Samuhik Pahal

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Highlights from the Samuhik Pahal Journey

A Journal of Our Collective Action

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CONTENTS

The institutional affiliations of the contributors reflects the status at the time of the first publication of their pieces in 'Samuhik Pahal'.

Creating Spaces by Facilitating Reflections

Highlights from the Samuhik Pahal Journey

There is often an unfortunate and artificial divide between spaces for doing and spaces for learning and reflection. In the context of the social sector, this generally maps on to the CSO vs University divide. However, this need not be the case. Civil society organizations working on the ground, for instance, are often well positioned for knowledge creation. They are also often well placed for testing the validity of knowledge coming from other sources on the anvil of practice.

'Samuhik Pahal' started with this simple premise – to co-create a space for learning and reflection that is built by the CSOs, belongs to them and is meant for them – to meet their needs of sharing and learning.

We believe that the process of writing creates a space, between one's work and one's understanding of it. This space is critical to hone the abilities of reflection and critical praxis. Things become clearer as one writes and writing becomes a process of learning. This is a critical aspect of knowledge creation in any domain.

We started this journey in the middle of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic with the goal of assisting the work being done by our partners grappling with the crisis, by being a space in which reflections can be voiced, resources can be pooled and insights can be shared.

Now we are into the third volume of Samuhik Pahal. To a large extent, the contributors for

the various issues (26 and counting) have been from our partner organizations. The process of iterations between various drafts revolving around reviews, feedback and conversations have helped us deepen our engagement in these relationships.

A significant aspect of this process has been the process of guest editing of specific issues involving our partners. For instance, the nature education issue of Samuhik Pahal was guest edited by Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) and ArtSparks guest edited the issue on art education.

In Samuhik Pahal, we have also regularly shared resources. These include listicles of books and TLMs, and technical tools that can help us all deepen our practice in the education domain. These include resources developed by partners, as well as by other organizations across the globe.

Samuhik Pahal, and the voices it tries to mobilize, similarly, have not been limited to Wipro's education partners network only. We have consciously invited voices from outside the network, and from beyond the CSO space from academia as well. We endeavour to engage with other communities and groups and create conduits of sharing across self-created silos.

This need and desire to go beyond silos is reflected in the choice of our themes as well. As a reader of the journal, you might be aware that each of our issues focuses on a specific theme. Sometimes this is a sub-domain of the field of education, e.g., social science education or mathematics education.

However, we have also picked up crosscutting themes such as inclusion, capacity building and impact assessment. A third kind of foci has been the ways in which we intervene in the sector; a good example of this is the issue that focused on learning centres as a method of intervention in education. We hope that by looking at such cross-sectional themes and tools of intervention critically, we develop an integrated perspective on issues of education that often dovetail into broader societal concerns.

The past three years have been a learning journey for all of us here in the Samuhik Pahal team. In this issue of the periodical we share with you articles selected from the two previous volumes that we believe will help us all in reflecting on our practice and renew our faith in why we are in this together.

The diversity of the themes and of the contributors that we have included in this issue of the periodical is representative, hopefully, of the collective work that we do. 'Samuhik Pahal' is after all, a journal of our collective action.

“Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast”

Nisha Subramaniam

In 2009, I saw these words on the blackboard. It was part of an ‘Organizational Behaviour’ course, as part of my Bachelor’s Degree Program in Sociology. I sat through the organizational culture lectures, fairly frustrated and puzzled - wondering, what on earth might this ‘culture’ be. It was all things - intangible, unmeasurable ways of being and working. Yet this is what makes or breaks an organization. I was grateful for all things tangible. I told myself, I would never want to deal with something this grey, complex and messy.

Through my first few years as a Program Manager at Teach for India, I knew I was hitting a wall, when I tried to work ‘around’ and not ‘with’ culture. My learning curve that started with me trying to get the core work done ‘despite’ people, got sharpened, twisted and turned into learning the ropes of working with people and taking them along. It was my first dip into that messy and complex thing called culture.

> “Kanavu means dreams... We aspire to empower teachers, community actors and students to provide holistic education.”

In 2018, I sat in a difficult space as a member of a small co-founding team of four where we wondered what’s happening? Why aren’t things feeling as they should? Why are we great friends, yet not able to use each other as sounding boards for the difficult things at work? Why are decisions taking forever?

In that moment, I knew we had to stop looking for answers amidst our plans and google docs. It lay in that complex, messy and grey parts of our work - in culture; not so much in what we do, but in the realm of how we do it.

Culture ate strategy for breakfast, lunch and dinner and we sat there, hungry for change.

Kanavu and the Hunger for Change

From the time I was an unassuming college student to being an ambitious manager and then a rookie entrepreneur - ‘culture’ shadowed me, like a wise monk, ever patient to put me on the path to pursuing the seemingly elusive excellence. As a rookie entrepreneur of a 3-year-old organization and as a parent of a 3-year-old child, culture has held most answers for the tough questions across life and work.

Kanavu means dreams; we are a small team of four with big dreams. We dream of a rural India where one’s circumstances don’t dictate one’s destiny. We aspire to empower teachers, community actors and students to provide holistic education.

We work collectively to lead change across five affordable private schools in Cuddalore in rural Tamilnadu. The work we do is challenging, gratifying, complex and essential. It keeps us grounded in the pursuit of building Kanavu as a sustainable organization.

As a small team with very varied backgrounds, working styles and beliefs, we bring an eclectic mix of perspectives and work experiences, in creating Kanavu. Living in one of the school campuses and working

together brings with it, its own share of joys, pulls and pressures. So, what is the role of culture in this journey?

The Dance of Decisions

We are a team with a lot to say and keen ears to listen. What this meant was terrifyingly long meetings and extended decision-making hours. A need to share one's own perspective, listening deeply to each other and waiting for consensus to appear was a way of working.

But often, consensus never made its appearance. What crept in instead, was exhaustion and divergence. Everyday operations made it tough to find that kind of time for long drawn out discussions, leading to overall disbelief in our abilities to make decisions.

A series of honest conversations showed us patterns of behaviors and mental models that made it clear that while overall ownership for Kanavu was abundant, ownership of tasks was unclear. When those juggle balls were thrown at us, we never knew who had to catch what.

This revelation pushed us into a design phase of reimagining the Kanavu whole, into smaller parts; verticals emerged and process flows were established. With some beginner's luck thrown into the mix, things began to flow and flourish.

What this allowed us to do, was to know where the buck stopped, for an aspect of our work. This nurtured a culture of ownership, while sparking initiative across verticals as well. For a young organization which is very heavy on everyday operations and very hands on with our stakeholders, this created mindspace and depth of impact, across different facets of our work.

Mirror! Mirror! On the Wall!

Kanavu works with 55 teachers, 5 school leaders and over 20 community actors - empowering them with skills and opportunities. A large part of our work involves 'reflection.' If you asked any one of us on the co-founding team, what's at the core of our work, we'd tell you it's reflection - except the time we realized it wasn't really an internal strength. Let me explain.

"When we see us standing through some of our toughest decisions, we know it happened because of the strength we draw from how diversely we approach a problem."

What's going well? What can we do better? What patterns are we observing? These are questions you'd hear us commonly ask. Except, we weren't asking ourselves these questions enough.

While we were dialed into our stakeholders' trajectories, we weren't reflecting enough on our paths, our strategies. We weren't all doing it at the same time. This meant that each one of us felt different pressures at different times.

This was detrimental to our culture. As a very tightly knit team, this left most of us confused about the health of our organization and its individual programs. Each one of us were on our own journeys. This led to conflicts.

This revealed to us, a part of our culture that needed focus - we needed to get into a habit of reflection. Reflection and articulation were then woven into our common spaces, meetings and work flows.

Does all of this make the journey of organizational culture sound heavy and more like a toil? Well, it's not really, because it's also a journey of learning and growing.

What makes it beautiful is that we are in this together. When we see us standing through some of our toughest decisions, we know it happened because of the strength we draw from how diversely we approach a problem.

That Kanavu provides a space for each of our workstyles to flourish is a huge source

Kanavu

The Kanavu Team in a Meeting

of strength and joy. The culture of respecting diversity and taking the approach of strength-based leadership has percolated to our stakeholders as well. As a way of working, we are able to play to our stakeholders' strengths, building immense confidence in a diverse set of leaders.

Does this mean, our culture no longer eats strategy for breakfast? Well! No; not for breakfast surely; however, it does step in for a nibble or two, showing us those ends that need refinement. We fall back on our current culture of connectedness, reflective practice and agility to keep moving and changing.

A variety of tools for reflection and mentors' perspectives enrich this journey. It continues to be grey, complex and messy – but it also makes one feel alive with the curiosity and stamina to explore this, as a lifelong reflective practitioner.

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This article is from issue no. 7 of the first volume of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of Organizational Culture. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

"What Should We Do in Class Today?"

Towards an experiential education?

T Shivanand

A Historical Conundrum

Tomorrow's history class is on my mind. I am already excited since it involves a short outing to a neighbourhood temple. In my preparation for studying local history with the seventh grade, I have planned several lessons but the temple outing excites me the most now. It is an obvious choice for exploration since it is a slice of time in the landscape that has remained for a few hundred years. There are other possibilities further afield in a small town about ten kilometres away, but when I suggest a class trip the students unanimously vote for the neighbourhood temple when I propose the options.

I'm suspicious of the excitement, and maybe a bit carried away by it as well, so here I am. There is the logistics planning, of course, talking to other teachers and taking the entire morning off from other classes, thinking of water and snacks. But the excitement for me is the bit of the unknown, the possibility of a discovery, precious and new to my understanding.

In the past week, I had tried to research the temple in the local district gazetteer and it had yielded very little information. I then made a reconnaissance visit to check out possibilities and chatted with a few residents of the neighbourhood who gave me different stories of origins for the temple. The temple itself was rather nondescript and somewhat decrepit. But it was clearly old, though the age was debatable. The architectural plan was a key in understanding its historicity.

But I had to consult more knowledgeable people and sources on the matter. A plan slowly formed in my mind that after some exploratory activities in around the temple, we can sit in the shade of the big banyan tree next to the temple and continue our class and take a break.

The run-up to the temple visit involved discussions around the understanding of historical time and the nature of evidence to be considered in estimating time. These are by no means simple ideas but are often implicitly expected of a seventh grader in terms of knowing dates and events. We had sessions of mapping the neighbourhood settlement from the children's collective memory, comparing these with topographic maps published in the late 1960s, planning and conducting interviews with people from the village to look at collective memory of physical changes and of people in the community.

> Inquiry-based, experiential learning approaches, with their constructivist focus, have the potential to be transformative educational experiences at scale and over time.

The temple represented a material witness which went beyond the age of the oldest person in the community. It is referenced in local lore around known historical events

that date a couple of hundred years at least. In all these sessions, I had introduced ideas and terms related to historical time, the nature and variety of sources to reconstruct history, and the balancing act of composing a historical narrative from these sources. There were many interesting points in the preceding weeks, including situations where children encountered contradictions in oral narratives and had chanced upon the idea that perhaps it could be resolved by considering other sources.

On the day of the expedition, I look forward to the learning possibilities for children in revisiting these ideas and hope that some of them would come together. I am also excited for myself, since there are many unresolved questions in my own mind regarding the origins of the temple and I am looking forward to the possibility of learning something new. The class activity planned that day is split between two groups. One group of students takes measurements and makes an approximate layout of the temple. Another group simultaneously makes pencil rubbings of sculptural reliefs of their choice on the pillars and wall skirting the temple's perimeter walls. The groups switch half way and experience the other activity as well.

