Samuhik
सामूहिक पहल
Pahal

A journal of our collective action

The importance of context in CSOs' educational work

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The importance of context in educational interventions

Children looking for Putpura, an edible mushroom variety, found by digging in the topsoil

There seems to be almost unanimity in educational discourse these days about the importance of context in educational practice. The idea means many things to many people. It can be, therefore, productively unpacked to inform practice in the domain of education and elsewhere.

The first thing that context means is that of the immediate geographical community. The idea that the language of the home or the neighbourhood should be the medium through which the child should begin her formal processes of learning is an established tenet in pedagogy. In India though, this is often not followed, with our inordinate fascination for English medium education.

Many marginal social groups, especially Scheduled Tribe communities, are finding their voices now. Their languages are becoming both a space for consolidating political identity as well as a tool for social renewal in the classrooms. The MLE (Multilingual Education) policies of many state governments and the focus on mother tongue based primary education in NEP 2020 are adding impetus to these processes.

Thus, the children's languages constitute the first strand of context. The child's linguistic background works as a bridge for learning, to take her from the known to the unknown, often from predominantly oral community cultures to those of print and literacy. Creating relevant children's literature in such an arena can fulfil both the learning needs of the children and the community's needs for cultural continuity and renewal.

The linguistic and social contexts also act as reservoirs of alternative knowledge

systems. Our local cultures often embody tools for survival and resilience. These are increasingly important in the context of the polycrises that the world is facing now, that is getting heightened by the global climate meltdown. Tapping into vernacular socio-cultural resources to craft teaching learning materials, processes and institutions that respond to community needs are a strand of work that many CSOs are now undertaking.

But context is not all positive. Many children come from broken homes and regions marred with conflicts, which are sometimes long-term. Here the child needs to be enabled to become proficient with the tools and the practices that help deal with trauma and sadness and flourish despite the limitations imposed by their context.

A big aspect of the context of most children's lives and trajectories of learning these days is related to diversity, plurality and the unpredictable nature of socio-political change. Many schools have children who speak different languages, often a language

that is looked down upon by linguistic majorities. Because of entrenched social hierarchies, many communities' children still face ostracism and discrimination in schools. These issues often get pushed under the carpet. These are matters of context that we need to address urgently.

What children need the most to learn in an effective manner is stability. However, many children's families must migrate constantly just to survive. Some are displaced for development projects. Processes like these create mobile social groups. Their children's learning needs require all the creativity that we can muster to be addressed adequately. Some organizations are already rising to the challenge and doing stellar work. We need to do a lot more.

To respond to the educational needs of all children in the country, we must think about systemic change. However, to do this well, we must also learn to look at each child as a unique individual, situated in a very specific context.

Dialogues between the contextual and the general: can we teach against casteism?

Amman Madan

In this short article, I explore the strange trajectory of the role of context in learning. I illustrate this by what it might mean in teaching about a theme like casteism. More and more educationists are saying that children learn best when teaching connects with the world around them. This is not a new idea. John Dewey, for instance, said that all humans learn by coming to grips with their environment and trying to make sense of that experience.

Children form concepts and schemas when they play with things and ideas around them. They develop attitudes and emotions which motivate their actions. The teacher's job is to create the conditions in which children may want to learn and to support their growth.

Learning was contextual for most of human history. Children in hunting-gathering bands learned where the juiciest berries were found in the jungles surrounding them. They did not learn general theories of plants and nutrition. Children throughout history learned more by observation and imitation of what was going on around them than by formal instruction into ideas and theories which came from far away.

Until recently, the classroom and its daily, regular learning of abstractions was only for a few. Those few learned in the classroom what could not be taught from observation or imitation of actions around them. For instance, they might be instructed directly by a guru about a philosophy of deeper ideas and narratives, which were far removed from their everyday world. Thus, they might learn about the Vedas and the Upanishads and that

abstract entity which was not in this thing or that but was beyond all of it. Such abstracted learning made up a small part of all that was being learned in that community and initially dealt mainly with metaphysical topics.

Gradually, other kinds of non-contextual knowledge and teaching, like that of mathematics and theories about the material world seem to have emerged. However, this teaching was still limited to small numbers and a few institutions. These were dedicated to the teaching and learning of what could not be learned from the family and the neighbourhood.

In other words, these institutions necessarily taught about something which was remote from the students' immediate context. The family and neighbourhood took care of the rest. The farmer's children learned when to sow seeds and how to clear fields of weeds. Girls learned from their mothers about how to cook and boys learned how to plough the land. In some societies, both boys and girls learned the same things.

Universalistic institutions redefine contexts

The rapid rise of formal schools and classrooms which took place over the last three centuries has moved the idea of what is worth learning further away from the immediate into a broader field. Children learn biology and not how to sow jowar and bajra. They learn loyalty to the nation and not to their caste or tribe.

Knowledge is now seen in a more de-contextual or universalistic way. It is important to note though, that it is never

fully de-contextual. Schools and classrooms have taken students away from the actual community life and put them into a special, insulated space. And parents are usually quite happy about this. It's because schools are seen as a ladder to another world, with the promise of greater status, power and wealth.

The biggest single jump toward such learning took place with the expansion of mass education after the 18th century CE. The Prussian state was one of the earliest to make a law that all children had to go to school and learn a knowledge that was specified by the state. What they learned in the school was no longer what they could learn from their families, neighbourhoods or workplaces.

Especially after the defeat of the Prussians by Napoleon in 1804, schools became a place to learn patriotic fervour and loyalty to the king who ruled in the far away capital. This was the knowledge which those in government thought that children should learn. It was quite removed from local loyalties and affections. This was not really a fully universal, de-contextual knowledge, as noted above. Instead, the context was now defined by broader institutions like the state and the nation.

The shift in school knowledge was a move away from the family, and local communities and their institutions. This was connected with basic changes in the nature of societies and particularly in the powers that decided what was considered worth learning.

In colonized India, for instance, the British shaped what the new context was. Children were sent to British instituted schools. This was because these were the main pathway to getting jobs in the government and also in the new economy that was emerging under colonial rule. The British insisted that their own syllabi and textbooks be carefully followed. They were deeply suspicious of what local teachers and communities might want to say to children.

The move away from the local into new, relatively broader contexts only accelerated in the 20th century. In this period school education for all became a widely accepted social norm in countries around the world. Schools and universities have spread into countries with little industrialization and where the state is barely recognized beyond the boundaries of the capital city. There too the context is being defined anew and now includes much more than just the family, community and neighbourhood.

Contextual learning pushes back

Over the last few decades, there has been a renewed interest in the contexts of learning. This has several sources. There are differences in what each of them means and wants.

To begin with, the anti-colonial struggle, with people like Gandhi, was staunchly opposed to British education. The British appeared to be preaching a knowledge that was universal, true everywhere and beneficial to everyone. Indian critics said that this was just not true. The British were teaching what appeared to be correct from their point of view. They were trying to present it as universally true.

Sometimes even the British themselves did not believe what they were teaching. For instance, they taught in India how we were too immature to be choosing our rulers. Meanwhile back home by the end of the 19th century they were saying just the opposite, viz., that all men (not women till the 1920s) should be voting to decide their rulers.

In short, the freedom struggle demanded that we Indians should decide what should be the content of our own education, and it should be designed according to our own perspective. For a while, this sentiment encouraged several Indians like Gandhi, Tagore and Aurobindo to think afresh about what our education should look like.

Gandhi, in particular, believed that Indian education should overcome the beliefs and practices of casteism. However, that

Headpiece of the preface of the book "Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Volume 1"

sentiment slowly quietened down after independence. Indian elites began following global cues. They began to model their own academics after Oxford, Moscow University and MIT.

A second source of emphasis on contexts has come from the rise of an awareness of the social context in psychology and particularly the psychology of learning. A couple of generations ago, psychology textbooks were written as if their knowledge was equally valid everywhere. According to these, humans had the same moral development everywhere, had the same kind of reasoning everywhere, and perceived objects and ideas the same way everywhere.

Then, there took place a revolution in the discipline of psychology. Now it is believed that almost everything depends upon the context. Moral development relates to the local culture and social structure. There are no universal moral stages which everyone follows. How people reason is similarly shaped by the challenges they experience as well as the theories and concepts they have around them to guide them in their thoughts. Even how physical objects are perceived and manipulated is influenced by history and social structure.

It has now become a truism in psychological perspectives on pedagogy that we must pay attention to the context of learning. Often this is indifferent to whether the aims of learning come from western or Indian or local culture. The emphasis is on connecting general theories to micro situations. For example, this may mean learning to connect a

theory of caste with how it works in the local community, inquiring into its experiences and the symbols used by it. Such a position recommends that we try to solve a particular real-life problem so as to give a contextual grounding to all knowledge, whether universal or not.

A third trend which has influenced how we see contexts is the rise of post-structuralism, post-modernism and de-colonialism as trends in social theory. At the heart of all their different versions is a scepticism about the confidence with which European knowledges claimed to be the final truth. Why accept the sociological model of caste, in the first place, this will ask. This has gone alongside social and political movements which have pressed for other versions of the truth to be accepted. For instance, Dalit and feminist movements have argued that their perspectives are more correct than the dominant ideas of social reality.

Castes have been usually studied and taught from the point of view of the West or of the dominant castes. Feminists further say that the women's perspective on caste was usually suppressed in what was taught in schools and universities.

There may be others who disagree with all of the above. They may insist that the Gita's interpretation of caste had been suppressed and should be paid attention to. Like the anti-colonial thinkers, many scholars today say that Western knowledge systems constitute just one particular way of seeing the world. We need to cultivate our own ways of seeing the world, they say.

However, this is not simple. The Dalit's way of seeing the world may be different from that of the dominant caste. Some castes may see eggs as something they cannot bear to touch or keep in their shops. However other castes may consider them quite innocuous and a cheap, though bland, source of nutrition.

Women do see the world somewhat differently from men and so on. A Dalit man may think nothing of walking home alone at night. Women have learned that this exposes them to the dangers of being attacked. Which context should we give priority to and why?

Many philosophers have believed that we can somehow logically uncover a final moral wisdom, which transcends all different contexts. They believe that we can have an objective moral compass, which will show us the right direction in all contexts. However, many contemporary philosophers believe that even our moral reasoning rests ultimately on intuitions. These come from experiences. They can vary from person to person.

We can reason about many things. However, the ultimate foundations of moral knowledge do not rest upon a single solid stone. This does not mean that we give up on reason or on finding common grounds. Instead, it means that we pay more attention to dialogue. We must try to better understand where we and the other are coming from.

The general or the contextual? Teaching about casteism

The context is thus seen in different ways by different points of views. We can talk about them, even if we do not always agree. One important question here is whether we can ever learn or say or understand something which is not from our context.

For instance, can a non-Dalit take a stand against casteism? Can we teach about casteism to a classroom with children from mixed backgrounds? Let us use this to illustrate the relations between contexts, broader moral truths and dialogue.

Many social scientists and philosophers now believe that we always speak from a particular social location. We always have a context within which we have been formed and which has shaped our understanding, emotions and actions. We are never context-free, we never see things with God's eye, which can see everything, from every direction, at the same time.

However, we can still grow, our experiences are ever-changing. We can indeed learn to look at caste, gender, food, love and hatred from broader and different perspectives. We are not fixed. We are continually being recreated by our actions, our reflections and our environments. We never become context-free. However, our contexts or social locations may expand and change. This leads to the development of more general knowledges. They may, in certain situations, be more valuable than particular knowledges.

As social processes like the market, state and rationalization bring more and more people together to rub shoulders with each other, they can develop affections which reach out across social boundaries. It is indeed possible for people from dominant castes to see others as people like themselves and to empathize with them.

They then start feeling horror and shame when they begin to understand what their friends may have gone through. This can lead people from dominant castes to introspect and to go through a painful process of changing more of their views and emotions. This is easier when the social circumstances change and become more expansive and inclusive so as to support such interactions and conversations. It is more difficult when social circumstances keep framing the others in negative ways.

In other words, when we remould contexts to expand people's experiences and exposure, then they begin to change. They start moving to a more abstracted and inclusive moral position and renouncing casteism.

This is the challenge for the teachers who want to push against casteism. What experiences, theories, emotions can they place around children which will help them make the desired shift? Meanwhile, for the teachers themselves to find it easier to think and act in this direction, they need certain situations to be in place. The context becomes bigger, but never ceases to matter.

The context matters in the opposite direction too, taking up a smaller and local form. As many anthropologists and sociologists have noted, there is no single homogeneous caste system in India or the world. We cannot teach about caste in a general way and expect it to change all children everywhere in India.

The status symbols used by dominant castes are different in Punjab when compared with the status symbols in Maharashtra. In Patiala the dominant caste may celebrate a particular style of tying the turban, boisterousness and eating chicken with gusto. In Pune the dominant caste may consider a certain kind of kurta and dhoti its marker and behave with primness, turning its nose up against any kind of non-vegetarianism.

Changing casteism in Patiala will call for seeing these symbols for what they are. It will also call for a new attitude of restraint and rebuilding the emotional schema of celebrations. In Pune changing casteism may call for accepting non-vegetarianism and no longer recoiling with nausea over it. The particular ways in which casteism works are different in different places. The teacher has to respond to those contexts. They cannot just simply think that a general talk against casteism will do the job. Instead, the particular ways in which status, occupation and power work in that particular place will have to be slowly un-clawed and peeled back.

Children and youth will need to be scaffolded to discover a new and better way of seeing food, power, work, marriage and friendship. Otherwise, they will repeat the general theories of caste. However, they will still remain enmired in the particular way in which it works in their region.

The context, thus, has many dimensions. It may be our immediate world. But we cannot always go by what the immediate world says. The immediate world may recommend that we just carry on with older practices. The immediate world may also have contradictions, with students being pulled in support of and against casteism at the same time.

For too long we have thought of education only in the false universal model, with one particular group's discourses masquerading as God's eye. Reacting against that, now we are also in danger of seeing the local as God, somehow nobler and truer than all the other gods in the universe.

Perhaps the way forward is to build more dialogues between different kinds of understanding. There is a place for the more general and there is a place for the more local, indeed for multiple locals. By trying to understand each other, we may find a better way for them to co-inhabit this world.

Amman Madan studied Anthropology at Panjab University, Chandigarh, and Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He works on the possibilities of an education for dialogue, fraternity and justice, and anchors a network of researchers and activists working toward that. His areas of research include how education helps in dealing with conflicts, how it transforms societies, and how it mediates social inequality. He has worked on the educational challenges posed by the existence of different civic cultures and political philosophies. He has been a research associate with Eklavya Foundation, and has taught at Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education and IIT Kanpur. Amman has been visiting faculty at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), JNU, and Central University of Tezpur. He is currently Professor of Sociology at Azim Premji University, Bhopal.

Email: amman.madan@apu.edu.in

Embracing multilingualism
A journey of love, language and learning

Haritha V.

For over 16 years, Amma Social Welfare Association (ASWA) has been working with underprivileged children and communities. We have been intervening in education, well-being programs, and social empowerment initiatives.

