also being COVID responsive as there is no external person visiting the locality. The youth member who facilitates this process is also a resident of the same locality. When the number of children is large, then they come in batches. In some places, an odd-even system has been put in place to ensure social distancing and minimum crowding. Additionally, handwashing has been made mandatory two times- before entering the centre and after leaving the centre. This habit is also nurtured when the child is back home. These centres further decentralises the idea of Teach for India/Teach 2 Learn by engaging a youth who is part of the community to take up a new role in teaching. The emphasis here on focusing on learning by doing, learning from the local environment and learning from each other.

The Mohalla class idea has been accepted and promoted by the State government of Madhya Pradesh through Rajya Shiksha Kendra in consultation with other civil society organisations and experts. Additionally, in the State government's Hamara Ghar Hamara Vidyalaya campaign a provision for Mohalla class was also included. Teachers have also been instructed to visit children's homes and help in the functioning of the Mohalla classes. Subsequently, Eklavya teams supported the teachers in Hoshangabad, Betul, Mandla, Badwani and Dhar districts in conducting village visits, enrolling migrant families' children, developing worksheets/ learning materials and setting up of these centres. Teachers have also in turn supported our teams to find spaces within the community, identify local youths, allow use of school verandas for the centres and so on.

FORGING AHEAD WITH RENEWED ENERGY

COVID has had a disproportionately affected rural children compared to urban spaces where the schools have the infrastructure to readily adopt to online learning and even new business models have come up for online international grade education systems. In rural areas, there is a lamentation of the reach of digital education and this model not only provides a solution for hinterlands where digital education is out of reach but also provides a space for joyful companionship. Here we are not only providing cognitive development of the child but also giving importance to the social and emotional safety of the child. The concept of the school is merging with the community and the scope of learning for a child has extended beyond the four walls of the school. We need a plan of action to sustain this redefined ownership of the school. The examples seen before are readymade solutions that adapt to the new realities of learning in the times of COVID especially considering the constraints that rural India faces. We must re-visit the role of a teacher from being someone who influences within the confines of the classroom to being a benign influence with the community itself. Many teachers have shown that they can reinvent themselves and play multiple roles – counsellor, teacher, guide and guardian at the same time. Activating her agency and encouraging her to do so will be crucial to bring change from a systemic point of view and ensure sustainability. Hence addressing issues related to salary delays among contract teachers will be crucial.

There needs to be an immediate thrust in education efforts while keeping the impact of COVID-19 in mind. A community-centric assessment of the ground situation through headmasters, teachers, parents, administrators, community leaders and local NGOs will be crucial to discuss the specific impact of the pandemic in their geographical areas and communities. Particularly, the impact of reverse migration and how it changes the social makeup of a classroom needs to be highlighted. Although TRIF partners are trying to assess the situation locally, creation of similar forums can make a big difference. Moreover, thousands of villages have very low incidence of infection. There need not be one strategy that fits every village. Hence having a realistic view through such assessments becomes very important. Also in rural tribal areas, the immediate risk of children appearing for class 10 and class 12 board exams have been worrying both the parents and children alike. Here, the government needs to change the pattern of board exams to focus on attaining key learning outcomes and encourage an open book format to ensure that comprehension takes precedence over memorisation. Thereby, focus will shift from eliminating chapters and creating shorter academic sessions to building foundational skills at each grade level. Equally, we need to focus on how to maximise student learning once the pandemic is over.

Let us not forget that both children and adults have been traumatised by the pandemic especially among returnee migrants. Teachers, headmasters and community leaders need to respond to the trauma, anxiety and despondency with empathy. State governments can collaborate with teachers and headmasters to organise workshops in each cluster to prepare them to address this trauma and its severity. Existing NGOs and CSR programmes that work very closely with the government schools can also initiate outreach with children, parents and new migrants. Additionally, the socio-economic stresses of the pandemic will cause a serious nutritional compromise among children especially among families that have lost their livelihoods. Hence, State governments should introduce breakfast in addition to mid-day meals and introduce other school health initiatives.

The challenges during the pandemic are unprecedented and change is imperative. However, in times of need, a true collaboration has been struck by parents, teachers, NGOs and the government. This collaborative endeavour opens up more avenues to build on our earlier efforts. TRIF canvas showcases how these ground level initiative can create the right energy in the system and how we can engage with this paradigm to make a difference.