

## **Mini School**

Being a teacher , I wanted to share my experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown . It was quite a balancing act to keep everyone safe while focussing on the needs of the children's education, given the many limitations and individual situations in my village.

### **My Initiative**

From a teacher's perspective, I felt it was difficult to ensure that the children kept in touch with their books during the 2020 Covid lockdown. As a first step , I distributed worksheets to all my village students by visiting their homes and asked them to submit the completed worksheets. By doing this , I was able to gauge their interest level and decided to start a Mini school under the guidance of Rajaram Sir and other senior members.

### **Beginning of Mini School**

In order to start the Mini school, it was important to convince the parents that we were going to follow strict covid safety guidelines like mask wearing and social distancing. Many of the parents who were hesitant initially, agreed to send their children once they saw our commitment. I decided to conduct classes for my relatives' children and the other children who lived near my house with 8 students.

After one month, the number of students attending the mini school gradually increased. Because of the students' interest in learning, their parents allowed them to take classes, and some parents even reached out to me to conduct classes in their respective areas. Since my village is large, I divided my time teaching the students in two different shifts. The first shift was teaching the students at my home, and the second was conducting classes at the far end of the village. I also took weekly classes for older kids who couldn't attend the regular mini school. There were many challenges along the way with some kids unwilling to participate in the regular schedule.. I reached out to the parents in some cases to monitor their kids' homework - These kids were happy to see the parents being involved in their activities and win their approval for some reward like additional phone time and play time. I created card games to sort and identify words which motivated the children a lot.. Weekly once, I also facilitated extra-curricular activities such as arts and crafts for the students that came to my home.

### **Two Teachers in Mini school**

By the end of the third month, 70% of students, including the middle school children, were now attending the mini school and I requested another Asha teacher to assist me with the classes.

Upon the arrival of my brother from Chennai, I had difficulties continuing my class at home. As the saying goes, "Life is never without problems." and I was forced to look for a new place to conduct the classes.

People in the village were hesitant to accommodate our request for space owing to safety concerns related to covid. After three days of frantic searching in and around the village for a suitable building , my sister let us use her empty house for as long as we needed.

With the help of Asha trust, we were able to provide worksheets, as well as funding to maintain the facility, such as the required lighting and fans. This ensured that the students would be comfortable while attending the classes.

### **Challenges faced in the Mini School**

The biggest challenge was that the students hadn't retained the information from previous years. We decided to proctor a basic written test to identify their reading and writing level. Based on the results, we split them into two groups and taught them all the basics ( English/Math/Tamil) upto 5th grade.

After six to seven months, there was a lack of continuity due to a large number of parents sending their children to their relatives' homes, where they would supposedly be safer due to Covid.

Nevertheless, we continued to receive new admissions to the school, which made us spend a lot of time with the newcomers. Since new students kept coming to the mini school, the teachers faced continuous disruption of having to repeat lessons, which threw off the daily schedule. Another problem we faced was that students had lost interest in completing their homework, since the pandemic had led them to become lazy and they seemed to gradually lose interest in studies.

### **Parents Support**

In due course, the parents started asking us to increase the teaching time. They also encouraged other parents' to send their children to the school. Quarantine helped a lot of parents understand their children's personalities as they were spending a lot more time together. An incident comes to my mind to illustrate this point : A 3rd grade student was below average in her studies. After observing the child at school, I requested her parents to focus on the child and take interest in her work. I encouraged them to check her handwriting and go over her completed work as well. Very soon, I could see a huge change in her activities as well as in her studies. The 3rd grader eventually improved in her grades and also became interested in solving math problems on her own. It is one of the many positive feedbacks from the parents about the Mini school.

### **Art and Craft in Mini School**

As mentioned above, we conducted several art and craft classes to increase the students' extra curricular activities. We held these classes every Friday and conducted a drawing competition once a month. We assigned themes to the students by grade level.

This topic reminds me of the complaint I had received from one of the parents following our decision to conduct the competition. A mother had said, "My daughter is in first grade. one day, I had asked her to buy snacks from the store, but instead of buying the snacks, she had purchased colored pencils." When the mother questioned her about the incident, she replied, "Don't you want your child to become a great artist?". Like this student , several other students developed a newfound interest to express their talents. This was one of the many great successes we had.



### Competitions in Mini School

To improve the students' memory and mathematical skills, we conducted many math quiz competitions as well as topics related to current events. We used Meena Madam's Math online class to teach math tricks. We concluded the academic year with a fun sports day with the help of the Asha organization and our coordinator.



### Evaluation Test

After one year, Asha for Education conducted oral and written tests. The results of the exam came as a surprise to me. While some students excelled as expected, others who I hoped would improve did not do well at all. This is going to be a challenge for me as I have to find ways to help them. Based on the results, I have further categorized the children so that they can receive specialized education, tailored to their individual needs for the upcoming academic year.



### **In Conclusion**

Starting Mini school is my contribution for the children of my village during the pandemic. Because of all of the troubles that accompanied starting the mini school, we teachers ourselves were able to acquire new skills and ways of approaching different issues. The real heroes of this story, however, are my students, who took the risk of attending classes even in this difficult situation. Despite their fear of the pandemic, their passion for gaining knowledge motivated them to push through and come to school. I pray to the Almighty God to get us out of the coronavirus pandemic, but in the future, if this situation continues, we Asha teachers will always be ready to continue the mini school with full safety precautions.