As a co-founder of ASWA and project leader of the School Education Wing, I have worked closely with children from diverse linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds. Through these we have tried to create spaces where they feel seen, heard and supported.

ASWA's full-time Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) and library interventions operate in Shadnagar and Ameerpet in Telangana. We support four government primary schools and run two Children's Learning Centers as a part of this process.

Our mission is simple. It is to nurture children's FLN and language competencies and emotional growth. We do this by fostering an inclusive learning environment. We honor the children's unique backgrounds. These children study in under-resourced governmental primary schools. Often they belong to underprivileged communities.

A significant part of this journey involves navigating the complexities of multilingualism. This is especially so, since 80% of our students come from non-Telugu-speaking families.

But the heart of our work lies in the stories of the children themselves. This involves seeing their resilience, curiosity, and capacity to learn in the face of language barriers as resources. In this article, I share some stories

Children writing in the classroom, by using their relationships

ASWA

highlighting how embracing a child's native language can unlock their potential and create a love for learning.

The challenge of multilingualism: a path to connection

Before I became a full-time teacher in 2018, I had volunteered with ASWA for over a decade. I was then conducting weekly sessions at Government Primary School, Bulkumpet, Hyderabad. My work relied on love and play to engage children. However, my full-time experience opened my eyes to the deeper complexities of children's learning, particularly those realted to multilingualism.

In the government primary schools we work with, children come from diverse backgrounds. Often, they come from states such as Bihar, Assam, Odisha and Karnataka. Sometimes they also come from marginal communities such as the Lambadis.

These children were often discouraged from using their native languages in class. This was leading to a sense of disconnection and disengagement from learning. Many students struggled to grasp Telugu, the medium of instruction.

However, when we incorporated their native dialects into the classroom, the results were immediate. The children felt seen and heard, and their learning improved.

I started encouraging children to use their home language freely in class. At first, I didn't know any language other than Telugu. I was unsure since I didn't understand their home languages. However, with the children's help, we created an environment where everyone felt safe to speak.

The change was immediately noticeable. The children's confidence grew. They became eager to learn. This lesson wasn't limited to other language-speaking children. Even among Telugu-speaking students, dialect differences created obstacles. The key was embracing each child's unique linguistic

An activity with children

ASWA

background as a strength rather than as a barrier.

Success stories: Bujjamma and Narasimha

Two children, Bujjamma and her brother Narasimha, had long been labelled by the teachers as 'unfit for learning'. This was simply because they struggled to grasp concepts in a language they didn't fully understand.

We started working with them in a way that valued their native tongue and personal experiences. Then they began to thrive. Earlier Narasimha was shy and withdrawn. When we started addressing his context, he excitedly began learning his name and numbers. Bujjamma, too, came out of her shell. She started sharing stories. She also began participating in class activities.

These children weren't unfit to learn. They needed an environment honouring their identities.

Understanding context: a key to unlocking potential

In every classroom, I heard stories that ranged from happy to sad. I remember Swathi, a young girl, telling me about her family's trip to the Medaram Jatara for selling rings. She shared, "Teacher, we had nowhere to sleep. And my mother rested by the chicken market, where it smelled terrible. We didn't have anything to eat." Another child, Arathi, said, "I didn't eat today because I couldn't go begging."

These are not just stories. These show the children's daily struggles. By understanding their lives, we can teach in a way that educates and supports them emotionally.

Over time, I realized that to teach a child truly, we must first understand their lives. What do they experience every day? Who do they turn to for help? By stepping into their world without judging them, we can help them reach their full potential.

We began to understand that we needed to follow certain methods to connect their context to learning. During this time, we came to know about Maxine Berntsen's balanced approach. This method is beneficial for connecting children's day-to-day experiences to their learning.

Beyond words: understanding emotional contexts

Teaching language isn't just about vocabulary. It's about understanding the emotional context behind the words. For many children, words like 'amma' (mother) or 'nanna' (father) carry emotional weight due to family circumstances.

Two students, Hari and Siva, don't have their fathers living with them. These men have left their mothers. Because of this, they don't like learning their father's name. Instead of 'nanna,' they prefer to learn words like 'mama' (uncle) or 'tata' (grandfather).

A moment of realization: Ashwini's story

One day, a little girl named Ashwini shared something that left a lasting impression on me. As we talked about a bird building its nest at the top of the roof, she quietly said, "My parents also leave us here to get food for us, just like this little bird's mother." Her words were a touching reminder of how much these children internalize their surroundings and experiences.

Inspired by her observation, we made birds the lesson theme that day. We discussed their habitats. We also drew their pictures and shared stories on birds. Ashwini's connection brought the entire class to life. That simple reflective moment shifted my teaching approach. It became clear that when children relate to the subject matter in their language and experience, learning becomes more meaningful and impactful. **- Lokeshwari, a teacher**

Teachers can only recognize this when they understand the children's backgrounds. So, we move on and teach them the words they feel comfortable with.

Rohit and Mohit, two brothers from Bihar, also left a lasting impression. After their biological mother passed away, they lived with their stepmother.

She treated Mohit poorly. She beat him and didn't feed him well. However, she maintained a good relationship with Rohit. Mohit always wants to learn his biological mother's name. Whereas Rohit learns his stepmother's name.

We acknowledged their emotional struggles. We also gave them the space to express themselves. By doing so, we helped them to learn based on their interests and connections. Empathy and patience are crucial to helping them engage with learning meaningfully.

Children's story book inauguration

In our classrooms, we emphasize the importance of empathy and inclusion. One day, a child named Akhil shared that he had eaten cat curry for breakfast. When the other children laughed, I turned the moment into a lesson on respecting cultural differences. These real-life experiences allow us to teach literacy and values like empathy and respect.

Critical thinking and addressing societal norms

At our Children's Learning Centres (CLCs), we often encounter questions from the children like, "Why don't girls continue their studies?" or "Why do parents enrol boys in private schools but see girls as burdens?"

These difficult and emotional questions come from their lived experiences. Our role as educators is to give them the space to ask, reflect and learn.

Multilingual classrooms also allow children from different cultures to ask questions and challenge societal norms. A young Muslim girl once asked, "Teacher, why do we pray to God if humans create everything? Why are you putting bindi, and why are we not putting anything on our faces? What would happen if we didn't follow the rules created by elders?" These are not just questions. They reflect deep-rooted societal challenges children face daily. When she asked these kinds of questions, I was shocked. I too started asking myself questions. "Why am I following these things?"

Acknowledging their questions and emotions, we help them grow academically, emotionally and socially. These moments are opportunities to foster critical thinking. These can be used to encourage children to explore the world around them with curiosity and courage.

Our library sessions also play a crucial role in this process. These help children to know and understand different contexts and cultures etc. We connect with the children's realities through stories and help them navigate their feelings.

One day, while reading aloud the book *Jamlo Walks*, children reflected on their own COVID-19 experiences. They shared how they went to different homes for food and were often ignored.

Parents' role

Parental involvement is another critical factor. This is particularly so in multilingual settings at CLC. Sandeep, a third grader whose mother spoke Marathi and father spoke another language, struggled with

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Telugu. Sandeep has made remarkable progress in the language by working closely with his family. He encourages them to speak Telugu at home. He also asks them to put on Telugu channels while he watches TV.

We also organize parents' meetings and sessions on parenting and educating girls. In one case, a 15-year-old girl Nandini's marriage was fixed when she was only three years old. However, her parents are in a dilemma to continue her education or to go in for marriage.

Influenced by our sessions, the community has been taking the responsibility for stopping child marriages, even being willing to inform the police. Our consistent efforts have brought about a clear shift in parents' mindsets. One community leader, Dasarad, praised our work, stating, "If such organizations existed in our time, we wouldn't have stopped our children's education."

We also observe that many boys' behaviour is influenced by their fathers. These men often drink and use abusive language. They also engage in domestic violence. To address this, we have held meetings with the fathers. In these we share the real-life situations their children face.

We emphasize that children observe and imitate their parents' behaviour. We gently encourage the fathers to be more mindful of their actions. The response has been positive. Many fathers have begun adopting healthier

ASWA

Story writing

communication and behaviour patterns at home.

Challenges

As a teacher, I have faced challenges like language barriers when working with multilingual children. Understanding their multicultural backgrounds and managing diverse learning needs has taken time and effort.

Around 10% of the children in our classrooms are still hesitant to open up. Many of them often migrate or take long leaves for family reasons.

Unfortunately, many schools also don't prioritize getting to know the children on a deeper level. This has also been a challenge.

Moving forward

These challenges have become learning opportunities for me. My success in sparking eagerness to learn comes from providing safe spaces where children can freely express themselves and connect lessons to their daily lives. I focus on understanding their emotional states and addressing the root causes of uncertain behaviours.

I enjoy interacting with children from different backgrounds. I feel deeply satisfied with every improvement I see in them.

The changes may seem small. However, they are influential in helping children connect to learning. Ultimately this has the potential to help them grow into kind and thoughtful individuals.

Haritha V. is a co-founder of Amma Social Welfare Association (ASWA). She is also the project leader of the School Education Wing.

Website: aswa4u.org

Email: haritha@aswa4u.org

Connect on:

बच्चों के लिखना–पढ़ना सीखने व अभिव्यक्ति के कौशलों के विकास में उनके परिवेश और चित्रकला की उपयोगिता

बृजेश वर्मा

यह पर्चा भोपाल में स्थित ग़ैर सरकारी संस्था 'मुस्कान' द्वारा संचालित स्कूल 'जीवन शिक्षा पहल' और बस्ती के केन्द्रों में पढ़ने वाले बच्चों के साथ भाषा–शिक्षण के अनुभवों पर आधारित है। ये स्कूल और शिक्षण केन्द्र उन बच्चों के लिए संचालित किए जा रहे हैं, जो विभिन्न सामाजिक व राजनैतिक कारणों से शिक्षा से वंचित हैं। इनमें मुख्य तौर पर भोपाल शहर की विभिन्न बस्तियों में रहने वाले आदिवासी, विमुक्त, दलित और अतिवंचित समुदायों के बच्चे आते हैं। इन बच्चों के परिवार पिछले तीन–चार दशकों से भोपाल शहर की कच्ची बस्तियों में रह रहे हैं। इन बस्तियों में मूलभूत सुविधाओं, जैसे— पानी, बिजली, शौचालय का भी अभाव है। घर कच्चे-पक्के हैं, कहीं पट्टे हैं तो कहीं नहीं। बच्चों के माता-पिता दिहाड़ी मज़दूर हैं, कबाड़ बीनते हैं या घर से कचरा उठाने वाली नगर निगम की गाड़ियों में काम करते हैं। दिहाड़ी मज़दूरी के लिए पीठे (लेबर पॉइन्ट) पर जाकर काम की तलाश करना उनकी रोज़ सुबह की दिनचर्या का हिस्सा है। उन्हें कभी काम मिलता है, तो कभी नहीं मिलता।

समुदाय में 8-10 साल की उम्र के बच्चों का अधिकांश समय ख़ुद कमाई के जुगाड़ में, अपनी बसाहटों के आस-पास खेलते हुए या घर के कामों, जैसे— पानी भरने, चूल्हे के लिए लकड़ी ढूँढने, इत्यादि में जाता है। आधे से ज़्यादा बच्चे कबाड़ बीनते हैं। अधिकांश बच्चे स्कूल जाने के पहले या स्कूल से लौटने के बाद काम करने जाते हैं। बच्चे परिवार की आमदनी में महत्त्वपूर्ण भूमिका निभाते हैं। हमारे स्कूल या बस्ती के शिक्षण केन्द्रों में आने वाले बच्चे अपने समुदाय की पहली पीढ़ी हैं, जो सीखने–सिखाने की प्रक्रिया में शामिल हो रही है। हर बच्चा अपने जीवन के विभिन्न वास्तविक अनुभवों, ठोस ज्ञान और समृद्ध मौखिक भाषा के साथ स्कूल आता है। किन्तु आमतौर पर मुख्यधारा के स्कूलों में बच्चे के सीखने की प्रक्रिया में उसके इन अनुभवों, उसके परिवेश और उसके ज्ञान को कोई स्थान नहीं दिया जाता है। अभी तक उसने जो कुछ भी सीखा होता है और जिन तरीक़ों से सीखा होता है, वह सब कुछ उसे कक्षा के बाहर छोड़कर आना होता है। घरों में बच्चे अपने अनुभवों से बिना किसी भय व दबाव के सीख रहे होते हैं, जबकि स्कूल में बच्चों को एक अलग प्रक्रिया से सिखाने का काम शुरू किया जाता है।

परम्परागत स्कूलों की बात करें तो उनमें भाषा–शिक्षण की प्रक्रिया में बच्चों को सबसे पहले वर्णमाला (क, ख, ग, घ) सिखाई जाती है। वर्णों से परिचय के बाद बिना मात्रा वाले शब्द, मात्रा वाले शब्द और फिर आखिर में वाक्य सिखाए जाते हैं। भाषा सीखने की यह प्रक्रिया बच्चों को बिना समझे और बिना अर्थ–निर्माण के सीखने के लिए बाध्य करती है। यह प्रक्रिया अत्यन्त ही नीरस और बोझिल होती है। इसके विपरीत, अगर शुरुआत से ही भाषा-शिक्षण की प्रक्रिया अर्थपूर्ण होती है और उसमें बच्चों की सक्रिय भागीदारी होती है, तो बच्चों को स्कूल के औपचारिक माहौल में सीखने के लिए प्रोत्साहन मिलता है।

यदि हम हाशियाकृत और वंचित समुदाय के बच्चों के सन्दर्भ में बात करें, तो आमतौर पर उनके घरों में लिखने-पढ़ने के माहौल और संसाधनों का अभाव होता है। इस वजह से स्कूल आने के पहले लिखित भाषा से बच्चे उतने रूबरू नहीं हो पाते। ऐसी स्थिति में वर्ण से वाक्य तक ले जाने वाले परम्परागत तरीक़े से भाषा लिखना–पढ़ना सीखने में बच्चों को बहुत कठिनाई होती है।

भाषा शिक्षण के तहत बच्चों के अभिव्यक्ति के कौशलों पर काम करना भी बहुत ज़रूरी होता है। सिल्विया अश्टोन वार्नर अपनी किताब *'अध्यापक'* में भाषा–शिक्षण के प्रारम्भिक स्तर पर बच्चों की स्व-अभिव्यक्ति की ज़रूरत की बहुत मज़बूती से वकालत करती हैं। वे कहती हैं कि सीखना वास्तविक अनुभवों पर आधारित होना चाहिए, सीखने की प्रक्रिया की शुरुआत बच्चे के ख़ुद के अनुभवों और उसकी ख़ुद की दुनिया से होनी चाहिए। हम अपनी शिक्षण–प्रक्रिया में इसी विचार को आधार बनाते हैं और बच्चों के अनुभवों को कक्षा में स्थान देते हैं, जिससे सीखने की प्रक्रिया अत्यन्त ही दिलचस्प बन जाती है। ऐसी प्रक्रियाओं में बच्चे बहुत ही सहज तरीक़े से और सक्रियता से भागीदारी करते हुए सीखते हैं।