At the end, we regroup, sweaty and expectant under the banyan tree, and discuss the morning session. The rudimentary application of the comparative method leads to inspecting the temple layout plan against others available in a visual compendium of architectural plans of south Indian temples. This results in a rigorous, but eventually inconclusive, debate on the possible age of the temple, with one group insisting on the 12th century by rooting for one possibility, while others think it is nothing like any representation of temple plans in the book. The pencil rubbings are interesting but not particularly helpful in our discussions. The competing oral narratives also complicate the picture.

One child draws our attention to the observation that the topographic map from the 1960s definitely had the temple located on it and concludes that people included it there since it was already there, so it must be at least that old. Someone else reminds us of the oral stories where the temple appears in accounts of a well-documented historical encounter from two hundred years back, so it must be older than the map. Another student even questions the veracity of the map!

If experiential learning and constructivist approaches are the way ahead, then we need teachers who are lifelong learners.

In the end of the class, I had a few imaginative exercises planned, including some writing in groups imagining the construction of the temple, where the students had to bring together the experiences of the past few weeks and ask questions as well - where did the stone come from, how did they cut the stone to fit so neatly, who made the plans, who put the stones together, where did they go after they finished the temple?

Is It Only History?

The challenge with a history class is to bring back the past in exciting and imaginative ways. At the same time, there can perhaps be some principles that can be drawn from the class to extend to any exploratory learning context irrespective of subject, school, or geography. We can take a math class and explore the nature of solids by way of examining the boundaries of known regular solids such as cubes and simple polygons in three dimensions and extending observations to make other solids with more edges, vertices and faces. We can comparatively examine the solids and arrive at interesting mathematical results that could link them together.

In this process of exploration and experimentation, we can learn new mathematical symbols and words that can be associated to make meaning in other ways using principles that we are familiar with already. We can explore the use of a variety of materials to make polygons; we can experiment with surface area and volume and extend these explorations in many other directions. The same can happen with a science class looking at the acidity of various foods in our diet, or a language class exploring the sound of words in poetry, and the experience of growing food in a small kitchen garden, exploring seasons, water, soil, pests, predators of pests and farmers' lives, that are part of EVS curricula.

In the tension between accountability to administrative hierarchies and the joy of observing learning in classrooms, the former often wins.

The core of an experiential[1] classroom is not in the curation of unique experiences, but the processes embedded in the exploration that enable multidimensional learning. The example of the experiential history class shared earlier is to illustrate the possibilities of introducing even middle school children to basics of the historical method, which allows them to approach history as a process of creating knowledge that is continuous and understand the limits of this process rather than accept it simply as a set of dates and events. In the example, it wasn't particularly important for the seventh grade that we definitely dated the temple, but that we arrived at a way of understanding the approach to dating it.

An aim of inquiry-based learning is to enable continuous learning, so it should be inherently process-focussed. This focus does not come at the expense of knowledge. In fact, it requires children to bring to focus previous learning as in the situation where children recall seeing the temple on the topographic map. The space for children to ask clarificatory and directional questions in shaping the learning process is another key essence of an inquiry-driven[2] process.

An oft-repeated complaint about planning for an experiential learning class is the perceived complexity and preparation involved. However, the increasing popularity of concept mapping and Bloom's Taxonomy[3] in Indian education circles has come in handy in translating constructivist[2] instructional scaffolding[2,4] approaches to lesson plans. At the same time, there should be discussions around its application in Indian classrooms which are alive to the socio-economic-politico-cultural contexts of the adults and the children involved in the learning process. Inclusive approaches that stem from an active understanding of the role of caste, disability and other pervasive inequities on the experience of learning, along with diversity of childhoods in the Indian context, need to be the next paradigm shift in shaping experiential classrooms[5,6].

Another concern around experiential learning contexts is around assessment. The creation of assessment opportunities, both formative and summative, can be plentiful in an experiential learning class. An immersive learning experience should free the child from the fear of assessment by taking away the focus from a single summative exam. The role of fear in complicating the learning process, often to detriment, has been widely understood for some time now. An experiential learning paradigm opens up opportunities for the educator to examine minimizing the role of fear in learning contexts. This is particularly true of the fear of consequence in learning experiences, often around asking questions, and expectations of performance in exams.

The Teacher: Learning and Autonomy

The central role of the teacher or learning facilitator in enabling experiential learning spaces may be self-evident in the preceding paragraphs, but the question of teacher motivation remains to be addressed. What motivates a teacher to spend time and effort to prepare for an inquiry-based class where she has to be responsive and alert, engage students who may vary in number and energy, encourage questioning and support contextual directional decisions in inquiry, anticipate physical and material needs, provide clarificatory, emotional and logistical support when needed, manage to note observations and offer formative assessments.

While this listing may sound daunting, many of these are already part of a typical teacher's life in school and require some alertness to certain aspects of her work relevant to the inquiry-driven space. This description of a teacher approaching an inquiry-based class largely applies to parenting as well, particularly in early childhood. Parents are our first teachers. What motivates parents to instinctively support a child intensely involved in learning to navigate the world every moment of its waking life?

Returning to teachers, the oft-quoted response to the question of motivation is the joy of observing children participate and learn in the classroom. While this is important, it can also be observed that teachers often transact lessons around the same context in textbooks over several years to different groups of children under demands of demonstrating learning outcomes through test scores. In the tension between accountability to administrative hierarchies and the joy of observing learning in classrooms, the former often wins. In this context, it may be worthwhile to highlight two key parameters of several that are not often discussed while considering a teacher's role in an experiential learning space. The first is the teacher's personal relationship to learning, and the second, teacher autonomy.

An experiential learning paradigm opens up opportunities for the educator to examine minimizing the role of fear in learning contexts.

My experience as a teacher has been a personally rewarding one, and a core part has been the joy of discovery and learning that is my own, independent of children and alongside them. In nearly a decade and a half of teaching in an alternative school near Bengaluru, I have repeated a chapter on evolution to thirteen batches of twelfth grade biology students. Each time, I have discovered new openings to the topic by exploring different approaches to it. One way is learning about fascinating examples of evolution from across the world, accessing studies and material beforehand and then design an inquiry-based lesson around it. Another way may begin in a purely comparative and observational manner, based on living examples available on the school campus and beyond.

While I realize that one aspect of this experience is likely to do with my training in biology, where I had advanced formal expertise, perhaps more important is my own life-long motivation and interest in learning. Learning excites me. The moment of insight in learning is perhaps the most intense emotional experience I identify with and one I often seek to gratify in my personal and professional learning spaces. But commitment to life-long learning is not restricted to teachers in alternative schools, but can be found in teachers everywhere[7].

The autonomy to take decisions in planning lessons and content to support inquiry-based learning spaces for children is the other side

of the coin to the personal relationship to a teacher's own learning. The autonomy to take decision in shaping a learning space often follows my own trajectory of learning. In my experience, I have also observed that autonomy is indivisible from the relationship of responsibility that I have with the child's learning process. This includes obvious signposts like awareness of time availability in the course of a year to plan the distribution of lessons effectively but not always feel constrained by the deadline, to more subtle ones such as sensitivity to the individual needs and contexts of children in the classroom. Awareness of these parameters provides me with the necessary preparation to approach any learning context without constant dread of making a mistake.

An important factor in my experience of autonomy and responsibility has been my conversations with colleagues and recognizing their key role in shared discussion spaces that have over the years informed my philosophy of approaching learning spaces. Subject-related discussions with colleagues in domain-interest groups have also contributed by means of sharing ideas, finding validation and facing critiques of particular ideas or models. The initiation of domain-specific communities of practice[8] and teacher-led volunteer learning forums[9] in various school networks across the country has been largely a consequence of recognizing the potential of peer groups to sustainably nurture learning in the long run.

There has been recognition at the systemic level that teachers need to be encouraged to discover learning for its own sake as increasing school numbers will attract a steady proportion of teachers who accept the role as a job to be done. If experiential learning and constructivist approaches are the way ahead, then we need teachers who are life-long learners and experience autonomy in systems which are responsive to these needs while nurturing a strong sense of responsibility to the process. While there have been many experiments of introducing experiential learning approaches in large scale systems such as the government school networks in different states, the long-term sustainability of such efforts involving individual teachers and schools would be in question without the active involvement and simultaneous reform of the existing cluster, district and state-level learning support frameworks such as DIETs and SRTs.

From Learning to Education

Inquiry-based, experiential learning approaches, with their constructivist focus, have the potential to be transformative educational experiences at scale and over time. When the relationship between the child-learner, adult-learner, whether teacher or parent, and the school systems is redefined under this learning paradigm, the potential impact on society can be consequential.

The core of an experiential classroom is not in the curation of unique experiences but the processes embedded in the exploration that enable multidimensional learning.

A key assumption here is that participants in this process have shared aims and core humanist values, and a shared understanding of approaches and outcomes, such as a commitment to achieving well-being for all. In reality, we have diverse personal and community values, and ways of living. In such a scenario, how do we commit to the broader umbrella of experiential education, with its disruptive potential to status quo, rather than restricting experiential learning as a classroom tool?

In case of teachers and schools, there is often a wilful focus and messaging on particular approaches and learning outcomes, rather than considering the long-term implications of experiential education.

This narrow focus can lead to inquiry-based approaches being the next buzzword in education circles or as a leading part of the branding of education institutions, especially in an era of burgeoning private education institutions. Parents in certain contexts may end up recognizing it for similar reasons.

To extend this argument, does the introduction of experiential learning approaches have a real impact, for instance, on perceptions of board exams and scores achieved in those limited, performance-oriented races? This is but one example of the limitations of narrowly defining the scope of inquiry-based learning to classroom approaches. I can only hope that this will not be another case of squaring the circle.

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This article is taken from an issue of Samuhik Pahal (1.12) that focuses on the theme of Experiential Learning. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

Missing: Paint Stains and Paper Cranes

The Case of Visual Arts in the Village Schools of Sukma

Neeraj Naidu

The Non-existence of Art Class

Come to Sukma, a district in south Chhattisgarh, walk into any government school and find the time-table. Try to locate the word 'ART'. Chances are that you won't find it. And, luckily, if you do, try to quantitatively compare with the number of times Mathematics, English, Hindi, Science or Social science appear on it. I am sure the comparison will illustrate the lamentable state of arts as a subject in schools. And I am convinced, as a student of the Indian education system and as a teacher in the same, the situation would not be different elsewhere in the country, excluding a few exceptions.

In Sukma, I often hear the government officials and teachers saying that it is very difficult to reach many villages due to the rough terrains and violent socio-political history. Nevertheless, I find that nothing stops the hierarchies embedded in formal education from entering the schools in those hard-to-reach villages. In the last 7 years of living and teaching in many different schools in Sukma, ranging from the massive residential schools that host around 500 children to small village-level primary, middle and high schools, never have I ever found an art class.

It is crucial to acknowledge the severity of the absence of the arts from the school classrooms—where children spend at least six important hours of their waking lives daily—in order to understand the contradiction between the kind of opportunities (as theorized by developmental psychologists) a child needs to learn, develop skills and attitudes, and what our classrooms actually offer. It would be unfair and irresponsible of me not to mention the names of researchers from whom I am going to borrow certain words and findings, and count only on observations I've made of small children. Yet, I recount that children are highly curious and playful within their social and natural environment. They are explorative and investigative in their approach. They are constantly building things and developing projects. They engage with materials deeply, and express their learning. They use their hands and bodies to grasp and make sense of the world and perhaps, at times, just to have fun. Does the space between four walls of the classroom provide children the apparatus to learn in the way children learn the best?