लिखना और पढ़ना सीखने की प्रक्रिया और उसका विश्लेषण

हमारी भाषा–शिक्षण की कक्षाओं में हम वर्ण पहचान के लिए शब्द/वाक्य की पहचान से वर्ण की ओर जाते हैं। इस प्रक्रिया में बच्चों के अनुभवों और उनके परिवेश के शब्दों का इस्तेमाल किया जाता है। शिक्षण के दौरान कक्षाकक्ष में जिन शब्दों का प्रयोग किया जाता है, वे या तो बच्चों की दिनचर्या पर आधारित चर्चाओं से निकल कर आते हैं या किसी कहानी या कविता के कुछ चुनिन्दा शब्द होते हैं। कहानी सुनाते समय हम बच्चों की भाषा में कहानी सुनाते हैं ताकि वे कहानी और उसके पात्रों से जुड़ाव महसूस कर सकें। शब्दों की पहचान के बाद हम उन्हीं शब्दों को तोड़कर बच्चों को वर्ण की पहचान कराते हैं और फिर पढ़ने और लिखने की दिशा में आगे बढ़ते हैं। इस सम्पूर्ण प्रक्रिया में बच्चों द्वारा चित्र बनाना और उसकी व्याख्या करना अहम होता है।

हम अपनी शिक्षण पद्धति में बच्चों के जीवन और उनके परिवेश से जुड़े हुए शब्दों का इस्तेमाल कैसे करते हैं, इसे नीचे दिए गए उदाहरण की मदद से समझा जा सकता है—

बाज़ार के अनुभवों पर केन्द्रित चर्चा

आमतौर पर सभी बच्चे घर के बड़ों या भाई-बहनों के साथ बाज़ार जाते ही हैं, वहाँ उन्हें चीज़े देखने, खरीदने से जुड़े अनुभव होते हैं। हमने बाज़ार पर बच्चों के साथ एक अनौपचारिक चर्चा की। बाज़ार पर चर्चा शुरू करने के पहले हमने बच्चों को बाज़ार के अनुभव पर आधारित कहानी *"सोहेल की पीली चड्डी"* सुनाई। ये कहानी एक बच्चे की एक दिन की दिनचर्या (साप्ताहिक बाज़ार में पानी बेचने) के बारे में थी। बच्चों को कहानी सुनकर बहुत मज़ा आया। फिर हमने बाज़ार से जुड़े हुए कुछ सवालों से अपनी चर्चा शुरू की। यह चर्चा कुछ इस प्रकार थी—

मुस्कान

बाज़ार में देखी गई चीज़ों के चित्र

सवाल : क्या आप कभी बाज़ार गए हैं? अगर हाँ, तो आप किसके साथ बाज़ार गए हैं?

बच्चों के जवाब—

- बच्चों ने कहा कि हाँ वे बाज़ार जाते हैं।
- अधिकांश बच्चों ने बताया कि वे अपनी मम्मी के साथ जाते हैं।
- कुछ बड़े बच्चे बोले कि वे अपने दोस्तों के साथ बाज़ार जाते हैं, तो कुछ बोले कि वे अकेले ही बाज़ार चले जाते हैं।

सवाल : आप बाज़ार क्यों गए थे?

बच्चों के जवाब—

- एक बच्चे ने कहा कि उसे बाज़ार में घूमना और दुकानों पर कपड़े देखना बहुत अच्छा लगता है। कुछ लेना नहीं होता है, तो भी वह यूँ ही घूमने के लिए बाज़ार चला जाता है।
- एक दूसरे बच्चे ने कहा कि उसे बाज़ार में अलग-अलग चीज़ों की खुशबू सूँघना अच्छा लगता है। उसे जलेबी, समोसे की दुकानों से आने वाली खुशबू बहुत अच्छी लगती है और वह उन्हें सूँघने के लिए बाज़ार जाता है।
- एक बच्ची ने बताया कि वह अपनी दोस्त के साथ फुल्की खाने के लिए बाज़ार जाती है।

- एक अन्य लड़की ने कहा कि जब उसे कपड़े खरीदने होते हैं, तो मम्मी के साथ कपड़े खरीदने बाज़ार जाती है।
- कुछ बच्चों ने कहा कि वे कभी-कभी दोस्तों के साथ बाज़ार घूमने चले जाते हैं।
- एक बच्ची बोली कि वह बाज़ार से चूड़ी, बिन्दी खरीदकर लाती है।

सवाल : आपने बाज़ार में कौन–कौन सी चीज़ों की दुकानें देखीं?

बच्चों के जवाब—

"कपड़ों की दुकान, जलेबी का ठेला, समोसे की दुकान, चप्पल, चिकन, मटन, मछली, सब्जी की दुकान, फलों की दुकान"

"चूड़ी, बिन्दी, झुमके की दुकान"

"प्लास्टिक की कुर्सी, टब, डलिया, मग, वगैरह की दुकान"

"केले, अनार, पपीते, सन्तरे भी बाज़ार में मिलते हैं।"

सवाल : आपने बाज़ार से क्या खरीदा था? उसके बारे में बताइए।

बच्चों के जवाब—

"मम्मी मुझे जलेबी, समोसे खरीद के देती है, मैं घर आकर अपने भाई-बहनों के साथ खाती हूँ।"

"मेरी मम्मी मुझे चप्पल दिलाने के लिए लेकर गई थी, दुकान पर पहनकर देख लेते हैं, पसन्द की और बराबर नाप की भी मिल जाती है।"

"मैंने चूड़ी खरीदी थी।"

"मैंने कपड़े खरीदे थे।"

सवाल: आप बाज़ार से और क्या-क्या लाते हैं?

बच्चों ने बताया कि जब सारा बाज़ार उठ जाता है, तब रात में वे सब्जी बीनने के लिए बाज़ार जाते हैं। दुकानदार अपनी बची–खुची सब्जियाँ फेंक देते हैं या छोड़कर चले जाते हैं और वे उन सब्जियों को बीनकर ले आते हैं। उन्होंने बताया कि टमाटर, भटे, लौकी, गोभी इत्यादि सब्जियाँ मिल जाती हैं। कई बार तो कुछ सिक्के या नोट भी मिल जाते हैं। आगे उन्होंने यह भी बताया कि सब्जी बीनकर लौटते–लौटते उन्हें रात के दो–तीन बज जाते हैं।

इस पूरी प्रक्रिया में बच्चों के पास मौखिक अभिव्यक्ति के और एक दूसरे को सुनने के पर्याप्त मौके थे। चर्चा के बाद बच्चों के पास बाज़ार का एक व्यापक सन्दर्भ था, जो उनके अनुभवों पर आधारित था। इसके आधार पर सीखने–सिखाने की आगे की प्रक्रिया आसान और अर्थपूर्ण रही। इसके बाद बच्चों ने अपने अनुभवों को काग़ज़ पर लिखा और उन पर आधारित चित्र बनाए।

बाज़ार को दर्शाते हुए चित्र

काग़ज़ पर बाज़ार का चित्रण

बच्चों ने बाज़ार में क्या-क्या देखा, इसे उन्होंने काग़ज़ पर चित्रों के माध्यम से दर्शाया। हालाँकि बच्चे लिखना नहीं जानते थे, लेकिन उन्होंने बाज़ार के दृश्य को चित्र के द्वारा दिखाया। बच्चे जिन दुकानों पर गए थे, जो सामान उन्होंने खरीदा था, उन्होंने उन दुकानों और सामानों के चित्र बनाए। बच्चों ने सभी को बताया कि उन्होंने किन चीज़ों के चित्र बनाए थे। शिक्षक ने बच्चों के चित्रों पर नाम लिख दिए।

इस अभ्यास के दौरान कुछ बच्चों ने इन चित्रों में खुद के अनुभवों या किसी देखी या सुनी घटना को चित्रों के माध्यम से अभिव्यक्त किया। कभी–कभी तो बच्चों के चित्रण में एक क्रमबद्धता दिखी, जिसमें एक पूरी कहानी दिख रही थी। शिक्षकों ने उस कहानी या घटना को चित्र के बगल में लिख दिया। एक बच्चे ने बाज़ार में घूम–घूमकर माँगने के अपने अनुभव को चित्रित किया, तो एक ने बाज़ार में बारिश के अनुभव को दर्शाया।

बच्चों ने अपनी चित्रांकित कहानी को समूह में बोलकर सुनाया। इस गतिविधि में बच्चों को अपनी भाषा में बोलने की स्वतंत्रता थी। इस प्रकार बच्चों की लिखित भाषा से पहचान की शुरुआत हुई। बच्चे यह समझ पाए कि वे जो कुछ भी बोलते हैं, उसे लिखा भी जा सकता है।

बाज़ार से जुड़े शब्दों को बोलने और लिखने की अभिव्यक्ति

अगले क्रम में बच्चों को बाज़ार से जुड़े शब्द बोलने थे, जिन्हें शिक्षक (मैंने) ने ब्लैक बोर्ड पर लिखा। इस अभ्यास के बाद बच्चों के पास बाज़ार से जुड़े बहुत सारे शब्द और चीज़ों के नाम हो गए। हालाँकि ये शब्द बच्चों को पहले से ही पता थे, लेकिन उपरोक्त चर्चा ने उन्हें उनके मस्तिष्क में ताज़ा कर दिया। कक्षा में पारधी, नट और कंजर समुदाय के बच्चे साथ पढ़ रहे थे, जिनकी भाषा भी अलग–अलग थी। ऐसे में बच्चे अपनी और दूसरे की भाषा के भी कुछ शब्द सीख और बोल रहे थे। जब बच्चों की कही बातों को कक्षा में जगह मिल रही थी, तो वे बड़े ही उत्साह से चर्चा में भाग ले रहे थे। इन शब्दों से बच्चों का जुड़ाव और गहरा करने के लिए उन्हें हरेक शब्द को लिख कर उनके चित्र बनाने का अभ्यास कराया गया। बच्चों ने इन शब्दों को ब्लैकबोर्ड से देखकर अपनी कॉपी में लिखा और हरेक शब्द के सामने उसका चित्र भी चित्र बनाया।

बच्चों के द्वारा बनाया गया किसी वस्तु का चित्र उनके मस्तिष्क में उस वस्तु की छवि का चित्रण होता है। इस गतिविधि में वे अपनी खुद की कल्पनाशीलता और अनुभव के आधार पर बोले गए शब्द का चित्रण कर रहे थे। कई बार ऐसा भी हुआ कि बच्चों के बनाए चित्र किसी वस्तु की वास्तविक छवि से बहुत अलग थे, किन्तु बच्चे इन चित्रों और वस्तुओं के नामों के बीच सहसम्बन्ध बना पा रहे थे। जैसे— जब बच्चे बाज़ार का चित्रण कर रहे थे, तो मालिनी ने गोभी के लिए दिल के आकार का चित्र बनाया। उसका यह चित्र भले ही गोभी जैसा नहीं लग रहा था, किन्तु उसके लिए वो गोभी ही था और पढ़ते समय वह उस चित्र को हर बार गोभी ही पढ़ रही थी। इस प्रकार, भले ही बच्चों को शब्द पढ़ना नहीं आता था, लेकिन वे चित्र को ही पढ़ रहे थे और पढ़ते वक़्त उनकी उँगली चित्र पर होती थी, न कि उस चित्र के नाम पर।

अधिकतर बच्चों को चित्र को पहचानने में कोई भ्रम नहीं हो रहा था, वे हर बार चित्र का सही नाम पढ़ रहे थे। लेकिन वस्तुओं के एक से ज़्यादा नाम होने के कारण या अलग–अलग भाषाओं में उनके अलग नाम होने के कारण कुछ बच्चे पढ़ने में गड़बड़ी भी कर रहे थे। जैसे—आम के चित्र के बगल में आम लिखा होने के बावजूद सोनपाल नाम का एक बच्चा उसको मेंगो पढ़ रहा था, लेकिन कुछ अभ्यास के बाद वह उसे सही पढ़ने लगा। इस स्थिति में बच्चा 'आम' शब्द को नहीं, बल्कि उसके चित्र को पढ़ रहा था, लेकिन धीरे-धीरे वह शब्द को भी पढ़ना सीख गया। खास बात यह है कि बच्चे किसी सुगमकर्ता की अनुपस्थिति में भी अपनी कॉपी से देखकर चित्र की मदद से इन शब्दों को पढ़ पा रहा था। यह गतिविधि बच्चों को न केवल लिखित भाषा से रूबरू कराती है, बल्कि उन्हें लिखित भाषा को पढ़ने का आत्मविश्वास भी देती है। धीरे धीरे, चित्र की मदद से वे नए शब्दों को पढ़ना

और नए सन्दर्भों को समझना सीख जाते हैं। इस प्रकार उन्हें पढ़ना सीखने के लिए बहुत ज्यादा इन्तजार नहीं करना पड़ता।

बच्चे इन शब्दों को चित्रों की मदद से अपने आप से भी पढ़ पा रहे थे। इन शब्दों को बार–बार पढ़ने के अभ्यास और अलग–अलग गतिविधियों की मदद से धीरे–धीरे बच्चे बिना चित्रों के भी इन शब्दों को पहचान और पढ़ पा रहे थे। लेकिन शब्दों को पढ़ने के इस क्रम में वे शब्दों को पूरी एक आकृति के रूप में पढ़ रहे थे और शब्दों के अन्दर समाहित अलग–अलग ध्वनियों को नहीं पहचान पा रहे थे। हालाँकि इस प्रक्रिया में बच्चे कुछ शब्दों और वाक्यों को पकड़ने लगे और साइट वर्ड (ऐसे शब्द जो उनके लिखने और पढ़ने में बार-बार आ रहे थे) की तरह पहचानने लगे।

जब बच्चे किसी शब्द को साइट वर्ड की तरह पहचानने लगे, तो इन शब्दों को तोड़कर पढ़ाने का अभ्यास कक्षा में किया गया। किसी शब्द में शामिल अलग-अलग आवाज़ों की ओर बच्चों का ध्यान आकृष्ट किया गया। जैसे कि चिमनी शब्द को पढ़ते समय चि...म...नी... की अलग-अलग आवाज़ पर ज़ोर देते हुए पढ़ा गया। हरेक वर्ण की ध्वनि को बोलते समय सम्बन्धित ध्वनि पर उँगली रखकर पढ़ने से बच्चे अलग-अलग वर्ण की ध्वनि और उसकी आकृति को पहचानने लगे। इस गतिविधि से बच्चे किसी शब्द में शामिल वर्णों की अलग-अलग ध्वनियों की उपस्थिति को जानने व पहचानने लगे। इसी क्रम में आगे इन शब्दों को तोड़कर लिखने और पढ़ने का अभ्यास कराया गया। इससे बच्चों को वर्ण को पहचानने में मदद मिली। इस प्रकार शुरुआती कक्षाओं के बच्चों के साथ भाषा–शिक्षण की प्रक्रिया में बच्चों की अभिव्यक्ति बढ़ाने और उन्हें लिखना–पढ़ना सिखाने की एक शिक्षण पद्धति के रूप में चित्रकला काफ़ी उपयोगी साबित हुई।

शब्दों के साथ काम करने के दौरान बच्चे कक्षा में उपस्थित अलग-अलग भाषा–भाषी बच्चों से उनकी भाषा के शब्दों को भी

मुस्कान
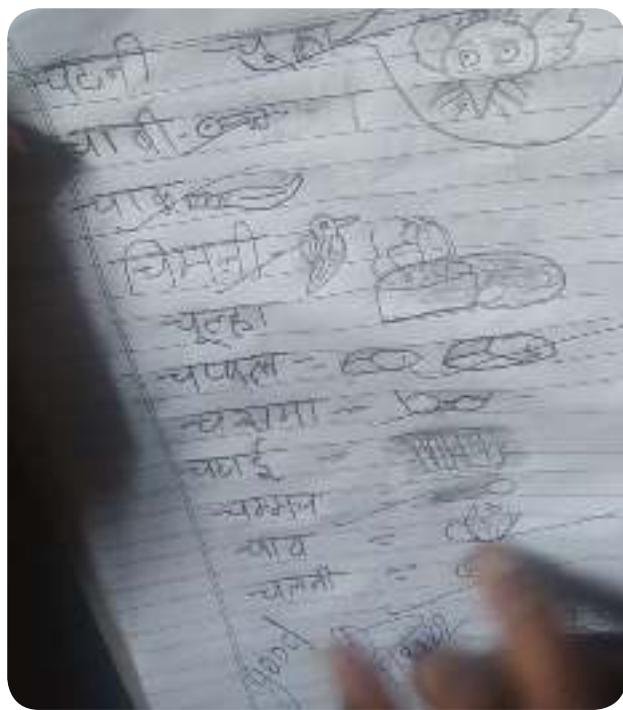
बाज़ार में मिलने वाली चीज़ों के नाम और उनके चित्र

सीख जाते हैं। जहाँ पारधी बच्चा 'चिड़िया' को 'चिमनी' लिखता है, वहीं गोंड बच्चा इसे 'पिट्टे' बोलता है। लेकिन बोलचाल में दोनों ही इन शब्दों को इस्तेमाल करने लगते हैं और इन्हें सीख जाते हैं। कई बार पारधी बच्चे चिड़िया को कभी चिमनी तो कभी चिड़िया पढ़ते हैं क्योंकि वो चित्र को पढ़ रहे होते हैं, न कि लिखित शब्द को।

ऊपर दी गई प्रक्रियाओं ने बच्चों को एक दूसरे को सुनने और जानने के अवसर प्रदान किए। इससे बच्चों का ख़ुद पर भरोसा बढ़ता गया और उनमें ख़ुद के प्रति गर्व का भाव विकसित हुआ। स्कूल से बाहर की दुनिया के ये अनुभव कक्षाकक्ष में सीखने का समृद्ध और सकारात्मक वातावरण बनाने में मददगार साबित हुए। इससे बच्चों के सोचने और कल्पनाशीलता का दायरा व्यापक होता गया।

चित्रों के माध्यम से स्वतंत्र अभिव्यक्ति

हम देखते है कि आमतौर पर स्कूलों में बच्चों की चित्रकला की शैली काफ़ी हद एक जैसी होती है। बच्चे या तो झण्डा बनाते हैं या फिर पहाड़ या पेड़। स्कूलों में चित्रकला सीमित उद्देश्य के एक कालखण्ड के रूप में होती है, जिसका भाषा–शिक्षण से कोई सरोकार नहीं होता। लेखन में भी गाइड से लिखना या पाठ के अन्दर या अन्त में दिए गए प्रश्नों के उत्तर देने का अभ्यास ही शामिल होता है। उसमें भी बच्चों के ख़ुद के अनुभवों और विचारों का कोई स्थान नहीं होता, जिससे बच्चों की रचनात्मकता बहुत सीमित हो जाती है।

किसी चीज़ को देखने और अभिव्यक्त करने का हरेक बच्चे का अपना एक विशिष्ट नज़रिया और तरीक़ा होता है। कुछ बच्चे चित्रों को अभिव्यक्ति का माध्यम बनाते हैं, तो कुछ शब्दों को। हमारे सेंटर पर बच्चे चित्र अथवा शब्दों के द्वारा अपने ख़ुद के अनुभवों को पन्नों पर व्यक्त करते हैं। एक ही विषय या शब्द को हर बच्चा अपने अनूठे तरीके से चित्रांकित करता है और उसके उस चित्र की कक्षा में स्वीकार्यता होती है और पर्याप्त स्थान मिलता है।

बच्चों के लेखन को किताब का रूप देना

स्कूल में हम सहज लेखन के माध्यम से बच्चों के लिखित अभिव्यक्ति कौशल को बढ़ाने का प्रयास करते हैं। हमारा प्रयास यह होता है कि बच्चों की लिखी कहानियों को किताब के रूप में विकसित कर उन्हें पढ़ने के लिए इन कहानियों की किताबों को उपलब्ध कराया जाए। इन कहानियों में बच्चे के परिवेश और जीवन की छवि होती है। ऐसी किताबें बच्चों की किताबों से दोस्ती कराने और उन्हें कुशल पाठक बनाने में मददगार होती हैं। जो कहानियाँ बच्चों के सन्दर्भ से कटी हुई होती हैं, जिन किताबों में उनकी सामाजिक और सांस्कृतिक पहचान की कोई जगह न हो, वे उन्हें कैसे आकर्षित कर सकती हैं? किताबों में उनके अनुभवों की अनुपस्थिति बच्चों में पढ़ने के प्रति अरुचि पैदा करती है। नया स्वेटर, बारिश का एक दिन, पायल खो गई, द पारधी रूल्स; डिफरेंट वर्ल्ड, मावली, गोइंग टु स्कूल अलोन, पढ़ो लिखो श्रृंखला की लगभग 30 कहानियाँ, ऐसी कहानियाँ हैं जिन्हें बच्चों
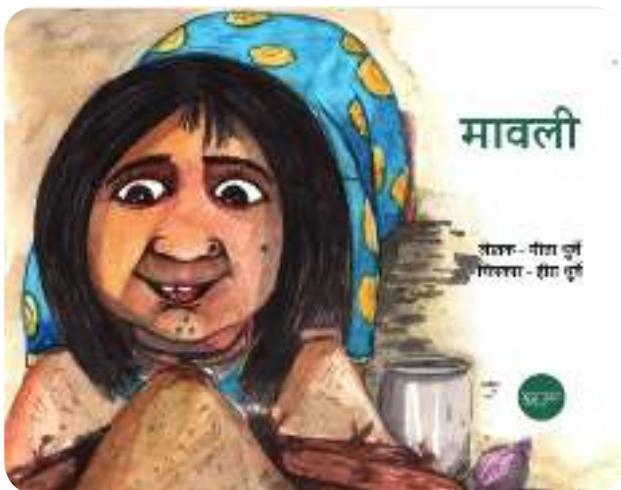
एक बच्ची द्वारा लिखी हुई कहानी की किताब

ने लिखा है और जो बच्चों के सन्दर्भ को दर्शाती हैं। इनमें बच्चों ने अपने समुदाय के संघर्ष, अपने सपने, अपने रीति–रिवाज़ इत्यादि पर बहुत ही खूबसूरत कहानियाँ लिखी है। अपने लेखन के माध्यम से वे अपने समुदाय के ऊपर होने वाले अत्याचार, शोषण, भेदभाव को बहुत ही गहराई से समाज के सामने पेश करते हैं।

बच्चों के द्वारा लिखी कहानियों को पाठ्य सामग्री के रूप में इस्तेमाल करने से बच्चे अपने दोस्तों के द्वारा लिखी हुई कहानियों को पढ़ने और ख़ुद नई कहानियाँ लिखने के लिए प्रयास करते हैं। चूँकि ये कहानियाँ उनके परिवेश की होती हैं व उनमें उनकी संस्कृति और जीवन की झलक होती है, इसलिए बच्चों में इन किताबों के प्रति बहुत लगाव दिखता है। वे बार-बार इन किताबों को पढ़ते हैं व अपने घर ले जाकर अपने माता-पिता को भी दिखाते हैं।

सिल्विया ऑस्टिन वार्नर ने अपनी किताब 'अध्यापक' में बच्चों को लिखना और पढ़ना सिखाने में बच्चों के शब्दों के प्रयोग और बच्चों द्वारा इन शब्दों के चित्रांकन की उपयोगिता और महत्त्व की जो बात कही है, हमारा अनुभव भी उसे सही साबित करता

है। शुरुआती वर्षों में इस तरह की अभिव्यक्ति के लिए बच्चों में चित्रकला की विशेष दक्षता होने की ज़रूरत नहीं होती है। बच्चों के मन में किसी चीज़ की जो छवि होती है, वे उन्हीं छवियों को कागज पर उकेरते हैं और उनसे अपना एक अर्थपूर्ण जुड़ाव बनाते हैं। अर्थ-निर्माण सीखने की प्रक्रिया का एक महत्त्वपूर्ण पहलू है। बच्चों को चित्रकला के माध्यम से लिखित दुनिया से रूबरू करवाना और उनमें यह समझ विकसित करना कि बोली गई बातों को लिखा भी जा सकता है, भाषा लिखना और पढ़ना सीखने की प्रक्रिया का एक अहम हिस्सा होता है। यह प्रक्रिया बच्चों में समझ के साथ उद्देश्यपूर्ण लेखन और पढ़ने की आदत विकसित करने में सहायक रहती है।

जब किसी जगह पर बच्चों की अभिव्यक्ति, उनकी पहचान को सम्मान मिल रहा होता है और उनकी सराहना होती है, तो वे उस जगह से अपना विशेष जुड़ाव महसूस करते हैं और वे उस जगह पर बार-बार आना चाहते हैं। जब बच्चों को लगता है कि ये उनकी अपनी जगह है, वे यहाँ आकर कुछ न कुछ सीख रहे हैं, तो वे उस जगह पर आते हैं और सीखने की प्रक्रिया में ख़ुशी से शामिल होते हैं। हमारे शिक्षण केन्द्रों पर बच्चे काफ़ी नियमित तौर पर आते हैं और सीखने की प्रक्रिया में सक्रियता से शामिल रहते हैं। बच्चों में लिखने और पढ़ने के प्रति दिलचस्पी विकसित होने में हमारे द्वारा अपनाई गई शिक्षण पद्धति की एक अहम भूमिका है।

बृजेश वर्मा वर्तमान में भोपाल में स्थित ग़ैर सरकारी संस्था मुस्कान द्वारा संचालित स्कूल *'जीवन शिक्षा पहल'* में शिक्षक के रूप में कार्यरत हैं। वे हाशिए के समुदायों, जिनमें मुख्यतः दलित, आदिवासी, विमुक्त और मुस्लिम समुदायों के बच्चे शामिल हैं, के साथ सीखने–सिखाने की प्रक्रिया से जुड़े हैं। उन्हें बच्चों को कहानियाँ सुनाना और उनके साथ खेलना पसन्द है। उनसे brijeshverma3@gmail.com पर सम्पर्क किया जा सकता है।

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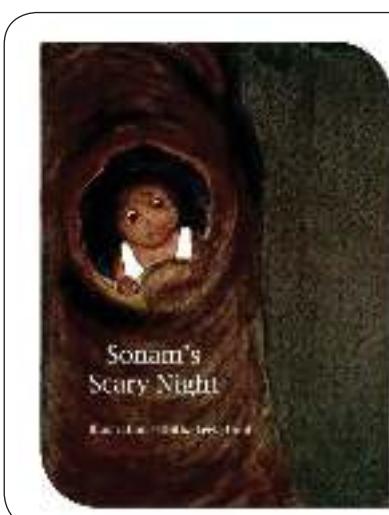
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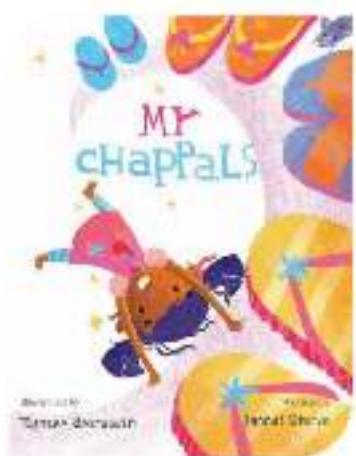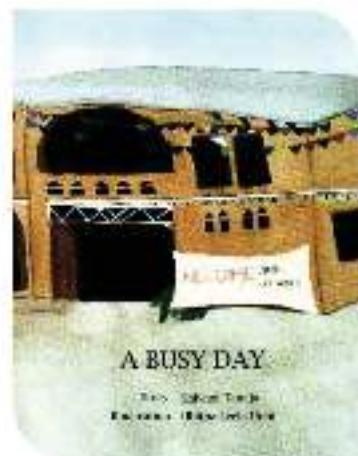
Context in social science education

Reflections on contextualization in civics and critical citizenship

Anjali Noronha

Introduction

Education is a social enterprise. It is deeply rooted in social reality. Even though the biological constitution of a human being is the same across the world, social reality differs hugely.

Human beings across the world have different clothes and eating habits. They also have different religious beliefs, forms of government and even different moralities.

Yet humans try to find some commonality, and some pattern among all this variety. We have tried to formulate concepts to describe and understand this commonality, through generalizations.

However, these generalizations and concepts are not always available to children at a young age. Concretization and contextualization are two pedagogical strategies through which these can be made available.

I will be sharing my reflections on our experiences of the above in a social science education and primary education program. We had developed this at Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh. This was a program that worked closely with and for the government school system. It also helped other states develop pedagogic material in their own contexts. My experiences, which form the basis of these reflections, span nearly 40 years.

The background of the Social Science Program

Eklavya's Social Science Program was developed between 1982 and 1995. It was being run in eight government middle schools of Madhya Pradesh's Hoshangabad, Bhopal and Dewas districts. The program was run in partnership with, and with the permission of, the Government of Madhya Pradesh.

Social Science, at that time, was considered the most boring subject of middle school. We began with the question of making the subject more meaningful for children. This took us to the basic questions of why social sciences, why history, why geography, why civics?

We debated at length on the integration of the social sciences. Some of us saw it as one comprehensive subject. However, we finally decided to retain the structure of history, geography and civics for various reasons.

History and geography were structured around the basic concepts of time and space respectively. The basic question that we tried to address through civics was this – "What kind of education would make a critical and constructive citizen?"

Civics is a subject that has traditionally drawn from many social science disciplines like political science, sociology and economics. It was redesigned as critical citizenship. The name remained civics though. A change in name may not have been agreed upon by the government. The experimentation had been allowed under the existing curricular framework.

This brought us to many of the following elements of content and pedagogy. A basic knowledge and critical understanding of

the economy and how it works is important. This gives an idea of the issues that need to be addressed by policy, so as to assess the functioning of a democratic government.

A basic knowledge and critical understanding of political institutions and processes is also crucial. A similar grounding in social structure, and its interplays with economic and political life, was also seen as foundational.

It was also felt that students need insights into laws and policies. The critical role of an active citizenry in bringing to light anomalies in their implementation and in developing alternatives was also seen as fundamental.