It is heart-wrenching to notice the dire absence of art-mediums, art-materials and art-teachers in the village schools which are terribly underfunded both in terms of money and imagination. Children rarely get access

Neeraj Naidu

Radha, Drawing a Bird, Grade 4, Primary School Pakela, Sukma

to unruled paper, colours (in any form) and other resources that allows one to make art. Sometimes, they don't even have pencils. I have seen children grabbing every little chalk piece fallen on the floor and drawing on the blackboard or the floor because these are large spaces where big drawings can be made. Sadly, there are schools that prohibit children from using chalk and board in the absence of teachers. Materials such as clay and other things from nature and children's houses are available. But using them for art-making and ensuring learning through the process requires pedagogic understanding by teachers.

Now I would like to take a strong position here and claim that the arts offer opportunities to develop not just artistic and aesthetic sensibilities and capabilities but also attitudes that we need outside of the realm of the arts. The arts attend to the process of learning in a manner similar to the way individual blocks in a game of Tetris fit into one another. And while I speak of learning this and developing that, one must not forget the joy that comes out of making art. Pure joy. I have seen it in the eyes of my children and felt it in my own heart.

What Happens When We Take the Visual Arts to a Classroom?

"*If I paint a wild horse, you might not see the horse...but surely you will see the wildness*" – Pablo Picasso

Allow me to limit my use of the word art to only the visual arts in this reflection piece. And, to start, let me first break down some commonly held beliefs associated with art. Often believed to be a hobby, visual art is often reduced to 'drawing' alone. If stretched, I've heard people refer to the visual arts as 'drawing-painting', something that can be practiced as an extracurricular activity and not a career pursuit. Often it is considered only worthwhile for a select few to pursue seriously—only those who are 'miraculously gifted' to become artists. Based on my experiences, a few educated parents stress the importance of visual art as it helps their children make better diagrams in biology.

Such notions need a sociological examination. Only a radical shift in people's perception might alter the state of arts education. Here I share a few anecdotes from my facilitation notes to illuminate how the process of guided art-making in a classroom can be a rich learning experience filled with opportunities to develop learning and life skills in children.

Neeraj Naidu

A Toy Made by Small Children, Village Neelawaran, Sukma

"Radha (age 8 years) holds the pencil but hasn't started drawing yet. She deeply observes the black and white picture of a bird. The bird appears enormous, its wings stretched out. She notices the many shapes, hidden in the picture, that form the image of the bird. When she is convinced of her close observation, she starts drawing on paper. Once the lines are done, she looks deeply again. She is looking at the patterns on the body of the bird, how the wings are curved, and seems like she is almost studying the anatomy of the bird. She also notices the lightness and darkness of the shades of grey as guided by the arts facilitator. She attempts to draw the shapes and patterns. Sometimes her face twitches in dissatisfaction. Maybe a line has gone wrong. She doesn't have an eraser. So she thinks how can this problem be solved. She asks a friend and he helps her in overwriting the line with a darker line. When

the drawing looks complete, she takes a deep breath." [notes 2019]

"Dinesh Baghel (age 14 years) seems to be dissolved in the process of mixing and making new colours. He asks me, 'How many colours can be made?' I say, 'As many as you wish.' He makes around 30 using 3 primary colours and white and is done for the day. Next day he starts painting his self-portrait. He observes himself using the selfie camera of a smartphone, noticing the shape of his face, the length of his hair, the position of his eyes, nose and lips. He paints his face but is not satisfied with the colour. He tries to change it and then gets sad that he made it worse. He goes around and looks at how others are painting. He talks with others and observes their brush strokes and colour-mixing. He observes that many are non-representational paintings and are using colours very freely. He finds it alright that the colour of his face in the painting is not the same as the actual colour of his face. In fact, he further challenged himself by taking a creative risk, creating a new colour for his face. He explores the paintbrush on another paper to make thin lines for eyebrows. He perseveres for more than one hour and then asks me to take a photo of him with his painting." [notes 2019]

"Hidme (name changed; age 9 years) presses the oil pastel on both white and then the black paper. She investigates how the pastels behave differently with different amounts of pressure applied, and on different papers. Exploring further, she learns that dark colours can totally cover light colours but the opposite is not possible. She scrapes the colours off to make patterns. With a little guidance, she realizes that her fingers can spread the colours. She makes a yellow circle and spreads the rays using her finger. She spreads blue over the black paper and makes white stars above. She seems to have an image in her mind. Her explorations lead her to self-expression." [notes 2020]

Neeraj Naidu

Hadma, Devnath and Dinesh (L to R) Painting Self-Portraits, Porta Cabin Pakela, Sukma

"Rural spaces provide rich possibilities of observing nature. My students and I often went outside the school to closely observe and draw. Today, each student picked a tree and observed its shape, colours and checked to see if there are any animals, birds or insects living on them. They then drew it using just pencil and crayons. I wish we had other art mediums to explore. Nonetheless, children were happy when they saw all the trees on paper together. One of the students said, 'it's like we've drawn a forest.'" [notes 2019]

These examples show how the process of art-making is deeply explorative, engaging and expressive. It allows for children to develop skills like close observation, attention to detail, investigation, problem-solving, creative risk-taking, collaboration, etc.

Through my participation in a professional development program (EdSparks Collective), I had the opportunity to learn about a robust and new approach to art education. Besides learning skills, it made me see how confidence is instilled in children when they actively create something meaningful instead of sitting passively in the classroom. It made me realize how art promotes creative risk-taking and unfetters children from the fear of failing.

On Art Integration

Apart from a few enlightened exceptions, the recent surge of attention that art education

has received is in the form of art integration. A group of art-educators advocate that the integration of art with non-art subjects—the practice of using art strategies to build skills and teach classroom subjects across different disciplines—will improve teaching-learning. Having found this idea useful, more and more teachers are subscribing to the many strategies of integrating art. This has resulted in research that studies the transfer of arts learning to other areas of cognition.

Hetland et.al., in a qualitative, ethnographic study of 'serious' visual arts classrooms, write, "Art students who become comfortable with making mistakes and being playful may be willing to take creative risks in other areas of the curriculum" (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013).

My fellow educators have also been utilising visual art to improve reading and language skills in children. In their experience, art integration helps children learn faster.

While practitioners' beliefs are to be respected, one needs to study the extent of these large claims about the pedagogical significance of art integration. In Burger & Winner's (2000) meta-analysis, they find no support for the claim that visual art enhances reading skills or even that reading integrated with visual art works better than reading instructions alone.

In my own experience of teaching art to children in Sukma, I find that while art integration can enhance language development, there is deep value in children learning art as a subject in itself.

Also, there seems to be a growing belief that art education will be useful in increasing workforce productivity. Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education writes in the report 'Reinvesting in Art Education', "Education in the arts is more important than ever. In the global economy, creativity is essential. Today's workers need more than just skills and knowledge to be productive and

Neeraj Naidu

Vishnu Kartami Made A Fully Operating Truck Using Waste Cardboard, Village Kodrikosum, Sukma

innovative participants in the workforce" (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011).

In contrast, the report 'Arts for Arts Sake? The Impact of Arts Education,' published by OECD argues that, "If learning in the arts has 'collateral benefits' in other areas, so much the better. However, we do not believe that the existence of arts education should be justified in terms of skills in other academic subjects: if one seeks first and foremost to develop skills in geometry, studying geometry—rather than music or dance—is always likely to be more effective. The primary justification of arts education should remain the intrinsic value of the arts and the related skills and important habits of mind that they develop. Ultimately, the impact of arts education on other non-arts skills and on innovation in the labour market should not be the primary justification for arts education in today's curricula." (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013)

Keeping in mind the complexities and nature of different subjects, one has to be mindful in their use of pedagogies in the classroom. Blindly using art as a decorative piece, as a catalyst in learning other subjects, might only continue to keep art low in the hierarchy of subjects.

Visual Arts as Social Justice

"Putting little white dots on blue-black is not enough to paint a starry sky" – Vincent Van Gogh

Visual art gives children a chance to engage deeply with materials and mediums and express in ways that are beyond words. In Sukma, the school language—Hindi is not the children's home language which is often Gondi, Dhurwi, Dorli or Halbi. Writing is rarely taught as a process of expression of one's own ideas and experiences. Thus, it remains ill-developed and doesn't naturally take the form of art. If given freedom and the tools, children eagerly want to express about their lives, their communities, their festivals and practices, dreams and fantasies.

Sukma is the *bhum* (earth) of *Adivasis* (original inhabitants) and yet schools have been neglectful in developing and extending children's cultural expression. As a teacher, I believe, visual art bestows children with possibilities to express, and share with others, their lives, their stories and imagination, their world with all of its richness and complications.

So as teachers, educators or anybody concerned with education, what should we do now? How can we fight the inequity of art education in our country? Will children studying in our village schools ever get access to art education? How can we advocate for art education in a time when our country is obsessed with STEM, seeing it as the only marker of development? With these questions, I would like to rest my case, because I know, in the vast expanse of Sukma, somewhere, in the villages, or in the forests, children will be making art now. And, nothing can stop them from making it. But I do wonder, when will children make art in the classrooms?

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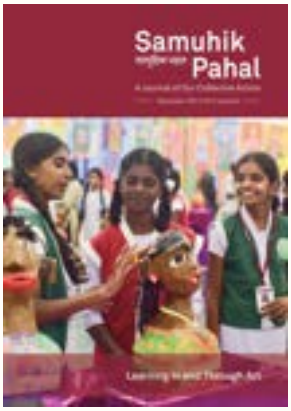

This article is taken from an issue (2.4) of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of Art Education. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

Inclusive Education Works Better for Typical Kids Too

Jo Chopra McGowan

At Latika Roy Foundation, we believe that when we plan for the most vulnerable, the world works better for everyone. It is one of those things we say so often it's become a truism for us – almost too obvious. But we call them truisms because they're true. Here's one example of how this particular truism works.

Many parents, many teachers and many school principals fear that bringing disabled children into mainstream classrooms will lower educational standards for the typical students. The reverse is true.

Look around the room at any meeting of educated people. Look around in your own office. A minimum of 30% of the people you see – always – will be wearing glasses, contact lenses or have had corrective surgery. You can ask for a show of hands to check on the ones who aren't obvious. No one minds admitting to the surgery or the contacts because this is a disability which has been successfully mainstreamed. There's no stigma.

But now go into a government school. I can guarantee you that you won't find more than one or two children (if that) wearing glasses. I've confirmed this again and again.

What happens when an obviously visually impaired child comes into that classroom? The teacher, finding that writing on the board or referring only to written text in a book isn't working for her student, has to do things differently. Maybe she brings that child right up to the front row so she can be sure he's following what she's saying. Maybe she assigns another child the task of verbally conveying what she's writing on the board. Maybe she asks him to repeat back what she's said. Whatever she does, she has

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recognized that every child doesn't learn the same way. Now that her class of 50 kids has one child who is blind, she knows that there are 15 more who are struggling with vision problems in some way.

Once she has made that breakthrough in her thinking, she may start to look at the other children in her classroom with more compassion. She may start to realize that some of her kids actually can't hear what she's saying because they were born with an undetected hearing loss or they've had repeated ear infections which weren't treated effectively. They aren't deliberately ignoring her.

Latika Roy Foundation

She may begin to understand that asking a class of 6-year-olds to sit still for 45 minutes is asking too much or that the child who keeps putting his hands over his ears isn't being naughty. He's feeling overwhelmed by the noise and the chaos of being in a crowded room with 50 other children. That's the power of inclusive education.