The need for contextualization and concretization

There are some commonalities, patterns and concepts that form a major part of the content of civics at the middle school level. Their very nature is abstract. Concretization and contextualization are two ways in which abstractions can be made more understandable.

We reviewed the middle school textbooks. This process showed that the presentation of concepts in the textbooks of classes 6, 7 and 8 was dense. It did not explain any of the concepts or sub-concepts in a meaningful manner.

According to research in children's cognitive development undertaken by Jean Piaget, children of upper primary and middle school are at the concrete operational stage of thinking. According to this formulation, this is true of children at the high school level as well. This means that they are just beginning to make logical sense of experiential reality. Hence, it is not easy for them to understand abstract concepts unless these are related to their manifestations in the reality around them.

In pursuance of the question - how would children of class 6, 7 and 8 understand these concepts and ideas, we read and discussed

them with children of class 6. The idea of a state and its capital were discussed, as were panchayats.

Children were used to memorizing names of capitals. Yet they were clueless about what really is a capital city. That it is the city which houses the headquarters of government, where decisions for the whole State are made, went totally above their heads.

They knew a few facts about some capital cities like Bhopal and Delhi, such as having big markets or a large lake. They tended to ascribe these attributes to all capitals. They seemed to be clinging on to some concrete information and putting it into the definition of a capital!

It was clear from the above experiences, that it is important for children of middle school age to have specific and concrete manifestations of the concepts that are being talked about. The examples need to have details of specificity. These also need to be chosen carefully. These concrete examples must not be random stories. Rather, these must be chosen to illustrate specific aspects of the concept.

Such experiences made us think of concretizing the content of the chapters, and building on the children's own experiences. We asked children questions about their experiences. For example, we discussed with them their experiences about their own panchayats. Who is the member and the sarpanch? When was the last meeting held, etc.

We also asked them questions about their agricultural practices, their landholdings, about what the parents do, what their profession is, etc. Often such queries touched upon sensitive issues of caste and village politics. We also found to our surprise, that the children of this age group had very little interest in talking about their experience's *ab initio*.

Another issue that came up was that the reality of the political institutions was such that in practice there was very little happening. For example, panchayats had not been constituted. Meetings were hardly being held. This gave a very cynical view of democratic functioning.

We received the following feedback from an SCERT personnel, when we showed them these draft chapters - "Do you want to raise children believing in democracy or being cynical of it." Our objective was obviously the former.

We seemed to have got stuck between abstractions and not being able to build positive understanding of democracy and active citizenship based on experiences from below. Luckily, through our reading and research, we found that there were many instances of collective citizen's initiatives for implementing the provisions enshrined in the constitution. We used these as concrete examples in contexts to build understanding of democracy in practice.

A third issue came up when we tried to help the children explore their own environment, see patterns, and generalize in primary school. For example, they were asked to reflect on questions like – "What are the main features of houses?" "What are the materials with which these are constructed?" "What are the patterns?" This approach didn't seem to work. As often, the immediate environment didn't spark much interest. It was too taken for granted.

We discussed the issues shared above in detail. This brought up the idea that instead of building on the local experiences of the children in the class, where we faced limitations and bottlenecks, the writing team would research and write either true narratives or material based on fact-based research.

We also decided to follow Jerome Bruner's approach on the basis of which he developed

the much-acclaimed course "Man: A Course of Study (MACOS)". Three organizing questions had formed the basis of this course. These are shared here.

What makes man human and distinct from other living beings? How did we get to be that way? How can we become more human(e)?

The course was woven around language tools and social organization. Its core content dealt with the lives of the Netsilk Eskimos.

Taking a cue from this, we introduced some chapters from esoteric contexts like the Arctic, and the Equatorial forests, etc., to contrast with the children's own lives. It worked to an extent in primary schools. For middle school, we took a relatively linear approach of closer to home for class 6, the state level for class seven, and the national level for class eight. The state curriculum being organized that way was also helpful.

Contextualization and concretization

Concretization is an illustration of a concept. For example, let us say one is talking of representational democracy or forms of

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production, or, for that matter, economic value. A specific example in which these concepts manifest themselves, e.g., for representational democracy, the constitution, and the functioning of a panchayat or a state or the central government is narrated first. The context of the concrete example is made abundantly clear. The concept is discussed after this has been done. Similarly, for forms of production or value.

As mentioned earlier, social reality differs a lot over both time periods and across geographies. A variety of examples were taken from different contexts to drive home that there is no one reality but a variety of realities, and that the differences and commonalities depend on the context. The contextual details of each example are important. These include when something happened, where it happened, and who did what. The variety of contextual, concrete examples are then compared with the conceptual parameters, e.g., representation, process, resolution of differences, etc. The comparisons help generalize to abstraction the underlying concepts of a theme, e.g., the fact that democracy is based on equality, participation, freedom, fraternity and accountability.

The most important issue we dealt with related to selecting the themes for the narratives. In internal team discussions, we grilled each other with questions and critiques about each other's work. We talked to university professors of relevant subjects, including politics, economics, sociology and law for the section on civics, history and geography. In the process, we clarified the conceptual frameworks for the content of the proposed chapters for ourselves.

Secondly, as far as possible, the content was attempted to be made specific enough for children at this age to comprehend. Most were at the pre-operational stage. Some of the children were at the concrete operations stage, at the latter end of the spectrum.

Thirdly, the aspects being talked about would need to be familiar to children. These would be concretized narratives with specific manifestations of relevant concepts and themes from different contexts. These would try to evoke an image of an idea, an event, or a phenomenon, complete with active people populating the narrative.

I will try to clarify the issues shared above with examples from civics or critical citizenship. This is the section I, along with a colleague, formulated and wrote up.

To write up the above, we researched at two different levels. The first were the localities. The second level was that of the area of enquiry at a broader level. The attempt was to find out the ways in which the concepts manifested themselves in the area around the children. We also wanted the children to develop an understanding of how these were theorized in the area of enquiry. For example, production, exchange and value were three very important concepts in the understanding of economic life. These form the basis of understanding economic policy and its effects.

To develop the contextualized narrative, we went to the nearby haat and mandi. We talked to people who were sellers and buyers. We observed these markets for a couple of days. We also read up on the research on haats and mandis, even if these happened in other geographies - in Himachal or in Tamil Nadu. We wrote up the whole issue of exchange based on the above research.

Similarly, we researched agriculture and industry. We developed the framework based on the forms of production paradigm. The goal was to understand industry and the categories of farmers and labourers. We also tried to show how these social groups are affected by different aspects influencing agriculture. These factors include technological and biological advances, such as green revolution or agricultural policies.

This approach was quite different from the focus on demand and supply based micro/macro economics, which forms the basis of most high school and undergraduate courses.

We chose these paradigms for the following reasons. We felt these are easier to exemplify and concretize into narratives that children could understand and relate to. We also thought that these brought out more meaningful learnings for real life analysis.

Thus were born the chapters on the small, big and marginal farmers and landless labourers and on the transition from self-owned production to putting out to large industry, as well as on markets, for classes 6th and 7th. The policy chapters for class 8th and the chapters on the constitution and government were based more on secondary research and newspaper articles.

A process of discussion was included in each chapter. In these, the thought process moves toward abstraction and concept formation through patterns and qualified generalizations.

Contextualization, representation and perspective

When we include a contextualized, concrete example to explicate a concept, we must make many choices. These depend on whether the material is for a school or a set of schools, or for a State or the nation.

Where and when is the example from? If it is for a set of schools, then is it from the

vicinity? If for a State – is it from the State – then which part of the state is it from? If for the nation, where from? Is it from now, or a few years ago, or a few decades ago? Who are the characters? Whose voice is prominent? What is it saying?

As the textbooks we made were used in eight (8) schools across three districts and four (4) blocks, our examples for the economic chapters on agriculture, industry and markets were from the area. The children's own experiences could be very like those in the case study example or a bit different.

Expression of their point of view is very important to the students' conceptualization. Asking the children to discuss aspects of the examples, and to articulate their viewpoints, is a strategy that we used throughout.

We tried to build in a perspective where marginalized communities' voices would be represented. We also built in examples of positive changes in response to people's collective voices. These ranged from narratives about local bodies, exemplifying the process of enforcement of fundamental rights with actual cases, to examples of debates during the making of the constitution.

Contextualization in state and national level textbooks

We were asked to help in creating such contextualized books for other States and for Ladakh. The latter was the only district that had district-level textbooks at the primary level. An important issue here was how to select contexts that would be familiar to all the children over a larger area. A process of selection of the examples from the geography that illustrate the concepts and the sub-concepts in the conceptual frame for the curriculum were picked up, researched and written up.

We also helped NCERT develop the national-level textbooks. Here too concretizing and

contextualization were used, including case study like chapters with live characters. These helped the children get a real feel of abstract concepts.

Contestations and challenges – by way of a conclusion

Contextualized concrete narratives have proved quite successful in creating a deeper understanding of abstract concepts of economics and political science. They have also helped in developing a deeper understanding of real conflicts and contrasts between ideals and reality. These have the power to make active citizens.

Because this power becomes evident, there is potential contestation and controversy by the educational establishment. This includes teachers, educational administrators and even many academicians.

This was one of the major reasons for the controversy over MACOS, over Eklavya's curriculum programs, and the intermittent controversies about textbooks. There is, and always will be, resistance to attempts at education for a just world.

One must decide whether it is a worthwhile endeavour. If so, controversies and challenges are a part of the game. Be that as it may, it is a powerful way too – reading the world, in order to change it.

No real and meaningful attempt at good social science education can be made without the purpose of creating active citizens for a just and democratic society. The risks are an occupational hazard that need to be mitigated with a robust strategy.

Anjali Noronha is an educator. She spent most of her life in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. She has studied issues around multilingualism, caste and gender in education.

Email: noronhaanjali59@gmail.com

A children's home context in education

Sonam Saigal

Boys celebrating Menstrual Hygiene Day

Akash (name changed for privacy) was placed in a Child Care Institution (CCI) in Kandhamal, Odisha, by the district Child Welfare Committee (CWC) on the request of his maternal aunt. His mother was arrested for physically assaulting her alcoholic husband to protect their son. The seven-year-old was confused, overwhelmed and scared in the unfamiliar environment. This made the child reticent and uninvolved in the activities that the CCI conducted.

The CCI Superintendent noticed that Akash only spoke Kui. It is a south-central Dravidian language spoken in Odisha by an indigenous Adivasi community. The Superintendent asked Catalysts for Social Action (CSA) to intervene, as one of the tuition teachers, Bijaya, knew Kui. Bijaya assessed that Akash was able to read and write alphabets and numbers in Kui, as he regularly went to an anganwadi back home.

Bijaya explained, "Akash was feeling isolated because of the language barrier. So, I introduced him to eight-year-old Lalita, who also spoke Kui. They started studying together. This is called 'peer learning'. This strategy is used by many educators in similar situations. Here children learn from each other. They get new perspectives and have increased social interactions. This leads to deeper personal learning for both the children. We have found peer learning to be very effective for children in CCIs."

Akash and Lalita became friends. She played number games with him and shared stories that were introduced by Bijaya. It has been six-months since Akash entered the CCI. He has been going to a local government school with other children. Bijaya reflects on peer learning to be an effective decision that brought about a change in the child's personality.

Catalysts for Social Action (CSA)

CCI: a home away from family

CCIs are residences where children like Akash are placed for their care, protection and rehabilitation, when their parents are unable to take care of them. So, the children here may be orphaned, abandoned or surrendered by their parent(s). Or, they may have been rescued from a situation of abuse and neglect. They may also have been placed in an CCI because their parents are unable to care for them. Some of these children are those who are alleged or found to be in conflict with the law.

Catalysts for Social Action (CSA)

Learning geometry together

Their period of stay in the CCI could range from a few days to years. This depends on their own needs and family situation. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which governs the functioning of CCIs, requires them to provide developmental and rehabilitative services to children, including education and health.

CSA works in partnership with government and NGO-run CCIs. Most of these CCIs are in rural and semi-urban locations across Odisha, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Maharashtra and Goa.

A child has to first feel safe

When a child enters a CCI, it is often with trauma, experiences of abandonment or neglect. These children have often lacked a consistent adult caregiver in their lives and have undergone disrupted schooling.

In such cases, learning can't be restricted to academics alone. It is imperative to first identify children's emotional and psychological needs. These may be different from that of children who live with parents. A child cannot learn unless they feel safe.

So as part of holistic development, children participate in a variety of activities. Their goal is to make them feel safe and foster a sense of belonging. Most mornings are about yoga. Enough time is allocated to sports and physical fitness in the evenings. Children engage in art, craftwork, listen to stories, and experience circle time. Wherever possible, they even grow their own fruits and vegetables in kitchen gardens.

CSA's program officers conduct life skills, adolescent health and child safety sessions. These aim to add to the children's socio-emotional well-being. These sessions encompass physical activity, personal hygiene and self-care, healthy relationships and communication, societal gender view, and sexual and reproductive health.

Some of these sessions have been game changers for children. Sameera (name changed for privacy) faced repeated sexual abuse by her stepfather every time her mother went out to work as a house help. After seven months of the ordeal, the child broke down and confided in her mother. The man was reported to the police. However, he was soon let out on bail. The mother then admitted the 12-year-old to a CCI in Maharashtra to protect her.

Sameera was deeply sad to be away from her mother. She would blame herself for the trauma she experienced. She felt very anxious and intimidated. She used to go to school before entering the institution. However, after entering the CCI, she completely withdrew from studies and used to remain aloof.

CSA's tuition teacher Kamini, who would visit the CCI every day, observed this. She tried to include her in all the activities and games they played to learn math and language. After attending sessions on adolescent health and safety, Sameera learnt about her body. She began to understand the abuse she went through. She also started opening up and expressing herself.

It may take a lifetime to overcome such trauma. However, the attempt is to make children speak up and absolve themselves of the shame, guilt and blame that is typical of such situations. Once the children are engaging with others and start participating in activities, the learning process can continue.

Holistic and integrated learning

A lot of hard work goes into making children experience as empowered a childhood as possible. So, children are taken for outings – to zoos, museums, heritage sites, parks and even cinema halls. This helps to ensure that they are growing up just like the other children they meet in school.

Every CCI has a Children's Committee. It is an elected representative body advocating for children's rights within the CCI. The committee meets regularly to discuss and take decisions on the problems the children may be encountering. It also tries to identify productive ways for the CCI to function.

These meetings are minuted and become the bedrock on which democratic values are built in children. Such committees are mandated by Rule 40 of the JJ Rules, 2016, as amended in 2022. The objective is to gather insights into the CCI's daily activities and foster a sense of responsibility, nurture leadership qualities, and bolster self-confidence to express opinions.

Weaving in different skills into one integrated whole is a skill CCIs are slowly developing.

Adolescent Health Program

Catalysts for Social Action (CSA)

For instance, computer labs are set up in some CCIs where children are allowed to play around with the computers. They are taught by appointed computer teachers as well.

Children receive certificates for basic, advanced and other specialized courses. Once they get familiar with the workings of the computer, they start maintaining the minutes of Children's Committee meetings on the system itself. They also start teaching the younger children how to operate computers.

The challenges

Institutional care is meant to be a measure of last resort. Every child, by right, deserves a loving and nurturing family environment. So, children in CCIs may either be restored to their biological family or placed with adoptive/foster families by the CWC, as soon as possible. This depends on their needs and situations. From a teacher's perspective this poses a challenge, as the children are a floating population.

Geometry together

Abinash Jena, Location Head - Odisha says, "Due to changes in the children's numbers, it becomes difficult for teachers to follow a schedule with them. A child may enter the institution with considerable learning gaps. The other children their age may be at a different level. The teacher puts in a lot of efforts bringing the child up to speed. But they often find that the child gets de-institutionalized soon."

Grouping a floating population of children is often an onerous task. Sometimes children go back home during vacations or for short durations. They then come back with 'vacation-loss' and/or separation anxiety. Specific life skills sessions try to ensure that the child is re-oriented, feels safe, and then learning is re-bridged.

Listing out another challenge, Lucy Mathews, Head of CCI Operations, talks about multi-grade, multi-level teaching. "A CCI has children studying in different grades, sometimes going to different schools, are

on different stages of the curriculum at school, and are of different learning levels as well. A tuition teacher has to deal with this complexity. Typically, tuition teachers spend two-hours every day with the children. Dividing their time, so that each child gets some individual attention, is a big challenge."

Here, what helps is when we group children in a way that they can teach and learn from each other. Sometimes, older children are made to teach the younger ones. This helps make concepts sharper for the older children.

Children like Akash and Sameera growing up without their families can gain a lot with the village coming together to raise them. Like-minded CSOs like Khelghar, Eklavya, Patang, Peepul, Bookworm, and Dream a Dream, are all helping create this village, so that every child learns. And even though Akash and Sameera can't be with their families, they receive family-like nurturing care.

Sonam Saigal is a former print journalist and a law graduate. She works at CSA (Catalysts for Social Action). CSA is a non-profit organization that is committed to improving the lives of children in CCIs and those who leave institutional care once turning 18.

Website: csa.org.in

Email: sonam.saiga@csa.org.in

Connect on:

Life skills

The wisdom of contexts

How social interventions can listen and adapt

Preethy Rao

"Curiouser and curiouser" – Alice in Wonderland

Our journey of nine years in Gubbachi feels a bit like Alice's plunge into the rabbit hole of fantastical creatures – rich, constantly evolving and sometimes unexpected. We set out in 2015 (with staunch backing from WIPRO) with a humble idea of running a Bridge Program in Kodathi GHPS (Government Higher Primary School) along Sarjapur Road in Bengaluru city. Kodathi then was a fast-growing peri-urban area full of construction sites. Now it is on the throes of being absorbed within the city limits.

The program's goal was to help integrate children from the neighboring migrant labour settlements, into the local government school. Our community team consisted of one person who worked with families just to ensure attendance.

Children from migrant communities in the city are typically unable to attend school. This is due to barriers related to lack of information, unsafe passage to school, weak prior learning and/or the lack of sibling care in schools.

Now in 2024, we hold a diverse mix of education and community interventions. The Bridge Program now has three versions. We are also intervening in Grades 1-2-3 of Nali Kali classrooms in nine schools. Nali Kali is a multi-grade and multi-level (MGML), activity-based teaching-learning program for Grades 1-2-3, which is being implemented in government schools in Karnataka.

Adolescents prepare for their grade 10 NIOS examinations in one of our bridge programs

Gubbachi

We have a community vertical that works across 30 communities. It helps migrants access welfare benefits and documentation. We also operate a health initiative that runs a free Primary Health Centre in Kariyammana Agrahara (KA).

This growth, both in scale and complexity, has not been due to any well laid out plans. This has been a result of our responses to systemic issues and to a rapidly shifting context. At the same time, we have been keeping an eye on our cause and philosophy of creating meaning for the marginalized children and their families.

In the next part of the article, I provide details of two pivotal experiences we have had in the space of education in these years. These have taught us to listen to the wisdom from the ground and challenge our own assumptions without ego. They have guided us to design programs that have worked.

The Kodathi GHPS experience

Bridge to Grades 1-2-3: The first challenge to our model came within six months of starting. When our first batch of 15 children from the bridge program was ready to be mainstreamed into their primary grades, we realized that the school was facing a serious teacher crunch.

It was barely functioning with 140 children and two teachers. Teacher appointments had been stalled. The peri-urban location of the school with no HRA (House Rent Allowance) meant that it wasn't an attractive posting for teachers.

Our Bridge Program would have been toothless if we didn't address the issue of dysfunctional classes in Grades 1-2-3, where the children were to be mainstreamed. We had to plan overnight to fully enter the Nali Kali space to make things work. We had to learn its MGML methodology from scratch.

Our team of two teachers and co-founders headed to Yadgir to be trained in the method

The first batch of 25 out-of-school children in the Kodathi Bridge Program

by the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) team. We also attended a workshop organized by Rishi Valley on global experiences with multi-level classrooms. In hindsight, these decisions were made in quick succession and a continuous process of adapting to a new normal.

Expanding the idea of bridging: The plot started thickening. We had in our Bridge Program adolescents from out of the State (12 years and above), whose context seemed painfully complicated. They were too old to catch up to an academic Kannada syllabus in the school. They and us were staring at a fast-closing window to school completion.

Having older children in the same community, not schooled, would have a negative effect on younger children. On the other hand, older children who complete schooling would be powerful role models. This was an idea we could not ignore.

We spun off a small engagement with one student within our Bridge program. Three more were added subsequently. We tried taking them toward Grade 10 of NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling), resourced entirely with volunteer teachers.

Open schooling gave us the flexibility to work on FNL (Foundational Numeracy and Literacy) and stagger subjects. It also provided the freedom to move at a pace best suited to this older student who had lost ground. This was an option not available in a regular government school.

Gubbachi

Our first bridge program started in Kodathi GHPS in 2015

Today, we have a well-defined program for Grade 10 NIOS. We have around 30 students in various stages of Grade 10 completion. This program is operational across two locations. There is an option with Kannada as the medium of instruction as well. The children in the program are supported by five teachers. Our first batch of three students are undergraduates in Azim Premji University. That's life turning a full circle for us!

After the COVID-19 pandemic, we added another element to the Kodathi Bridge program. This tried to integrate older, in-state migrant students (aged 9-13 years) into their grades after a year of fast tracking.

From a monolithic idea of a bridge program, we branched into alternate forms of bridging. There is an NIOS option for the older students. We are also intervening in the Nali Kalli program in Grades 1-2-3. We have had to evolve to suit the context of our students.

Now onto the second key experience.

"But that's the trouble with me. I give myself very good advice, but very seldom follow it." - Alice in Wonderland

Our experience of the community learning centre in Kariyammana Agrahara

We had to challenge our original assumption of working inside a government school again in 2022 as the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic started hitting us on the ground. In-migration into the city, particularly from Assam and West Bengal, had exploded. There were many more children who were out of school than we had imagined.

In response, we started a full-fledged Community Learning Centre (CLC) (located close to the settlement) in Kariyammana Agrahara (KA) in April 2022. The Bridge Program is now in its third year of operation with 170 children (3-18 years). How did our context lead us there?

Force majeure and the best laid plans: Before the pandemic, we used to bus 25 children belonging to North Karnataka and bordering Andhra, to our second Bridge location in Sulikunte Dinne (6 kms) from Kariyammana Agrahara (KA). KA is a dense migrant settlement of around 3,500 households. They are packed in a radius of two kilometers off the Outer Ring Road, Bengaluru's IT hub.

These families supply the support staff to the tech industry. Their members work as housekeeping staff in tech parks. They also work as security guards and helpers in upscale apartment blocks in the neighborhood. In a sharp contrast with the spaces they work in, they live in abject conditions.

As schools had closed, our Sulikunte Bridge team of teachers (like teachers in all other programs) taught students near their settlements (in this case in a temple yard). As we became more visible to the communities, our enrolments shot up from 25 to 75 and then to 100+ in under a year.

The watershed moment came in October 2021, when our community vertical started a Primary Health Clinic (in partnership with the Foundation) in the area. This opened the floodgates for communities that we had hitherto not reached - displaced families from Assam and West Bengal. They had no viable schooling options. Local government schools (which in any case were closed) had cultural and linguistic barriers. Low fee paying (LFP) schools were unaffordable.

Dizzying pivots: We had nothing in our tool kit to solve for this deluge. Our curriculum was Kannada-focused. Our teachers were Kannada competent. Maybe they had a smattering of Hindi skills. We had no prior experience working with these communities. We had to understand their socio-cultural contexts first.

These families saw meaning in English as a language of schooling. They saw it as a more portable language that would stay relevant wherever they went, whereas knowing only Kannada would restrict their choices.

From October 2021 to April 2022 – within a short span of one and half years – we had the current KA Community Learning Centre up and running. Again WIPRO backed us to take the risks. This center became operational in ten rental rooms. It was in close proximity to the settlement.

Enrollments since then have never dipped below 130 in the Bridge Program, and 40 in the Early Childhood Program. We see the latter as a necessary adjunct to our Bridge Program. Our waiting lists are always brimming. We painfully turn back fresh enquiries for admissions as we have capacity constraints.

Our curriculum in this program has pivoted completely to an English medium, open schooling structure. We work on open schooling of Grade 10 here. We also work on Grades 3, 5 and 8 (called the Open Basic Education – OBE) with younger children. Thirty children successfully got their NIOS exam certification earlier this year. Many others will do so next year. The program does not seek to be informal. It gives the legitimacy of exam certification. Our teacher profile now is of primarily English competent graduates or postgraduates from Azim Premji University and other institutions.

In conclusion

All our work in education still has one single aim of including marginalized children into mainstream education. However, versions of the Bridge Program different from our

Adolescents need tailor-made programs to help them complete school

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original conception were born squarely out of an unfulfilled need on the ground. Our interventions in the Nali Kali Program came out of a systemic context of teacher shortage.

Our KA Community Learning Centre experience has made us understood something crucial. To fix our locus inside the physical space of a government school alone would mean that we would ignore the larger problem of the 'out of school' child. This issue exists outside of school spaces – in the settlements themselves.

No matter how many bridge programs we open inside a school – there will always be children who will hesitate to enter such formal spaces. These children may be adolescents, unschooled children, and children still too steeped in the rural context, and so on.

Community centers are powerful ways to reach the last child. The effectiveness of this approach has been demonstrated through the pioneering work of other experienced organizations like Muskan in Bhopal and Sakthi Vidiyal (after school programs) in Madurai.

What we have learnt from these two experiences is this – learn and adapt. Shape shift, if you have to. Always respond to the context.

Where next?

Our Nali Kali program will continue to strengthen FLN from inside the system, for as long as the system needs us. We know that the system, the Education Department, policy makers (all the top-down actors) are not fully ready to accommodate the idea of a bridge space outside the physical and legal construct of a school, or for that matter a Bridge Program existing in tandem, inside the school. But it still does not take away from the need for it and its power to shift the ground for countless forgotten children.

Attending school in the city is a challenge for migrant children

As we speak, we are in consultation with the Education Department to give space – physical and ideological – to children who are unable to enter and thrive in a conventional classroom. We are advocating for Bridge Programs – with OBE, NIOS certification options - to be part of public schools. The coming months will be crucial in setting the direction for this process.

Making an intervention relevant to a community could mean razing all pre-held notions to the ground. This would entail simply aligning to the context. It may be emotionally painful. However, our experiences have taught us that such pain is always worth it.

Preethy Rao is an alumna of Azim Premji University (MA Education, 2014). She is part of the six-member Founding Team of Gubbachi. Currently, she is also the Program Lead of the Bridge Centre at Kariyammana Agrahara. Bothered by the inequities in our education system, she joined hands with her likeminded founders nine years ago and hasn't looked back since. Greeted by children first thing in the morning keeps her reminded of the mission Gubbachi started with. She loves travelling, reading and binging on OTT!

Website: gubbachi.org.in

Email: preethy@gubbachi.org.in

Connect on:

The forest and the classroom

Ankita Rajasekharan and Shikha Nain

In a gathering of adults training to be facilitators, there was an invitation to reflect upon and share a memory of a moment when they experienced learning something. Among the many sharings, the following situations were included.

While baking a cake with an aunt, when on a bird walk a bird was identified by its call, when being trained by a coach in swimming lessons, while shopping with a parent, and so on.

It didn't go unnoticed that none of the examples stemmed from a classroom environment. Surely, this small group wasn't a conclusive reflection of classroom environments. What it was, however, was an insight into the settings within which learning is enabled.

If an experience supports an expansion of our understanding of the world or ourselves, there exists a potential for learning. Further, rooting that experience in the lived context of the learner can have a much more long-lasting impression of learning than attempting to transfer that learning in a disconnected setting.

Learning of a bird one can hear and see in one's surroundings could open pathways to interest and inquiry into understanding the world of birds at large. This process is much deeper compared to studying enigmatic bird species from a book, with no true connections to one's environment.

How might we begin to look at an entire curriculum from the perspective of introducing a learning experience from the lived context? In the process, we also need to figure out the contours of journeys in understanding what's beyond our local environment.

This was our guiding thought, as we worked on building a 'Biodiversity Curriculum' with a team of educators from the villages of Kanha, Madhya Pradesh, as part of our work with Earth Focus Foundation. The children we were designing for went to government

Focusing on the earth

Earth Focus Foundation (EFF) was set up in 2019. The organization is born out of the belief that empowering Baiga and Gond tribal communities is key to conservation and nature-based economies in Kanha, a national park in Madhya Pradesh. This is achieved through two streams: nature-based livelihoods and contextual education.

The first involves an agroecology-based model. Its goal is to enable tribal farmers to restore degraded land and create climate resilient income streams. The model focuses on agroforestry and horticulture. It also includes the revival of native crops and trees that meet social needs, provide economic benefits and build climate resilience. Our program has scaled from one acre in 2021 to 450+ acres in four years.

Our education model builds foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), and critical thinking through a biodiversity-based curriculum. It benefits more than 2,200 children in 29 villages.

Our work is characterized by community ownership. We co-create and implement our programs with the community. We also hire community members to lead these.

schools and came from Adivasi (Gond and Baiga) communities.

The jungles of Kanha are these children's homes. The forest ecosystem is an integral part of their livelihood and culture. And yet, this integration seemed to be thinning among the children. This has been a result of them spending more time within walled classrooms. This keeps them away from everyday activities that could connect them to the forest.

Along the way, we spoke to families, village elders, and children. As we did this, we found ways in which the forest could be brought back into the conversation where learning and education are concerned.

Activities for play and learning, from the ecological context of the Kanha landscape

Foraging and the food ecology: Foraging and food ecology are not just survival skills for families around Kanha. These are deeply woven into their cultural and environmental identity. During the monsoon season, for instance, families venture into the forest to collect wild mushrooms and leafy greens like *bhaji* and to fish. This practice offers a rich nutritional bowl. It also serves as an educational resource.