The Latika Roy Foundation is a three-decades old NGO based in Dehradun. We started as a school for disabled children because my own daughter wasn't welcome at the school her elder brother and sister attended. I didn't want her to go to a special school. But 30 years ago, there was no other choice. Today, while there are more choices for disabled children, these are still far from being enough.

So, a large part of our work is training mainstream teachers to be more accepting of differences, and to cater to all kinds of learners. We continue to provide specialized education options for children with ASD, Down Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy, along with the physical, behavioral and occupational therapies they need. But more and more we are successfully transitioning kids into mainstream classrooms.

When teachers and principals have the right attitude, it really isn't that difficult. True inclusion means giving every child the benefit of doubt. We assume that every child wants to learn, that they're hard-wired for learning, and that if they are struggling, it's up to us to identify the problem and work around it. There's always a work around.

When we give teachers strategies to help the particular child they're worried about, they often find that the same strategies do wonders for the rest of the children. I remember Vishal – a class 3 student in a government school in Delhi. Vishal used to shout out answers whenever he felt like it, never waiting to be called on and often answering questions that hadn't even been asked.

There could be many reasons for this, but one of them was that Vishal didn't understand how to wait for his turn. We suggested that his teacher make up a rule that he could only speak when he was holding a ball that she would toss to him if she wanted him to answer. It became so popular that all the children wanted to hold the ball while they were answering.

For Sara, who fidgeted constantly, making it difficult for her to concentrate, we suggested giving her a squeezy toy to hold. The excess energy was thus channeled and she was better able to focus.

Aslam used to constantly ask to leave the class on one pretext or another. If he wasn't given permission, he would just walk out anyway. We suggested that the teacher present him with three 'get out of class'

tickets. Any time he felt he needed a break, he could simply place one of the tickets on her desk and leave. No questions asked, no explanations required. But he only had three tickets. She explained that he should save the tickets for when he really, really needed to get out. Because, if he used them all in the first 10 minutes, he'd be stuck if later in the class he felt desperate.

The knowledge that he had the control in his own hands was remarkably liberating for Aslam. As the days went on, he was able to wait longer and longer without leaving the room. Just knowing he could leave if he wanted to, allowed him to relax.

For Aslam, being forced to sit in class with no hope of escape felt like being thrown in jail for life. Paradoxically, by giving him an actual escape plan he stopped needing to escape. For other children, extra time to complete assignments, having a scribe or being allowed to take tests orally can all be helpful.

Yet one of the most common responses we get when we talk about such strategies for disabled kids is outrage on behalf of the other children. "It's not fair to them," people insist. The belief in fairness is deeply-held but often misunderstood. Fairness doesn't mean that everyone gets the same. Fairness means that everyone gets what they need.

Inclusion helps us understand the truth about fairness because the needs of disabled children are more obvious than those of typical kids. It would be ridiculous to deny Moy Moy the wheelchair she needs because we aren't giving all the other kids wheelchairs.

The other kids don't need wheelchairs. And if a child needs not a wheelchair, but extra time, alternate testing arrangements or a 'get out of class' ticket, that's what they should get. Whatever it takes.

Inclusion moves us out of a competitive, anxious view of education focused on marks, seats and the dog-eat-dog world of getting into IITs. It allows us to see education not as a transaction for material gain with winners and losers, but as a process of opening up the world for every child, at a pace that is enjoyable, and in a style designed for learning, not crushing the opposition.

Like the ramp that allows wheelchairs, prams and suitcases easy access to buildings, and the visual timetable at traffic lights that allows us to calm down while waiting for the green signal, there is no downside to inclusion.

So the next time you enjoy an audio book, read captions on a TV news broadcast or use Siri on your smart phone, thank a disabled person. While such innovations were created for them, we're all on the inclusion gravy train now.

Jo Chopra McGowan is the founder and Executive Director of Latika Roy Foundation. Jo has worked on disability services, rights and awareness for over 28 years. She believes in the power of ordinary people to change the world, and she brings photography, love and passion to her work.

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Fundraising: An Art, A Science Or A Sport?

Sneha Arora

Let's start by addressing the elephant in the room - fundraising is a Pandora's box for most small and mid-sized NGOs in India. One enters the development sector with the assumption that funding will follow strong program delivery and impact. But that's not always the case. We have seen NGOs delivering strong programs, but falling prey to either organizational or systemic deficiencies impacting fundraising. Successful fundraising requires a triad - strong program results, organizational capabilities and a conducive environment.

Organizational capabilities refer to the internal aspects of NGO management that a Founder/CEO typically has full control over. When Atma works with NGOs to strengthen their fundraising capacities, we focus on a prioritized set of three critical organizational elements.

An organization should spend time in understanding and reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses across these elements. We often find that Founders/ CEOs tend to look outward for solutions to or causes of their fundraising troubles, without first taking a step back to look inward and understand where their fundraising capabilities might be broken.

Whether we like it or not, fundraising is both an art and a science; and if I may add, it's actually more of a sport. Sports research reveals that there are seven key traits that determine the success of an athlete - Concentration, Commitment to Excellence, Desire and Motivation, Goal Setting, Optimism, Confidence and High quality of relationships and Support. If you're a fundraiser, I am sure you can relate to most of these traits and might even have experienced moments of both strength and weakness in them.

Environmental Factors at Play

Though organizational factors play a large role in fundraising successes of NGOs, environmental factors can often prove to be a spanner in the works. Environmental factors may have a low traceability of occurrence, but can prove to have a high impact on the fortunes of a nonprofit, depending on any number of factors (sector, NGO size, geography etc.). Unlike organizational capabilities, these are often not in control of the Founder/CEO. There are five environmental factors which in my view dominate the fundraising landscape for NGOs in India.

Mandate Mismatch: Much like modern day dating, a mid-sized NGO leader is often trying to find the best donor match. Sector alignment (Education), sub-sector alignment (Life Skills), program alignment (Teacher Training vs. Student Intervention), annual budget size (<Rs. 5 crore), grant duration (Annual vs. Multi-year) are a few of the top traits that one tries to match early on. 3.1 million NGOs in India have to align with these

criteria of the top thousands of institutional donors. This often proves to be a herculean task in itself for a leader to manage.

Asymmetry of Information: A related second challenge is the asymmetry of information which compounds the mandate mismatch. NGOs often invest in donor research, but there are only a handful of donors that invest in NGO research. Information - both with regards to the giver and the receiver - is fairly broken in the sector. Reliability on databases can prove to be helpful to an extent, but we have often seen that NGOs lack the resources to tap into sources of information that could help them overcome the mandate mismatch. These two challenges alone often trap nonprofit leaders in a loop which becomes difficult to break out of.

Regulatory Challenges: Regulatory challenges have been a recent addition to the list of macroeconomic factors plaguing nonprofit fundraising efforts. Reduced access to foreign funds and license renewal requirements have kept NGO finance teams, often overseen by the CEO, busy in the last 1-2 years. This impedes both the access to funds as well as the bandwidth to invest in fundraising efforts for a small or mid-sized nonprofit.

Domino Effect: The fourth factor that I would like to call out is what I call the Domino Effect. Not all NGOs experience it, but the ones who do, end up being the tail ends of the bell curve. NGOs that have been able to successfully raise large amounts of funding (due to any number of factors) tend to continue to build onto their success and scale up rapidly to be large organizations - oftentimes backed by a strong program performance, no doubt.

However, I have also seen the reverse occur, where small NGOs that lose out on funding due to factors beyond their control, see a domino effect of funders pulling out one by one, putting their very existence at risk.

Randomness: My thoughts on environmental challenges would be incomplete without discussing the role of luck or randomness in fundraising. I am sure we've all experienced the paradox of cultivating a donor through extensive efforts over the years, only to get a rejection, and the seeming serendipity of someone picking up the phone to call and tell us they would like to make a donation to our cause. As fundraisers, while we might not be able to 'plan' around this randomness, we cannot ignore its occurrence and impact on the success or failure of fundraising in our organizations.

Elements of Effective Fundraising: What Works

Being an eternal optimist, while I started this article on a note involving challenges, I would like to end it with solutions and recommendations that I have seen work for many mid-stage NGOs as part of our work in the Atma Accelerator.

Embrace the Grind: In my view, fundraising is 80% effort and 20% luck. Put another way, organizational factors can play a major role in the success of fundraising efforts. Given these are well within the control of the Founder/CEO, it is imperative for them to internalize and learn that fundraising is an effort-reward game. As Atma, we advocate for metrics to help NGOs track their fundraising efforts, before aspiring for fundraising results. This means setting targets not only for the amount to be raised, but also for the number of meetings conducted, proposals sent and new leads added to the pipeline. A strong research and an execution orientation is a non-negotiable for a fundraiser.

Resource Tip: Streak is a great software to invest in to manage funding pipelines. It allows the fundraising team to be organized and methodical in pursuing leads.

Diversify Your Donor Base: Never put all your eggs in one basket, or if I may add, even one kind of basket. Diversification has two

dimensions - one is the number of donors which contribute to your organization's annual budget, and the other is the nature of these donors. Keep the number of donors large. Even though this presents challenges in donor management, its benefits in terms of risk mitigation far outweigh its costs.

The second is to ensure that your donors are spread across the spectrum; a healthy mix of corporates, foundations, Indian as well as international funding, HNIs, non-HNI individuals, recurring and one-time donors, single year and multi-year donors - helps to ensure stability over a longer period of time.

Resource Tip: Read this article on IDR to understand the different categories of donors and assess what your organization's donor mix currently is.

Invest in Donor Relationships: I have found that fundraising can be one of the most tactical things a leader can do; but it can also be one of the most strategic. Investing the CEO/Founder's time in cultivating and nurturing a donor relationship that goes much beyond funding can be a catapulting force for the organization.

When was the last time you had a call or a coffee with a donor who supported your organization 5 years ago? It might not seem like the most pressing need for your organization, but it is an investment in its future. Invest in strong donor relationships.

Build a Reserve: This is a more recent lesson that we have learnt and advocate for passionately post pandemic. Saving for a rainy day hardly seems critical until the rainy day is upon us. If there is one thing that 2020 has taught us, it is the sheer uncertainty of our times. If you are driven by the long-term change your organization can create with stakeholders, set aside time, energy and a strategy to build a general reserve fund.

Resource Tip: CAP is a great one stop shop to help an NGO strengthen its compliances, finance and fundraising. Its annual membership is reasonably priced and we would recommend them as advisors for building a reserve.

Build a Support System for Yourself: Yes - for you. Fundraising is a mentally challenging sport to play, since it's mostly played alone and vs. an ever changing team. We recommend NGO leaders to invest in building a network of supporters - friends, family, Board members, advisors and mentors that can guide them through the ups and downs that come with fundraising. As is the case in a game, you might lose after doing everything right. In those moments, I go back and read the definition of success by John Wooden that I have subscribed to for the last decade of my life - "Success is a peace of mind attained only through self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you're capable."

Resource Tip: Read an article by Atma's fundraising associate to get a feel for what a day in the life of a fundraiser looks like here.

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Sikshan the Eklavya Way

A Two-Decade-Long Journey with Learning Centers

A Conversation with Rajesh Khindri

Eklavya is a non-profit, non-government organisation that develops and field tests innovative educational programs and trains resource people to implement these programs. For over two decades, Eklavya has sought to relate the content and pedagogy of education – both formal and non-formal - to social change and the all-round development of the learner. Eklavya has built up an extensive base of resource materials that includes educational literature, children's literature, magazines, textbooks and other learning aids.

Samuhik Pahal: Good evening. Please tell us about the experiences of Eklavya in running learning centers. Eklavya has been using them as a key intervention strategy for a long time and other organizations will have a lot to learn from you.

Rajesh Khindri: Eklavya was set up almost four decades back in the early 1980s... to primarily work on figuring out how learning can be improved in government schools. In those days, more than 90% schools were government schools. There were hardly any private schools. Eklavya comes out of an earlier initiative called 'Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program'. But as soon as Eklavya was set up, we got into working on other curricular areas like social sciences, languages and mathematics etc.

So, almost for a couple of decades from the 1980s to the 1990s-2000, Eklavya focused primarily on developing curricular packages for social sciences, languages, and mathematics, and on spreading the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program to larger geographies. Eklavya's vision and intention has been based on 'from micro-level experiments to macro-level action', that is to undertake intensive field engagements to develop programs, which might take 3, 4, 5, 6 years, as often these programs do. And then we try to scale these up through government structures-systems and through other avenues.

> We started realizing the importance of community engagement in late-eighties and early nineties, as local issues-voices started cropping up, even though we had the state backing.

So, for the first two decades, our interaction was mostly with schoolteachers, children and domain experts in the entire range. This was going fine as far as elements of holistic packages were concerned. But one crucial piece was missing, that was engagement with the community. We started realizing the importance of community engagement in late-eighties and early nineties, as local issues-voices started cropping up, even though we had the state backing.

Some parents or community members would question a certain method or a pedagogic practice. They'd say it is all child's play, and there is no serious teaching. Or they'd complain as to why we brood on flowers and

trees and cow dung, when it is the age of modern science and rockets! Across many semi-urban geographies, these kinds of issues started cropping up and we found that it was important to engage with the community as well.

Second, we also realized that this kind of total reliance on state structure and governmental permissions can be fatal at times; and, that did happen with three of our iconic programs between 2001 and 2002. Permissions were withdrawn for all the three major curricular interventions - the science teaching program, the social science program and the Prathmik Shiksha Karyakram. So, that was when we started thinking seriously that it is important to have educational engagements that are independent of the state permissions as well.

So, in this background, around 1998, some explorations were started in Shahpur Block of Betul district in Madhya Pradesh. In this block, Eklavya's primary education program was already running in the entire block in a couple of hundred primary schools. So, the local team thought of trying out some explorations working with the communities to figure out a way ... and, thus, the first such center was set up on a pilot basis.

At the same time, in addition to the two things that I mentioned, the third reason was that when we got into primary education, we also realized that the kind of academic and cultural support that most of us get in middle class families from parents, siblings and relatives is not at all available to a large section of children going to government primary schools, both in tribal belts and rural belts... even sometimes in urban areas as well. So, we felt that one has to conceptualize a space wherein a similar kind of support can be provided to these children, which we middle class folk get in our own homes. The support system ensures that this kind of input reaches children who do not have the organization from within their social circle. So, that was the idea.

So, when we started this in 1998-99 at Shahpur, we had two-three such centers. In those initial years, as well as today, we have had to ensure that this input is not mistaken as a parallel school. This is also not a coaching facility wherein school-work/ home-work is done. It is not even a full-fledged alternative school. But we hope that if students spend a considerable time over 3-5 years in this setup, they will be able to do much better in the school situation.

What we had in mind was to be able to prepare the children, so that they can learn all that is needed to enter a school and be comfortable there, that they become much more confident, and they are able to cope with their level-appropriate education in classes. That has been the idea. And, to enforce this we began 'Shiksha Protsahan Kendra' (SPK), an engagement in partnership with local communities. The pedagogy and the approach that Eklavya believes in, in primary education, in language education, in mathematics education, that is what is followed.

An SPK has about 30-35 students who work together. It has students from class 1-5 and a local youth, who'd ideally be from the same or a neighboring village, working to facilitate the learning of students for at least two hours every day. It is ideally arranged in the morning hours, but depending on local processes and needs, some centers also hold it in the evening. Either in the evenings or in

Eklavya

Mohalla Learning Activity Center
at Matapura in Hoshangabad District

the mornings, there are students from all age groups from 6 to 11; hence they are divided into three groups - A, B and C.

The clubbing occurs based on the existing skill-knowledge base of students: like the ones who are engaging with the foundational ideas of arithmetic or language, say are in group C and the ones who are fully aware of the basics and are ready to traverse into other developed domains are in A, and the ones who are in the middle are accommodated in B.

So, we felt that one has to conceptualize a space wherein a similar kind of support can be provided to these children, which we middle class folk get in our own homes.

This entire process requires some initial assessment that is done by the Eklavya team for which we use tools to classify children into three segments. And then, within that center students work as three independent groups, C, B, and A, with whom the facilitator must work. In general, we can assume that the students in class 1 and 2 are in Group C, students from class 3 and the beginning of 4 are in B and the ones in class 5 are in A. That is a general picture, but there are variations and mixes in each center, based on skill-knowledge level of each student.

So obviously it's an MGML – Multi-grade Multi-level - kind of approach. In this, the facilitator usually spends the most amount of time with Group C, that needs individual attention. She can then look at Group B and assign Group A with some activity to keep them engaged. It is entirely activity-based; whether it is language, or arithmetic, or way to know places, theatre and everything else is done this way.

But where does the community come in? This process starts with a series of visits and meetings with the local community. We sit with them for meetings after meetings to understand their perception of children, their ideas on learning, and on the standards of the students' knowledge. It is only if there is mutual consensus and keenness to collaborate that the Shiksha Protsahan Kendra is set up in that particular locale.

Right from the beginning, it is clear that the community will have to take responsibility to select the person who would run the SPK in that locality. So, they locate students who have finished matriculation or are in college from either the same village or from nearby ones. While selecting, they also discuss and deliberate with our team about the expectations from the facilitator, her/his role-responsibilities etc. While there are local pushes-and-pulls, they are also keen that an appropriate person gets selected. There is also the most important part of how we expect them to create an environment in the village which is conducive for students' learning, as well as for them to show interest in learning. While selection of the local facilitator is a crucial first step, organization of space of the SPK is as important.

So, for most of our centers in the initial days, it is the community that provided the space, whether it is a Panchayat Bhawan, or a room or any open space which can be used by the students. We realized soon enough that parents can't really contribute to the effort with regular financial inputs, so we tried to find a way out. Usually when the harvest season arrives, community members take care of a few expenses of the SPK—making available notebook, pencils and other stationaries for children. This is how the community takes further responsibilities.

We also ensure that every month a meeting is held with the local community wherein there would be discussions about the functioning of the center, updates about

the SPK, students' progress and a meet to present students' achievements facilitated by the young facilitator. We see to it that such meetings are regularly attended and participated with interest. We also set up a committee from the local community which has a couple of members from the school management committee as well.

Samuhik Pahal: In communities where you work, the parents are not exposed to education, but you are involving them in the education process through community participation. How has the parents' involvement in the work of these learning centers worked in your experience? What impact does it have on the children's learning outcomes?

Rajesh Khindri: So, we shall understand this in three steps. We believe that there are people in the students' community—the elders, parents, and others—who possess life skills and critical knowledge that might be very useful in learning, for example— a vast knowledge base about farming, weather changes and terrain conditions etc.

These also include their own ways of doing mathematics, their intrinsic linguistic skills etc. The problem is that society does not consider these as important and because of the perception that is created, local communities do not even realize that they possess important knowledge.

In SPK, it is possible to work with parents as well as students. Parents soon realize that the student had been going to school for two-three years, but she has picked up much more in just three months in SPK! And over time, over a year or two, some of the parents become confident enough that they start raising these issues and concerns in the mainstream school system as well, especially when they are formal members of the school management committees. This also pressurizes the mainstream education system to perform better.

Most of the facilitators are quite young — usually matriculate or college going, in some rare cases, even school drop-outs. So, we arrange intensive training sessions for them. In the first year they have three intensive, week-long residential training sessions; one at the beginning, another after 4-5 months and the third at the end after another gap of 4-5 months. In these sessions we try and discuss what is education, what is meant by learning, the relationship between understanding and learning—all these are discussed, not delivered as speeches from the stage. Along with these, the concrete matters of formulating teaching plans, monthly activities, day-to-day actions are all taken up.

We believe that there are people in the students' community—the elders, parents, and others—who possess life skills and critical knowledge that might be very useful in learning

The facilitators in the SPKs, i.e., the learning centers, work for two hours every day, and that too with different level-age groups. Hence, they are provided specific inputs to formulate strategies to work with multiple groups simultaneously. Content and process related topics are discussed in the training sessions. Additionally, we have fortnightly review and planning meetings. So, once every fortnight about 15-20 SPK facilitators meet along with 2-3 members of the Eklavya team. In these meetings they review the previous fortnight's actions and plan for the next one.

Over the last few years, we have realized that probably this capacity building has to be more intensive and requires one day every week. So, now at many places, these centers run for five days and facilitators

spend one day every week for preparations. So, over time, a strong local cadre gets built which looks after the education of students in that particular area. We also focus on and help toward further formal education of the facilitators. We explore options like D.Ed., B.Ed., completing graduation etc. So, although the SPK focuses mostly on students' primary education, very many other kinds of activities keep happening alongside.

Samuhik Pahal: You mentioned earlier that everyone contributes to the running of the learning centers. Would it be correct to say that the cost is shared between all the stakeholders who run these? And, that it is also a testimony to their motivation to have a learning center and their belief in education?

Second, is there a difference in the manner of participation of boys and girls? What different approaches are required? Is it the same when you reach out to girls and boys or did you try out some other approaches to encourage girls to join the learning centers?

Rajesh Khindri: One major recurring expense is the facilitator's honorarium. During the initial period, the stipend used to be about 1500 rupees per month. Now it is 2,000, 2,500 and 3,000 rupees, as per experience and location. In addition, there are many one-time/capital and some more recurring expenses. These were always taken care of by Eklavya, using various project-specific grants that it receives. The community was mostly responsible for providing space, allocation of time, involvement in the process of teaching-learning and, sharing some responsibility of the stationary materials etc.

Till the time we had 4-5 centers, there was intensive training for the facilitators. Every fortnight there were meetings to decide the course of action. And, there was on-site support too - Eklavya team members used to visit the centers regularly. This was not an 'inspection' or 'monitoring' but more on the lines of on-site training support. It was meant to analyze, with the facilitator, the problem areas, the nature of issues and troubles, and to discuss children's participation, problems, and solutions, if any. Until 2004, when there were 4-5 centers, all these activities were being undertaken by the Eklavya team members directly.

such out-of-school educational efforts and structures are necessary only because the State is not delivering on its promise.

By 2004-5 all the components of the SPK model were worked out and it was ready for being scaled up. So, it was decided that henceforth we would plan for a cluster, say of about 20-25 centers in one area. This would result in optimizing our efforts on fortnightly meetings, trainings and other organizational aspects. It was worked out that if an area has about 25 SPK centers, then it would require two Eklavya core team members. But two team members cannot visit all these 25 centers regularly.

But on-site support is quite important in this structure. So, we added one more tier to it, the 'anuvartankarta'. They were usually inducted from the team of sanchalaks/ facilitators who were doing really well and picked up content-methodology and became more proactive. The anuvartankarta had to visit a different center every day during the week and would be responsible for about 5-6 centers each, with a weekly onsite support cycle. So, for every cluster of 25-30 SPKs there would be one sanchalak each and one anuvartankarta for every 5-6 centers. So, there would be about 5-6 anuvartankartas and a couple of Eklavya team members anchoring this entire enterprise in terms of providing academic support and other operational inputs.