In contrast to the uniform, often unseasonable produce found in markets, the forest requires a nuanced understanding of what is safe to eat. The community's knowledge is passed down through the generations. This includes knowing which mushrooms and leaves are edible, which fish is suitable to consume and during which season, and how to prepare and process the produce.

In our curriculum, we leverage this traditional practice of foraging to teach children vital concepts. As they participate in these activities, they learn to identify shapes, sizes, patterns and colours. In the process they gain hands-on experience within the natural world. This approach allows children to understand seasons, decomposition, and the life cycles of plants growing near decaying leaves or wood.

Women and children often forage together. They observe insects, flowers, saplings, birds, and occasionally even tigers. These

A traditional fishing practice using woven baskets

Earth Focus Foundation/Shikha Nain

experiences nurture curiosity and creativity. These transform the forest into a living classroom. Here learning happens naturally and meaningfully.

Medicinal connection to nature: The communities around Kanha possess a deep-rooted knowledge of traditional medicinal plants. This is a legacy that has been passed down ancestrally. This expertise enables them to identify trees, plants, herbs, and their various medicinal uses, often without reliance on doctors, hospitals or pharmacists.

Their intimate understanding of the forest is profound. They can easily name trees, recognize their fruits, and recall their seasons and uses with just a glance. This knowledge naturally sparks curiosity, especially about how these communities first discovered that a particular part of a plant could cure or treat an ailment.

To harness this rich knowledge in our curriculum, we incorporated it into lessons that connect to biological and botanical studies. For instance, in a lesson centred around the mahua tree—a plant of immense significance to these communities—we explored its multiple roles as a source of food, spiritual symbol, and medicinal resource. By using the mahua tree as a focal point, we taught students about the different parts of a tree, how trees grow, and their crucial role in maintaining ecological balance.

We also introduced concepts like photosynthesis and interdependence within ecosystems through this familiar context. This approach made the lessons more relatable and engaging for the students. It also allowed them to apply their traditional knowledge in a structured learning environment. This process helped to deepen their understanding of both the natural world and of scientific principles.

Play and games: Incorporating children's natural play into the biodiversity curriculum goes beyond simply observing their

Using the sticky sap of Jatropha/chandrajot to blow bubbles

Earth Focus Foundation/Shikha Nain

interactions with nature. For example, we often observe children using Jatropha leaves and the sap within to make bubbles. We then invite them to explore the different types of plants and the unique properties they possess. Are other leaves and plant sap capable of the same? Why not?

It becomes an opportunity to observe variety in plants, leaves, stem structures, and even the biological functions of various plants. We link their play with structured learning. Thereby we ensure that their innate curiosity about nature translates into a deeper comprehension of ecological principles and plant biology.

Soil as a living thing: In Kanha, soil is more than just the ground beneath our feet. It is a vital resource for daily life. The locals build their homes, create smooth and clean floors, and even craft the plates (*kawelu*) on their roofs from soil.

In our lesson 'Exploring soil', we introduced children to the concept of soil, its formation, composition, minerals, colour, texture and profile. We discussed the various types of soil

found in different regions of Kanha. We then connected it to the soils of Central India and across the country, to show how soil types vary.

In conversations with children, we came upon the question - "Is soil a living or a non-living thing?" Some believed that it was living, because it absorbs water (*drinking*), forms new soil (*reproducing*), and anchors trees to prevent erosion (*holding*). Others thought it was non-living, because it didn't speak or play with them like their mates.

The answers opened up further learning opportunities. These related to the characteristics of living and non-living beings, soil's water-holding capacity, soil formation, and soil erosion and methods to prevent it. All of this made the lesson both relatable and expansive.

Seasonal practices and children's presence in classrooms

During the *ropa* (paddy cultivation) and *mahua* seasons, children's participation in and around the fields is truly remarkable. The older children actively plant and care for the rice paddies and gather mahua flowers. The younger children contribute in other vital ways. They assist by cleaning the home. They prepare the utensils for cooking when their

Earth Focus Foundation/Shikha Nain

Children's involvement in taking up chores to sustain an agricultural lifestyle driven by the community

parents return from the fields. They also take the cattle out to graze in the open fields.

This involvement goes beyond mere chores. It is a crucial part of their family's agricultural lifestyle. This offers valuable learning experiences. Through their tasks, younger children gain a sense of responsibility. They also feel a connection to their community's traditions and the natural world. By participating in these seasonal activities, children learn about storage and processing of plant produce, plant life cycles, water management, and soil health. They also gain understanding of the significance of sustainable farming practices.

Contextual education, then, also means that children's absence from schools during these seasons is accounted for. It isn't that learning is absent if the child is absent from the classroom. This approach, however, still has a long way to go.

Challenges while building a context-based curriculum

Limited documentation of knowledge in local languages is a challenge. There are high-quality resources on the internet, both audio-visual and textual, which are relevant to the forest ecosystem we are working within. However, these are primarily in English. This is a language that is in most cases the third language of, and most often incomprehensible to, the communities we work with.

These resources are conceptually relevant to the landscape. However, these aren't created within here. Therefore, these can be disconnected in terms of the perspective on offer and the visuals. We are seeing an attempt to bridge this gap with content from organizations such as RoundGlass Sustain. There is a dire need for an expansive library that addresses this resource scarcity, and in the native languages of the land.

The intersection of folklore, myths and science needs to be trodden on with

sensitivity. One of the stories we came by was of the flower of a fig tree. The belief is that no one has truly seen the flower of a *dumar*, a fig-tree. It is only on a rare occasion when lightning and darkness meet that a fig-tree's flower gently falls from the tree. And if you happen to be there, you'll be lucky to see it.

On exploring the fruit of a fig-tree, opening it to see the flowers within and finding that they are quite unlike the prototypical flower, the community wasn't easily convinced. Their curiosity peaked and it opened up several conversations on what a flower truly is, the structure of a flower, etc.

Another such intersection happened while discussing snakes, venom, snakebites and their treatment. Most individuals believed several non-venomous snakes to not be so, including a bronze-back tree snake. This meant that very often an encounter with a snake resulted in it being killed. And further, any snakebite was first and in many cases only treated by a local practitioner. They would use *mantras*, immobilize the patient, and suck out the venom from the bite, etc. This continues to be an area of conversation and negotiation between new knowledge and old practices.

The risk of equating context-based to 'only local' is an easy one to fall prey to. In being context-based with our content and pedagogy, we ensure that what we take to the classroom doesn't alienate the learners. It engages with their lived reality, culture and knowledge systems. This, however, doesn't imply that we don't take to the classroom what is beyond the context of the learner.

Sure, we won't be introducing 'g for giraffe'. However, we will talk of giraffes where the conversation allows it. It is vital to do so even. This helps in ensuring that the children aren't restricted to their immediate reality in today's globally informed knowledge systems.

Integrating the ecological context into education is not just about making learning relevant. It is about rooting education in the children's lived experiences. And then one must move in breadth and expanse to integrate global knowledges. This approach has the power to make education more meaningful, fostering a deep relationship and connection to the environment and community. It can also help prepare children to engage with the broader world.

As we continue to develop and refine this curriculum, we remain committed to bridging the gap between the classroom and the forest. We try to ensure that learning remains a natural and integral part of the child's life.

While our curriculum is being developed in the Kanha landscape, it can quite easily be made meaningful for other forest landscapes with some contextual integrations relevant to the local ecology. The hope is to nurture and strengthen their innate and cultural love and connection for the natural world and encourage its preservation and protection for the time to come.

Ankita Rajasekharan has been working in the space of education for over 10 years with a focus on nature-based learning, expressive art and creative writing. She facilitates outdoor learning experiences and consults as a curriculum developer with multiple organizations, Earth Focus Foundation being one of them. She may be contacted at 27.ankita@gmail.com

Shikha Nain is an educational consultant with over four years of experience. She currently develops context-based curricula at Earth Focus Foundation in Kanha. Her work focuses on integrating local knowledge and environmental awareness to enrich learning, especially in rural and tribal communities. She may be contacted at nainshikha1996@gmail.com

Website: earthfocus.in

Connect on:

Contextual literature in Mising and Assamese

Sreya Rakshit

Established in 2017, The Hummingbird School was born out of the hope of providing quality education in the flood-affected village of Kulamua, in collaboration with 19 other villages in Majuli, Assam. The foundation of the school reflects the strength and resilience of these flood-prone villages, where the community came together to donate the land, and bamboo, and to build the initial infrastructure of the school. Now it stands as a beacon of hope amidst the challenges of the region, nurturing the dreams of over 300 children.

In striving to understand what contextual education could look like for a rural, underserved, tribal community which has been geographically and socially isolated, the school hopes to transform the lives of the children through an education which allows them more choice and freedom to build a dignified life for themselves as well as for their community.

Ayang Trust, a registered social purpose organization runs the school. It works toward bridging gaps in primary education through teacher development programs and community libraries.

Additionally, they support women artisans and landless farmers, through collectivization, capacity-building programs and market linkages to help them achieve economic independence and resilience in the face of adversities.

Ayang Trust works to uplift and support the rural and underserved communities of Northeast India, fostering a sense of hope and possibility amidst challenging circumstances.

Working as educators in a tribal village in Majuli, Assam, led us to think about what meaningful education would look like in our context. We ventured into translating and creating original texts in Mishing and Assamese to cater to the needs of children we serve. Most of the children coming to the Hummingbird School belong to the Mishing community and speak in Mishing at home.

However, Mishing had predominantly remained an oral language till the community adopted the Roman script in 1972. Since then, much effort has gone into development of the language and literary works being produced in Mishing.But the presence of Mishing texts catering to young children at libraries in schools or otherwise is close to nil. Standing in a crucial time, where languages like English and Hindi (as linkages to the market economy and social mobility) threaten to obliterate languages like Mishing, we feel the need to act.

The world has marched forward into being 'print-centric'. Developing readership in a language is crucial. The youth struggle to read texts available in Mishing, as such opportunities don't present themselves early on. As Assamese, Hindi and English dominate the language arena in schools, Mishing youth struggle to express complex ideas in Mishing and often lean on Assamese and Hindi to get their thoughts across.

Members of our community share that they had no access to texts written in Mishing while they were growing up. Having to read, write and communicate only in the state language was challenging. It posed a constant obstacle in understanding and

learning concepts in different subjects. There's ample research to support the crucial role that mother-tongue instruction plays in a child's language and cognitive development. NCF 2022 recommends it as the primary medium of instruction for children till eight years of age.

This gave rise to the pressing need for creating titles for early readers to engage with. While the landscape of children's literature in India is shaping up dramatically with the availability of high quality, and a diverse variety of texts in English and Hindi, other regional languages struggle to catch up.

Having been an oral language, Mishing has a rich collection of practices, songs, poems, and lore that are central to the community's history, culture and identity. We believe that texts are needed not just to expose them to the Mishing script early on, but to represent their identity, reality and experiences which feel closer to home and for the reader to discover the joy of finding themselves in it.

The expressions and experiences that are embodied in a language are sometimes unique to what one encounters in that region and context. The Mishing community holds a body of rich indigenous knowledge in their collective memory. Documenting it is the only way to save it from from oblivion with the passage of time.

Being situated at the heart of a Mishing community, we feel that the Mishing language should find space within the schools for expression and engagement. It's an uphill fight for equal status of languages and that one shouldn't have to feel that other languages supersede their own.

We, at Hummingbird School, are committed to creating a multilingual environment where children receive exposure to Assamese, English and Mishing at the same time and acquire all the three with ease early on. While it's easier said than done, creating original as well as translated titles and placing them

Ayang

within the reach of children would bring us closer to our vision.

We began this journey in 2022 with Eklavya Foundation as our partner in producing translated titles in Mishing and Assamese. We translated 12 titles catering to different age-groups of children. What made this beginning a memorable one was that we were able to involve middle school students of Hummingbird School to take part in the translation workshop.

The team involved students as well as teachers who worked together in translating these titles. The joy of being able to express and read in one's own language enlivened the teachers and students alike. A popular Rajasthani folktale 'Khichdi' was translated into 'Purang-Pitang' in Mishing. It was one of the most exciting translations as word-play was central to the text's humor and plot. Being able to contextually adapt that into Mishing was a moment of joy and pride for the entire team.

The selection of books for translation were guided by themes challenging gender roles and stories set in a rural context. We also chose books that might appeal to different age groups of children. The hope is to eventually build a repertoire of texts that caters to a wide range of readers.

The excitement led to taking on the challenge of producing original titles in the following

year, along with a few more translations. For months, our team members spent time in the community collecting folktales from the elders of the village. They also observed young children at play, to record the game-songs they sang.

This resulted in two books called 'Rinjang-jang' and 'Ikut Bikut Chikut' in Mishing and Assamese respectively. Children from grades 6th to 9th from Hummingbird School illustrated both of these game-song books. The delightful game-songs are quite popular among young children. One would often hear them singing together in groups.

We also produced two folktales in the form of picture books called 'Tamuli Takom' and 'Baak' in Mishing and Assamese respectively. These were illustrated by Pankaj Saikia. He brought the characters to life through his vivid illustrations.

However, our journey was not without its struggles. One of the difficulties we faced was to arrive at a common understanding of what it meant to translate a text and how word to word translation could lead to complete loss of meaning. On the other hand, many of the texts demanded one to be creative to be able to retain the lyricism of the original work.

A seemingly simple text called 'The three friends' by Indu Harikumar presented us with such a challenge. It pushed our team to think about how to keep the soul of the text alive.

We faced a similar challenge while translating a Bundelkhandi folktale 'What a Song' by Jitendra Thakur, in coming up with appropriate, rhyming sounds which would appeal to the reader in context!

Translating 'Cheenta', a book by Soumya Menon, also led to interesting insights. While translating, we had to pay close attention to the subtle nuance in the gender of the ant and the role it carried out, which, if overlooked, would take away from the poem's central idea.

While translating, one could end up explaining what is going on instead of leaving it for the reader to discover. To restrain oneself from telling one's understanding to retaining the flavor of the original text was a difficult ask from first time translators.

Contextualizing and modifying the texts to suit our readers was also challenging. One had to be mindful of the illustrations as well as of the overarching plot so that one is able to change a few aspects without compromising the original work. With the author's permission, we changed the names of a few characters in some texts and even altered the names of fruits in a few cases with the hope that the reader would find it more relatable. One also had to understand the nature of the text and where it would be inappropriate to contextualize, for example, in the case of a non-fiction work.

As the literary world is expanding into different styles of storytelling and a boarder use of language in written work, one is faced with challenges in terms of word-choice to sentence structure. Is one to use a more colloquial word or to function within the precincts of a standardized form of what has been permissible in written work for ages?

Even when we moved on to developing original texts based on folktales collected from the community, we were faced with many conflicting questions. Do we wish to stick to the folktale as it is, or do we want to modify parts of it in keeping with the evolving times? These dilemmas led to many spirited debates, arguments and discussions to reach an understanding that was agreeable to all.

Getting the original titles illustrated was no simple task. One had to work closely with the illustrator to help bring out contextual nuances. For example, in 'Baak', the kind of fishing net we wanted our illustrator to draw was specific to what one would find in Majuli. Attention to detail in every aspect with regard to context, colloquial expressions,

representing gender and identity was crucial in developing these texts.