In this structure, cost of the salaries of the Eklavya's staff, the anuvartankarta and the sanchalak, and some other running costs are involved as well. Each SPK needs to have a set of books; 40-50 books ought to be there - a set of some other teaching-learning materials too, and a set of stationery items, in addition to individual notebooks/pencils for students. So, while nothing compared to a school, the cost for running an SPK is about one lakh rupees per year to cover all the expenses. Hence, a cluster of around 25 centers, will require about 25-30 lakhs for a year. This is not very high if you look at the school system. But it is not so very little that it can be mobilized easily by the community locally, which anyway has scarce resources.

Question of long-term sustainability of such an effort crops up time and again. We did try a model of partial economic contributions from the local community for a few years between 2014 and 2018, but it did not work out. The effort required to raise partial contributions was enormous, so it negated the purpose. We have been told that other organizations have managed to achieve this. But a couple of other such efforts that we have seen could not be sustained for long. Probably if there is a very strong local movement base, the scenario might be different. Also, we believe that responsibility of basic needs of the society rests with the State, and such out-of-school educational efforts and structures are necessary only because the State is not delivering on its promise. So, the debate continues.

Samuhik Pahal: Given that this experience of running these learning centers has been going on for the last 23 years almost, what role has it played in Eklavya's thinking about education? When the Shiksha Protsahan Kendras were started, they began because of particular organizational and field related needs. But did you have any other specific initiatives in mind which you were trying to learn from while doing this? Something that other organizations would have done earlier, for example, and in a similar domain?

Rajesh Khindri: I will like to get back to a question asked earlier, that I had missed answering, because it kind of ties up with the concerns raised in this question. It is the question about participation of girls. We noted that wherever the facilitators were women/girls, the center saw an increased and active participation of girls. So, over time, consciously, we tried that at least 50 percent of facilitators should be girls or women. This made a huge difference. That was an important lesson that we learnt.

We are banking on the fact that once students reach a point, the agency of the student, the young-adult will take over, for them to flourish and learn.

In this context another experience comes to mind. In another phase in 2015-18, we tried to develop a model for middle school SPK. In Shahpur, where our primary school centers were running for 15 years, our team shared that participation of girls in middle school SPKs dropped significantly. On closer scrutiny, they realized that the girls coming to middle school SPK were about 11-14 years old. They had to take care of all the household chores. So, they could move out of the house only after completing all the cooking, cleaning and washing tasks at home. So, we had to change the timings of the middle school SPK centers so that many more girls could attend. In the long run, we understood that both the course design and schedule were impacted by girls' participation.

Let me also talk a little about how things moved after the first SPK decade. Around 2010-11 we thought that we must try and gauge how it has impacted the education and learning processes of these areas, hence

we undertook a detailed study. At the same time, we also came to realize that impact can be enhanced if we are working in both the spaces. So, we proposed a composite model wherein we would have SPKs located in the community; but, at the same time would work with government schools and teachers in the same geography.

The approach was to provide workshop cum training support for teachers who are interested in a certain subject area. It also included components of onsite support where anuvartankartas would go to the school and work with the teachers, undertake some academic exercises and classes together, and plan with them. So, over the last decade a composite model evolved, wherein we work with the teachers inside the school and we also work with government school structures. This means that wherever possible we also engage at Jan Shiksha Kendra / Shala Sankool level to conduct trainings and orientations of teachers.

That is why we say, all that we are doing with the community must also get reflected in the school. If you look at the last ten years, now more than fifty percent of our centers are being held in school premises. In such places, we make the materials available to the teachers as well. That is, if teachers want to use these for the regular school, all the SPK resources are available and accessible — say 'Cardon ka Pitara' for langauge-maths activities, 'Gintimala' for foundational mathematics, or number cards set, or perhaps library books! So, the same set of resources can be used in SPK as well as in schools. This is another direction in which we have been travelling in the last 8-10 years.The other question was, how long will the SPKs continue to function in an area? So, three years ago one of our teams decided to try and build a set of criteria and parameters to review and examine an SPK's continued existence. They evolved a checklist of 10-15 parameters. These are used to review the current functioning and status of an SPK.

This led to a new model. If 10-12 conditions/ criteria are fulfilled, that means a sustained educational change has occurred in that locality and hence the SPK can be closed now. But that doesn't mean we pull out. We replace the SPK by a transformed structure called a 'Gatividhi Kendra', which has been developed in the last 2-3 years in a separate geography in Shahpur Block of Betul district. The Gatividhi Kendra is located inside the school, not outside. The older students studying in classes 6, 7 or 8 usually run these Gatividhi Kendras. So, the students who have studied in the SPKs will run these GKs and it will also have necessary resources – books and TLMs. So, these will act as a resource centers and will figure out their own mechanisms—whether they will have weekly or daily activities, or anything else that they deem fit. Teachers act as patrons, and don't have any major responsibility.

So, over the last decade a composite model evolved, wherein we work with the teachers inside the school and we also work with government school structures.

So, we tried this in Shahpur in a specific engagement slowly over last three years by reviewing and closing SPK centers. In the first year we reviewed and closed five SPK centers, next year we closed 10, and opened 'Gatividhi Kendras'. Now we have 25 such Gatividhi Kendras/centers running in Shahpur, wherein SPKs have been closed down by a conscious process and decision. And a transformed structure is in place. This opens up possibilities of a new trajectory.

At the end, I would also like to share another very recent achievement that is built on these community-based engagements. By mid-

Eklavya

Mohalla Learning Activity Center at Sitapuri in Dhar District

March last year, all the schools were closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. By mid-May, it was apparent that the schools were not going to open anytime soon.

The state was all into the digital mode. By mid-June we realized that there is no way that these digital measures are reaching the sections of society that we are working with. We were also clear that it is extremely important for young children to have face to face interactions, group-peer interactions, to meet, to get out of their houses that were in a very stressful situation because of economic hardships.

So, in June 2020 we started a sort of community engagement in two places, in Hoshangabad and in Shahpur. It took the form of Mohalla Learning Activity Center (MLAC) in Hoshangabad and Mohalla Gatividhi Kendra in Shahpur. In these, students of a locality come together, and guided by a local youth they spend some time together every day, without any external physical movement into the locality. The only requirement was that the facilitator be of the same locality, and that the facilitator had access to a smart phone on Saturdays wherein they could attend planning meetings for a couple of hours.

For example, the planning team sits in Shahpur and the cluster is in Dhodra Mau, where the center is. So, the team plans activities for two-three hours daily and ensures that the center has enough stock of books and stationary items.

The trial centers ran in well-ventilated spaces. Not more than 10-12 children came and interacted maintaining COVID safety protocols. This trial took place for 2–3-weeks in the second half of June and the beginning of July and it worked well. Local Communities responded with enthusiasm and interest, especially because children had not been to school for many months and parents were concerned about their education.

So, in July we decided to launch these centers on full scale. Within one month, in Eklavya's geography, we had 300 Mohalla Learning Activity Centers running. By September 2020, we had 600 centers running daily for two hours. And the Shahpur centers, which had become 'Gatividhi Kendras' run by older children of class 6, 7 or 8 took up this task seamlessly. So, we could work with around 15,000 students throughout the year, during a year wherein the mainstream education system came to a standstill.

Because of this, we now have a cadre of 600-700 Youth Volunteers across five districts. We feel that a cadre of local youth who can contribute to the education of that area is being built up, and this will also facilitate their own learning curves.

Samuhik Pahal: Please give us a generic sense of the good things happening at learning centers per se, not only from Madhya Pradesh but from across India. Secondly, we request you to discuss some of the more negative aspects related to running learning centers. Any observations from different models that you have been reading about or experienced?

Rajesh Khindri: I think this provides an opportunity to reflect on a four-decade journey wherein one sees a cyclic learning. Right from mid-1980s, starting in Dewas and in Hoshangabad later, we set up 'Chakmak

Clubs' anchored by a resource pool of students. 'Chakmak' is a monthly magazine for children that Eklavya brings out. It started in 1985 and it has been running for the last 35 years. Interested active students of middle and high schools with initiative, selected through a process of workshops, usually 4-6 in each village, ran what we called a 'Chakmak Club'. They could undertake whatever they wished to do, be it opening a library or doing some daily activities like origami and clay modelling, or form a study-discussion circle. And it was entirely voluntary.

Our input was that every month they would come together for at least two days in residential workshops to review, plan and learn some new activities. A similar kind of model was later tried in Hoshangabad, what we called 'Baal Samooh'. In this process we saw children's own learning, understanding of social issues, sensitivity towards issues, problem solving evolving enormously.

It was an open platform where not only learning was in focus, but social issues were also discussed. These spaces are very important and crucial. We must see how we can create more of such spaces. From running SPKs, then working with schools, to Gatividhi Kendras run voluntarily by students; we are almost back full-circle to the point where we started.

So, over time, a strong local cadre gets built which looks after the education of students in that particular area.

We are banking on the fact that once students reach a point, the agency of the student, the young-adult will take over, for them to flourish and learn. I see a loop, and a question emerges: that wherefrom will the understanding of society and sensitiveness to diversity come from?

In all this the most critical issue is that all stakeholders—children, youth and others—see their relevance, their roles and understand the workings of this process of democratization while simultaneously realizing their own importance and potentials.

Introduction to the Interviewee: After a basic exposure to science during formal education, **Rajesh Khindri** learnt science-education on-the-job during a longish stint with Hoshanagbad Science Teachinng Program (HSTP), from 1986 to 2002 in Eklavya. He has also served as the Editor of 'Sandarbh', a bimonthly magazine for teachers. He is keen on the development and dissemination of educational materials and ideas, and in issues related to sustainable development.

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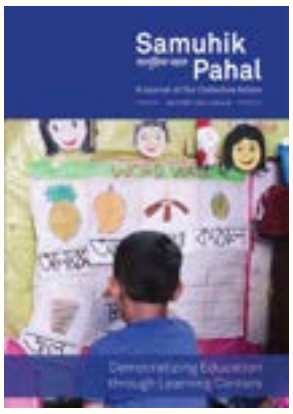

This interview is taken from an issue (1.8) of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of Learning Centers. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

Bringing Children Back to Government Schools

School Improvement Stories from Bengaluru

A Conversation with Varun Nallur

Varun Nallur works with Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru.

Samuhik Pahal: What is the genesis and history of the school improvement journey of your organization? What are the approaches and thinking that have informed this process?

Varun Nallur: At Azim Premji Foundation, our work focuses on the professional development of teachers, head teachers and government functionaries. In addition, we also work at the state level to create enabling conditions for change. We attempt to do this through building capacities of senior administrative and academic leaders, curriculum development, support for in-service teacher education processes and policy-related work.

We are currently present in 50 districts across six states and one union territory. These are amongst some of the most vulnerable districts in the country. Our field institutes offer on the ground support in different aspects of school education in the districts we are present. Most of our work is centred around the elementary education system in rural government schools.

In Bengaluru, just like in other districts, we focus on the capacity building of teachers and other stakeholders in the government schooling system as the core of our work. Here I will try to provide some context on the public schooling system in Bengaluru. Bengaluru is divided into Bengaluru Urban-North, Bengaluru Urban-South and Bengaluru Rural districts, for ease of educational administration. These districts are further divided into blocks and each of these blocks may have anywhere between 80 to 250 government schools, depending upon its size.

Over the years, Bengaluru has seen a mass exodus of students from government to private schools. This is in line with what is happening in other urban areas in India. In rural areas, where we mostly work, 50-80% of the children still go to government schools.

In Bengaluru, the situation is completely different. Only about 15% of the children remain in government schools. These are children whose parents cannot afford any kind of private schooling.

A few years ago, we undertook a study with schools and communities to understand why parents were moving away from the government schooling system. What we found out was that there were aspirational aspects, other systemic issues and in some cases, there were misguided perceptions of the government schooling system. I will

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try to mention a few of these here. Some of the parents mentioned that the government schools were in the Kannada medium, whereas the parents' aspiration was for their children to study in an English medium school.

The infrastructure of the schools was perceived to be bad. Safety of girl children was also felt to be an issue by a large number of parents. In Karnataka, grades 1-3 are clubbed together to facilitate multi-grade, multi-level teaching and activity-based learning processes. Parents often saw this as an arrangement to deal with the lack of teachers and not as a pedagogic innovation.

We found that some of these areas could be resolved fairly easily. The most difficult part was how the government schools could bridge the parents' aspiration of having English as the medium of instruction. However, around the same time, the Government of Karnataka started the Karnataka Public Schools (KPS) along the lines of Kendriya Vidyalayas.

A KPS is supposed to offer classes from pre-primary to class 12th in a single school with both Kannada and English as mediums of instruction, with higher annual grants for these schools for learning resources and infrastructure. The support for infrastructure and learning environments in government schools has historically been inadequate due to the scale of investments required.

Our approach has been guided by the principle of working closely with the schools and their various stakeholders to bring about change, along with creating opportunities for advocacy, so that the government takes up and improves the schools at scale. Wipro Foundation agreed to collaborate with us in this effort. They provided support to improve the overall school environment and we worked on the academic and community engagement aspects. We identified two schools for intervention. Both these schools were different. One was a Grade 1-7 school, located in the Peri-Urban part of Bengaluru, and served mostly migrants from North Karnataka, Bengal and Bihar. The other was a K-12 school which was located in the centre of the city and served some of the most densely populated slums.

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In both these schools, the children came from the most marginalized backgrounds, and we wanted to ensure that these children get access to some of the best possible resources along with good teaching and care. We should understand that the starting points of children from these backgrounds and those from middle-class homes are very different. These children need a disproportionate amount of resources, attention and care to do well – the best possible schools, teachers and other institutions of care to make up for the lack of resources and care at home. Government schools are the best places for this to take place, unlike a private school that stratifies the education system based on the children's parents' ability to pay.

We were trying to enable these two schools to have the best possible resources for the

students. We thereby wanted to send a message to the communities saying that here is a good school, which will cater to your children's needs. It must be said here that some of the government schools now already parallel many of the private schools in terms of resources.

We started working very closely with the teachers in these two schools by providing onsite support. We also have had continuous dialogues around different areas such as corporal punishment and better engagement with the community, etc.

Let me give you an example, which will provide you with a glimpse of the work. We found children from grades 3 and 4, for example, lacking in very basic competencies in language and math. Our approach with the teachers was that we discussed the problem and how they could address it by using different pedagogies using the resources we already had (e.g., using libraries to improve language acquisition). This is just a very basic example of some of the collaborative efforts we have undertaken in different areas. It took us a lot of time to get to this level. Slowly over some time, they have started paying attention to students' learning, which in turn guides the way they teach.

We also began working on areas such as school assemblies. This intervention was important because it provides a space for children to speak up and for teachers to understand students. Many other areas such as school maintenance are discussed in the assembly. Along with the school leaders we have been working on different areas.

To illustrate an example, how do we work on effective timetabling to ensure adequate learning? If some of the students are falling behind in reading, can we include more library periods to encourage and inculcate both guided and independent reading? In one of the schools, there were significant behavioural issues amongst the children.

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We looked at using physical education (PE) as a way of addressing this. It meant that PE needed to become a part of the timetable and we worked it out with the headteacher.

In rural areas, what you have is a village and a school and these are co-existent. The school is right there in the community and people know each other. It is very different in Bengaluru, where many micro-communities coexist in a place where the school might be located. Children come to the school from different settlements. Structures such as School Development Management Committees (SDMCs) are pretty much non-existent. From the very beginning, our attempt has been around getting parents to come into the school more often.

For any school to work, it needs to develop good relationships with the community. With this in mind, we did learning melas that get the parents to visit the schools and become involved in their children's education. We tried to involve them in the process of development of school infrastructure. In the SDMC meetings, the requirements of the school were discussed and decided upon. This was then shared as a brief with the architect. Some parents worked in the schools when the construction was going on. The support of the community was critical in getting the work going during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenge in our context was reaching out to parents in the community, so that they bring the children back to school. We did a lot of community outreach. When you reach out to parents in their homes and their

communities, they become a lot more open to what you have to say and offer.

Our learning is that parents' involvement in the school is directly proportionate to the visits to the community that the teachers undertook with interactions which are centred around their children. It has helped us address problems of attendance and continuity of education. When parents see the folks from school involved in their children's lives, they also start becoming involved in the school's affairs.

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Despite our best efforts, some children do drop out. What we need for such children, who come from extremely challenging backgrounds, is effective after-school support. We are now planning for a community resource centre in one of the settlements. Initially, that was not a part of our program design.

While working with the schools, we were also talking to the functionaries from the education department at the cluster, block, district and state levels in parallel. We also made it a point of going to the schools at least twice a week to work with the teachers. It was an intensive effort and some of our best people have worked in these schools.

School improvement does not happen with one visit or one workshop in a month. Improvement means that you need to work with the staff, build relationships with them and the community, and they need to start seeing the value in school improvement processes. Only when they do that, then they start participating.

Otherwise, it is a very superficial way of looking at school improvement. We can develop many models; we can come up with acronyms and these would look good on a presentation. Nevertheless, it does not work that way on the ground where the key is to have an on-ground presence and work very deeply with the various stakeholders.

Both the schools we work in - one of them is the Govt Higher Primary School, MR Nagar, which is a grade 1 to 7 school and the other is the Karnataka Public School, VV Puram which is a K-12 school - serve children from vulnerable communities that have their own sets of issues. They are also very different from each other.

The MR Nagar School has always been doing relatively better. When we did a study of student learning when we started work, its children were at around 65 to 70% of their grade-level competencies. Therefore, the focus in this school has been to make sure that all the children are at the grade level of learning in all the subjects. This lowers the risks of children dropping out substantially.

However, at the VV Puram School, we found that students had only around 30% of the grade-level competencies. One of the reasons behind this may be that the children here are from Tamil speaking backgrounds. Hence, it becomes very difficult for them to learn in a Kannada medium school.

Moreover, the shortage of teachers also has had its effect. In addition, the children were not very regular at school. Unless the students are regular, no matter what you do, it does not work. You could have wonderful lesson plans and make wonderful resources available. However, if the students do not come to school regularly, then it is extremely difficult to ensure effective learning. Therefore, at the VV Puram School, we have been focusing on making sure that the children come regularly.

The VV Puram School, in its heyday, was very good and had close to around a thousand students studying there. Due to various reasons, the enrolments began to deteriorate. When our interventions started in this school, the enrolment was less than 400. It had 370 students from pre-primary to 12th grade. We did many enrolment drives to ensure that community members are aware of the school. We realized that not many people knew about this school, even though it was in a very prominent location. The enrolments now, with all the improvements and outreach, is close to 700 students.

The enrolments have gone up because people could see clear, tangible change along with the visits from the teachers. The primary school where we work had some 74 children when we started. Today, it has about 220 children enrolled with increasing demand every day.

We have seen children from low-cost private schools coming back to both these schools. Because all that was there is available here in the government schools as well. The kind of resources we have in these two schools are much better. You walk into our library, you would be surprised by the kind of books that we have there. We have books in Kannada along with English books from different publications and books by authors such as Dr Suess, Eric Carle, Julia Donaldson, and Margaret Wise Brown among many others.

We have been doing consistent outreach in the community, making parents aware of the changes happening in the schools. This has led to an increase in enrolments. It is very encouraging to see that it is possible to get children back to government schools. We feel that by making sure that the basic facilities are in place, with parents realizing that the teachers do care for their children and there is an effort at the school to improve their child's learning, the enrolments in government schools will go up.

We were also working with the state simultaneously. We often invited state and district level functionaries of the education department to the various functions in the schools. This started multiple conversations. In one of our monthly meetings, they came back to us saying that they want to widen the ambit of the program and extend it to more schools.

They said, "We will give the infrastructure support. Would you help us with the academic part of it?" We agreed. We mapped out the schools in Bengaluru. We took some of the most vulnerable populations - one of the examples is DJ Halli, which is the largest slum in Bengaluru. Similarly, we mapped out 50 odd settlements. Amongst these, we prioritized the twenty most vulnerable ones. In these communities, we tried to identify schools that go from pre-primary/grade 1 to grade 12 or at least till the 10th. The Government of Karnataka (GoK) have now chosen 20 such schools.

Now the GoK have allocated a budget of 89 crores that they will invest in these 20 schools. We would not claim that this has happened only because of our intervention. From an advocacy point of view, it is the outcome we have wanted all along. We want higher expenditure, and higher investments, in public education. It becomes very superficial when you advocate bigger spending without really showing an example

or demonstrating a model. Therefore, our focus through this process has been on how we advocate for large-scale public expenditure in education.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you think organizations working on school improvement can bring in concerns surrounding equity, inclusion and diversity into the centre of their operations?

Varun Nallur: Some contextual information might be relevant here. Karnataka spends 17-22,000 rupees per child on their education per year. If you have the Kendriya Vidyalayas as a benchmark, they spend close to 40-50,000 rupees. Therefore, that is half of the state government's per child spend. This means that massive additional investments are required to improve public education.

Karnataka has one of the lowest per capita public expenditures on school education. Of every 100 rupees it spends on education, 80% goes towards teachers' salaries. In addition, about ₹5 goes to midday meals and the rest go towards other entitlements and incentives. This means that very little amount is available for improving the overall environment of the schools and focusing on improving the quality of teacher professional development.

It is a big issue. It is not just a Karnataka specific problem, but a pan-India one. Everywhere we have seen a drastic decline in public expenditure on school education. Studies have shown that the amount state governments spend per student, as well as how they spend it, have a positive correlation with student achievement, especially for children from vulnerable backgrounds. What we see is by design, the education system is nowhere close to being equitable, diverse or inclusive. So, the question then becomes, how do we start paying attention to these issues?

Issues of equity are often tied to underlying causes and that is why we need to think closely about diversity and inclusion. Issues around equity can be difficult to address because of historical and structural systems of inequality we have in our society. These are very complex issues. However, let me try to address it from the perspective of our work with the two schools.

Azim Premji Foundation

Equity entails each of the children receiving what they need to develop their full academic and social potential. No matter what the child's present socio-economic and family background is, they must get the support and resources they need to achieve their full potential. Here are some of the areas we are working on with the teachers, headteachers and the community. For example, the teachers have become more aware of issues such as poverty, family background and other issues that the children face and how these affect the students' learning.

By understanding this, they can identify underlying issues behind students' low performance and create better opportunities for students in their classrooms. They can

thus better engage the parents on the support that their children will need at home. They are also in a position to provide more effective in-school and after-school support to the students that will help them perform better.

We are now looking at setting up community resource centres to ensure that good after-school support is available to the children of these schools. We realize that the school alone may not be able to solve the issues the children face. These are unsupervised, young children who are easily susceptible to the influences that surround them.

Therefore, can we get them to engage a lot more productively when they go back home from school? Can we have a good library where many activities take place? Can we have a centre where arts and crafts are happening?

We have not executed these ideas yet. That is the next thing we want to do here. We want to make sure that these children at least complete their basic school education so that they can make good, informed choices about what they want to do in their lives. The idea is that you set them up for a good life.

What we see is that those who remain in the government schools are some of the most marginalized, i.e., those from the lowest socio-economic strata of our society. Unless we can bring children from different backgrounds into government schools, it is never going to address the idea of having a diverse school. That is why we have tried to create a school with the best possible resources and teaching-learning practices which enable children from diverse backgrounds to study in the same class.