Every time, a new title is published, and it arrives at school, the excitement among children spreads like wildfire. We see young children of grade 3 or 4 trying to read many of these titles to each other on their own. These texts also find their way into the classrooms. Children thoroughly enjoy these being read to them.

All these titles are also made available in the 39 community libraries that our organization Ayang Trust supports and works with. Our library facilitators conduct various activities like Read Aloud to share the stories with the children who visit the libraries. To support children in recognizing the Mishing script, they conduct some sound-symbol association activities as well.

One of our library facilitators, Rakesh, shares, "When the new books in Mishing arrived, the children were so happy and excited to see them. Even though they were unable to read, the children tried to engage with it. They would also request to listen to the stories again and again. Earlier when Mishing books were not available, engagement with Assamese books posed some challenges in comprehension and marred the joy of listening to the stories unhindered. In a year's time, now many of them can read short texts on their own."

Children issue these books from the library and take them back to their homes. They share these story books with their parents and grandparents, who in turn tell them more stories that they remember. When the children come back, they bring back new stories and songs to share in the library space.

In the communities which are predominantly Mishing, the members ask for more books in Mishing and eagerly look forward to engaging with them. The engagement of the youth and other community members have also

increased since the arrival of Mishing books. Rakesh beams with pride as he holds up the text and says, "We are proud to share our stories!"

Now, going forward, we are working on a few original titles in Mishing, keeping the early years in mind, so that we can plant the seeds of reading early on. We hope that the voices of this community travel far and wide and become a luminous presence in the world of print. Creating this body of text, especially for children in Mishing, is going to be a long and arduous journey which we are committed to undertake.

Sreya Rakshit started out her journey in the field of education in the year 2014 as a Teach for India Fellow. She has been working in the education space ever since and has mostly worked in language learning. After completing her M.A. in Education from Azim Premji University in 2019, she moved to Majuli, to work with Hummingbird School. Literature and language being the primary areas of interest, what keeps her rooted to this sector is her passion for learning and social justice. Sreya can be reached at sreya.rakshit@gmail.com or at hummingbird@ayang.org.in.

Website: ayang.org.in

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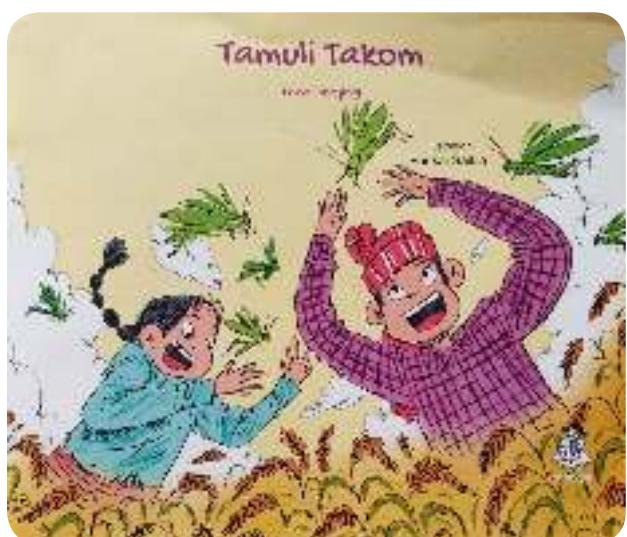
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The relevance of sociocultural contexts in educational work

Aniket Gawade

The context in education varies among different communities. Their traditions, socio-political situations, geography, and various other aspects are all a part of the matrix. While working with communities, one must understand that coming with a pre-set agenda is not going to work. One cannot also set a timeline for the work. Being alert to the context and responding to it in an agile and sensitive manner are important aspects of educational work in the community context that intends to have long-term, systemic relevance.

In this piece we share the experiences of three organizations from across the country. These are engaging with the contexts of the communities they work with in creative ways.

Marudam Farm School

"One has to be very aware of our neighbourhood. We all tend to live in our own bubbles. In education, you need to know who your neighbour is," says Poornima, a Founder-member and Head Teacher of Marudam Farm School.

As they describe themselves, Marudam is an alternative, holistic, environmental, multi-cultural, equality minded, community farm school. It is located on an organic farm. It spreads over 12 acres in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu.

Marudam is host to around 130 children between the ages of 4 and 16 years. About 30 teachers and staff in different capacities are members of the community. It has roughly 20 residents. The community also includes numerous dogs, cats, cows and chickens. It has a diverse wildlife population as well.

Marudam Farm School

Marudam Farm School runs under the umbrella of The Forest Way. The latter is a registered non-profit charitable trust. It is involved in education, afforestation, environmental education, organic farming, and more.

Marudam has been primarily working with the Narikurava and Irular tribes. The Narikurava are a semi-nomadic, de-notified tribal group from Tamil Nadu. They speak the unclassified Indo-Aryan language called Vaagri Booli. The Irular are a ST community inhabiting the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. They speak the Irula language. It is from the Dravidian family of languages.

"Why do we need to read and write? We can ask someone if we want to learn a new thing. We have been doing this for generations. We are not landowners. We don't want to build anything for our children. We are happy-go-lucky people. We earn and we spend it." This was the answer during Poornima's first interaction with the Narikurava community people.

Poornima has more than 15 years of experience working with communities in the

urban slums. But she says, working with the gypsies and the forest tribes is very different. One must understand their needs. One must redefine knowledge. Making a wig is knowledge, taking care of a tree is knowledge. If a child from either of these communities has to be admitted in a government school, there has to be some commonality with the teachers or some context to have a discussion. Many children at Marudam are first generation schoolers.

Apart from redefining knowledge, Poornima also mentions about the discrimination that these communities face time and again, whenever they go, especially the Narikurava. People always see them with suspicion because of their appearance. This feeling of being suspected stays with them wherever they go. "If somebody takes a photograph in the school, the children tend to put their heads down as they are always seen as someone who commits crimes," she shares.

Poornima also mentions about the other side of their appearance. These communities are said to have migrated from the northeastern part of Asia. They have different facial features when compared to the local students from Tamil Nadu. This further increases the discrimination within the students. All these things play a crucial role in social integration at school.

These communities don't speak Tamil. They have their own languages. Their superstitions also need to be considered regarding their schooling. A gypsy cannot marry outside their own community. They get scared if a girl is sent to school and falls in love with someone from outside their community. They would rather keep their girl children uneducated. For a community that has always been migrating from place to place or a community which has been in the forest for generations, formal education is new for them.

"It's not as simple as we think. Like a child goes to school and then we just teach them...

It's not like that. It's a process in which we need to consider a lot of things before sending the child to school. The school is not in a situation which is catering to where they are coming from," says Poornima.

"We must support them without discriminating against them. They are trying it for the first time. We must understand this, without being judgemental," she adds.

Considering the above conditions, Marudam has various areas that they focus on while shaping programs for these children. The first is language. Considering the language barrier, Marudam focuses on teaching vocabulary through pictures. Thay also have designed their own games and have created their own dictionary through which the children can effectively learn Tamil. The second thing they focus on is motivating the children using a craft that they already know, and at the same time to learn something new from the same craft.

Along with motivation, they also work on improving the children's concentration. The school uses focused activities like memory games toward this goal. The children love these games. When the children are in school, Poornima and the team conduct such activities in the school which the children have already done at Marudam.

These help in boosting the confidence of the children at school, because the Narikurava students know something that the other students don't. This also helps in increasing social integration among the students.

The last and the most important area that Marudam focuses on is learning from nature. The children love being in nature. They grow different trees and want to start a small nursery. They, especially the Irular children, walk around observing all the birds and the trees. The Narikuravas don't like it much. But these kinds of experiences, give the children some context to start conversations in the classroom.

Marudam focuses on the strengths of the children from these communities. It also supports them in mainstream schooling. Poornima believes, "We have to represent the children's needs and rights within the government school, without antagonizing the government teachers."

When the students are supported through all these efforts, they do quite well in the classroom. This then encourages the teachers to involve them more in the discussions.

Apart from the intervention at the school level, Marudam also works with the government officials, where they provide various materials and learning kits which are kept in the classrooms. These materials are usually focused on the children of the Narikurava and Irular communities but are used for the whole class. The best part of these learning materials is that these are completely inclusive. Anyone can use these, even a student with special needs.

Marudam has been able to train two Narikurava and two Irular adults. They work as support teachers at the farm school. The children feel more comfortable when someone from their own community is helping them. The children look up to them as role models.

Samanta Foundation

"If you can build education, and within that frame of education, and along with it, if you can build youth leadership, it will create not only a narrative for education, but also be a motivation for the children of the respective communities. They will have someone to look up to," says Prashant, co-founder at Samanta Foundation.

Samanta Foundation works with school children. Their focus is on children from forest dwelling communities living close to the Rajaji Tiger Reserve since 2018. Samanta works with the Van Gujjar and Tongia communities.

Van Gujjars are traditional pastoral nomads. The Tongia people worked as labourers for the British, mostly for cutting wood. Hence, they settled in the forest.

"Even if a girl rides a two-wheeler, which is quite uncommon within these communities, the kids look up to them. The children can learn from the examples of their own people and learn from the things around them," adds Prashant.

More than 80% of their team members are local youths, especially girls. Samanta's Youth Leadership Program supports girls in becoming leaders in their own communities. A couple of them are national fellows. Another is a Tata Steel Foundation Fellow and is now writing story books.

Just like the Narikurava and Irular communities from Tamil Nadu, the Van Gujjars and Tongia have their own languages. These do not have scripts. These are only spoken languages. The transfer and exchange of knowledge across generations has always happened orally. Prashant has come to know that the children from these communities are interested in stories. Hence a key focus area for Samanta has been setting up a library for the children. Language plays a crucial role while working with the children from these communities.

To help the children read, Prashant and Tanya, co-founders of Samanta, learnt the local languages. Only by listening to the language,

Samanta Foundation

Prashant and Tanya were able to create the Gojari script, for the language the Van Gujjars speak. This helped them interact with the kids in a better way and to make them read.

"When a child comes to the classroom for the first time, their interactions should be in the native language. This helps them in avoiding the fear children feel when suddenly confronted with a completely new language which they have never heard," says Prashant.

Samanta has also designed their own teaching learning materials according to their understanding of the children. The Van Gujjars are experts in rearing buffaloes. Hence, their materials involve animals, trees and mountains, etc. For example, counting is taught using sticks or by drawing the legs of the buffaloes.

According to Prashant, one should not assume that the mainstream school education is the way to go. These communities have their own way of living and learning. Handling a buffalo is something the children of the Van Gujjar community learn as a part of their lifestyle. This itself is a crucial learning which a child from a city can't perform.

"The communities themselves are a mine of knowledge. One should value it and hold it high," says Prashant. "These communities usually lack basic rights. Most of them are always in some or the other conflict," he adds. He feels that this is something that one should consider while planning an education-based intervention. Conflicts often disrupt the education of a child, forcing them to drop out of school.

JKASW

Jammu Kashmir Association of Social Workers (JKASW), one of our partner organizations, has been working with such children since 2006. JKASW is a non-profit organization working toward creating a better future for children from vulnerable communities. It has a multi-

pronged approach to address the multi-dimensional issues that children face. It works in education in the areas of ECCE, Out of School Children (OoSC), Supplementary Learning, and STEM. It also intervenes in child protection, advocacy, and adolescent and youth development. The organization engages with multiple stakeholders. These include communities at the grassroots level, and governmental and non-governmental organization for linkages and policy advocacy.

"Due to the prolonged conflict, school education has suffered a lot. But other than the conflict, there are various other factors that affect a child's education as well. Due to the harsh winters, schools remain closed for three months. Previously both these factors caused the schools to remain closed for six months at a stretch sometimes. These long breaks have severe effects on children's learning. The topography is another point which makes access to education difficult for many children living in remote areas. Then there are nomadic tribes which move as per the seasons. All these factors affect the education of a child in Jammu and Kashmir," says Ashfaq Ahmad Mattoo, the Executive Director of JKASW.

The JKASW team has been trying to bridge the learning gaps through their various programs. They have set up learning centres across various locations in Jammu and Kashmir. In these, they provide support for out of school students, and supplementary learning for children from first generation learner families. The CSO also supports the local education system in ECCE/FLN and the education of OoSC. JKASW tries to strengthen local government schools by providing volunteer teachers as well. In 2021-22 they collaborated with the state education department for the TALASH Program. This helped to identify 93,000+ students across 20 districts who were out of school.

According to Ashfaq, "Each family have their own situation, either due to the conflict

or due to the lack of opportunities. So, it's like convincing one family at a time. In case of financial issues, we try to minimize the vulnerability of such families by introducing them to various government schemes. There are also families which do not prefer sending their child to school because of the tensions resulting out of the conflict. There is always one or the other resenting family member who resists their child attending school, especially if it's a girl beyond a certain age. In such cases, JKASW works with such resenting family members to create a support system for the child through various counselling sessions."

With a retention rate of 91%, JKASW has been able to bring more than 6,000 out of school children back to school over the previous decade. The CSO has been able to do this by employing a multipronged approach to address the issue. It has been using various fun and innovative TLMs at its centres. It has been designing its own TLMs. The CSO also uses TLMs provided by other organizations like JodoGyan, Vikramshila and Eklavya.

Apart from the TLMs, JKASW provides training to schoolteachers for handling out of school students. The organization also provides continuous remedial support to the children after they join school. This is accompanied by frequent home visits.

JKASW has created a contextualized intervention model for delivering ECCE/FLN through anganwadis and Pre-Primary Schools. It does this by enhancing the capacities of key stakeholders and by creating contextualized content and material. Over the years, JKASW has improved the functioning and delivery of ECCE in more than 1,200 Anganwadi centres across J&K.

JKASW's work has been appreciated at the State level. In 2022, JKASW was presented an award by ICDS, J&K for its systemic support program to improve the functioning of anganwadis by capacitating the anganwadi

JKASW

workers, helpers and supervisors. JKASW is creating a similar model for pre-primary schools. It focuses on the effective delivery of ECCE/ FLN by contextualizing the content, capacitating the teachers and building models.

Ashfaq mentions the importance of having safe spaces for children, especially in conflict-ridden areas, where they can feel free to express themselves, understand their rights, and raise questions. All of this helps in developing children's agency. These also help in sustainaing their interest in continuing at school. JKASW's interventions are going some distance in making this possible.

Conclusion

One must accept and value the knowledge that local communities have. They have their own unique ways of living and perceptions about the world. One can't, thus, assume that mainstream education is the way to go for all children from the local communities.

Involving community leaders and considering their opinions will help in building trust among these communities. It will also help in thinking through context-specific educational opportunities for our children who need it the most.

You may reach out to the organizations featured in this story at: poornima.arun12@gmail.com (Marudam); prashant@samanta.org.in (Samanta); and ashfaq.jkasw@gmail.com (JKASW).

Gubbachi

wipro foundation

Wipro Foundation is a public charitable trust
set up for corporate citizenship and
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives of Wipro.

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