What does being included mean for children from marginalized and minoritized groups in terms of effective participation in learning processes? Here are a few examples of some inclusive practices that teachers could follow in their classrooms: Not using any form of corporal punishment, fear or intimidation in the classroom with children; Not labelling or passing judgements on learners (regarding their capacity to learn or to be successful) based on their socio-economic status, gender, appearance, physical and learning needs etc.; Displaying patience and skill in addressing diverse learner needs to support their learning, e.g., identifying learners lagging and giving them attention, using differentiated instructions for different learners, knowing learner needs, etc.; Displaying commitment to learners and their learning; Accepting all children, observing and engaging with all children, believing that all children can learn; Not discriminating against learners based on caste, gender, religion, or any other biases, and showing equity and fairness among all learners; Demonstrating social sensitivity – being empathetic towards the challenging socio-cultural context of the learners.

Most of our work is focused on working with the teachers and other stakeholders to help them reflect on their existing knowledge, beliefs and attitudes so that they are able to change their practices.

Samuhik Pahal: You have given us a good sense of what has been the impact of this school improvement intervention. However, if we were to measure impact, not necessarily quantitatively, what are the ways in which we can conceptualize impact while thinking about and working on school improvement?

Varun Nallur: There are certain things that are visible. Enrolment is the first indicator that things are working. Retention of the students in the school is another measure. The second aspect of impact that we can discuss here is on student learning. We try to understand with the teachers how the students are doing in math, languages and other subjects. Along with the traditional pen and paper tests, we try to give students opportunities to express themselves, to figure out their learning level.

It has been important for us to have a continuous sense of where these children are

in terms of their learning. It is clear to us that these assessments are not only meant to find out what the students know, but also to guide the teachers about changing their pedagogic and classroom practices. Improvement of teachers' practices in subjects they teach is also an area where we are seeing visible changes.

However, there are certain things about which you will not be able to measure impact in quantifiable ways, e.g., the teachers' involvement in the community and students' lives. We now see that the teachers are regularly engaging with the community. They make sure that PTMs happen regularly. They visit the community with us. They take a lot more interest in how the students are doing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when we decided that we would provide rations to the community, the teachers volunteered to come with us to distribute. The interest of the teachers in ensuring that the school is well maintained is high. Now they have started to come in early in the morning, and along with the students take part in maintenance of the school premises.

So how will you measure this, someone taking ownership of these spaces which was never the case before? We have engaged very closely with the community and the children during the pandemic. The teachers used to go into the communities as part of Vidyagama community classes. While it was allowed, we did that. It was very encouraging, because not all schools were doing it.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the key learnings from your school improvement journey that might be of use to other organizations as aids in thinking and practice?

Varun Nallur: One key takeaway is that anything you do must be rooted in students' learning. You can have as many programs as you want, but if you want to make a change, it has to be tied to the students' learning. Secondly, you have to work with all the stakeholders including the teachers, the headteachers, the community, the students and the educational functionaries. If you are looking at systemic improvement, you must take into account all these stakeholders.

We have also been trying to get teachers from around the schools we work in to come and observe some of the good practices the teachers in the intervention schools have undertaken in their classrooms. For example, many schools have received funding for libraries in Karnataka. Now we bring in teachers from the neighbouring schools and try to highlight the role of the children in the maintenance and functioning of the library along with the teachers.

We also bring them into the Nali Kali classroom to observe how math is being taught well with low-cost materials that the teachers have created, observing the role of children in maintaining the kitchen garden, and so on.

There are many such things that we try to do to make sure that this work expands. Therefore, when you are doing something, you will need to work with all the stakeholders and ensure that there are opportunities for interactions with other schools and teachers. Creating these professional communities of learning will ensure that better practices are adopted and in turn lead to improvements in other schools.

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This interview is taken from an issue (2.8) of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of School Improvement. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

Resources for Nature Education

Roshni Ravi

What are some resources we can use to introduce people to the wonders of the natural world? Here, we feature nature education resources in diverse formats, from different parts of India, for a wide range of age groups and learning levels. We also share a glimpse of the resource creation process for some of these to inspire you to create your own materials keeping your local contexts and audiences in mind.

Talking Birds: Early Bird's mobile-friendly, interactive poster series featuring Indian birds in different habitats, with their calls

Type of Resource: Interactive Digital Posters

Published By: Early Bird, Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF)

Languages: 10 languages: English, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu

Who is this resource for?
Beginner birdwatchers, children and adults!

About the Resource: Early Bird's interactive digital posters can be accessed on any device - from mobile phones to laptops. The posters feature photographs of common Indian birds across different habitats. Clicking on any bird allows the user to see its enlarged photo, name and some interesting facts about it. You can listen to and learn the bird's call as well!

Resource Story: In collaboration with photographers, illustrators and designers, the team at Early Bird have created several resources including flashcards, posters and activity sheets to introduce people to birds that can be easily seen around us. Initially, they created posters of birds in different habitats that could be easily put up in classrooms. Interactive digital posters were created in collaboration with Mapunity to popularise Indian birds in a format suited for virtual learning.

Link to Resource/Contact: Interactive Posters https://www.early-bird.in/interactive

Contact: team@early-bird.in

A-Z Picture Cards: Fauna of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Type of Resource: Flash Cards

Published By: Dakshin Foundation

Languages: English

Who is this resource for?
For early readers and anyone wanting to know about the wildlife of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

About the Resource: These A-Z picture cards feature animals seen in and around the

Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This resource was developed to make foundational literacy and numeracy accessible through place-based education for children in the islands.

Illustrations and interesting facts about 26 land and ocean creatures are featured on these cards - one for each letter of the alphabet! From diet to habitat, the cards are packed with little information nuggets about the islands' wildlife and can be used to play games and quizzes.

Resource Story: This resource was designed by the Environmental Education team at Dakshin along with illustrator Subhadra Sridharan. The cards will serve as a supplementary resource to the Treasured Island books – a contextual and place-based environmental education curriculum about the islands. The team also sees the cards as a response to the needs of curious students and teachers who want to get to know the animals they spot around them better!

Link to Resource/Contact: https://www.dakshin.org/a-z-picture-cards-the-fauna-of-the-andaman-and-nicobar-islands/

The Magic of Mangrove: *An introduction for young people to the mangrove forests of Odisha*

Type of Resource: Activity Book (available as PDF/ hard copy)

Published by: CHALE CHALO, Bhubaneshwar, Odisha

Languages: English, Odia

Who is this resource for?
13 years and above. Originally put together as a resource for eco-clubs in government schools in Odisha.

About the Resource: A book that uses activity-based teaching-learning methods to introduce the unique mangrove habitat and its plants and animals to children and young adults.

The book features maps, simple experiments, illustrations and a glossary to learn about mangroves not just in Odisha but other parts of India as well. Children get the opportunity to closely observe what they learn in classrooms on visits organized to mangrove nurseries and forests. The use of songs, puzzles and flashcards along with the book makes this learning experience joyful for students.

Resource Story: The team at Chale Chalo has been working on mangrove regeneration, conservation and education since 2005. The book was developed after many visits to the forests to spark curiosity and interest among school students and teachers about mangrove ecosystems they lived so close to.

Conversations with the Forest Department and local communities contributed significantly to this resource.

Contact: Ranjit Swain, Director, Chale Chalo | chalechalo@rediffmail.com

Aniruddha Ghosh

Shell Shocker: a card game on the turtles and tortoises of India

Type of resource: Card game

Published by: Turtle Survival Alliance India (TSAI)

Languages: English

Who is this resource for?
Ages 10 years +

About the Resource: Can a card game help you learn about turtles and tortoises? 'Shell

Shocker' is an innovative card game that presents interesting facts about the many tortoise and turtle species found in India. A fun and accessible game that can be played in small groups, each card presents opportunities for players to learn about the shell length, weight, diet, clutch size, habitat as well as conservation status of these creatures.

Resource Story: This resource was created by the team at Turtle Survival Alliance India. The game took shape during the lockdown and was brought to life over several online meetings and the efforts of a multidisciplinary team. The cards are packed with information. These can also be used as handy field identification guides by budding biologists and students!

Link to Resource/Contact: If you are a school, library or learning centre write to tsa.indiaprog@gmail.com for copies

Purchase link for individual copies: https://www.pashoopakshee.com/product-page/shell-shocker-card-game

Trees of Mangar Bani: An illustrated guide and activity book

Type of Resource: Guide and Activity Book

Published by: Sanctuary Nature Foundation (Mud On Boots) and Mangar Eco Club

Languages: Hindi and English

Who is this resource for?
Members of the Mangar Eco Club and visitors to Mangar Bani

About the Resource: A bilingual resource, this book features 12 iconic tree species found in the Mangar Bani sacred forest on the outskirts of Delhi.

The book puts a spotlight on each tree through illustrations and interesting natural history and cultural information about the trees of Mangar. You will find descriptions of tree parts (that may help you put a name to a tree), information about a tree's flowering and fruiting patterns, details about a tree's preferred habitat, as well as the ways in which people use and relate to these trees.

Along with this, the book also has fun art activities and games that are sure to help you explore, know and connect with nature around you!

Resource Story: This book was the outcome of a collaborative project between Sanctuary Mud on Boots fellow Sunil Harsana and independent illustrator and designer Labonie Roy. The resource was designed for children of the Mangar Eco Club as well as for visitors coming to the Mangar forest.The intention was to encourage learning about their surroundings and the local ecosystem using an easily accessible booklet. This bilingual book also helps readers learn new words in either language.

Link to Resource/Contact: Visit Mangar Bani and strike up a conversation with Sunil Harsana to get your hands on a copy or write to Labonie Roy labonieroy@gmail.com

Wildlife of Pakke: Colouring Book and Nature Journal

Type of resource: Activity Book (available as PDF/hard copy)

Published by: Eastern Himalaya Program, Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF)

Languages: English

Who is this resource for?
Children and grown-ups who live in and around Pakke Tiger Reserve; but also for anyone who wants to know more about the wildlife of Pakke!

About the resource: A unique resource designed to encourage deeper engagement with wildlife through colouring and nature journalling. This activity book has colouring pages featuring simple and detailed drawings. The book is designed with the intention to help the user explore and enjoy the colouring process. Along with drawings there are blank pages to record observations and notes. Both commonly found wildlife and rare species like clouded leopards are featured in this book.

Resource Story: The Eastern Himalaya team at NCF organizes nature camps with school children in and around Pakke. This resource emerged during the pandemic when they could not organize these programs. The resource seeks to encourage children's creativity and imagination and to capture their own experiences of spotting wildlife around them.

Link to Resource/Contact: https://www.instamojo.com/NCF/wildlife-of-pakke-colouring-book-and-nature--b28a6/?ref=store

Saniya Chaplod | saniya@ncf-india.org

Birds of Kyari

Type of resource: Guide/ Information Booklet

Published by: Kyari Ecoclub and Titli Trust

Languages: Hindi and English

Who is this resource for?

For school eco clubs in Uttarakhand

About the resource: A booklet made by children for children documenting the bird diversity of Kyari village located at the edge of Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, Uttarakhand. This resource is a showcase of delightful illustrations and stories of Kyari's common birds created by children. A truly collaborative effort that captures children's experiences into a learning resource for other beginner birders.

What it takes/Process: The children of Kyari eco club began documenting the birds they spotted on their nature walks. They translated their observations and learning into drawings and stories that are featured in this booklet.

Link to Resource/Contact: https://wiprofoundation.org/resources/birds-of-kyari/

Sanjay Sondhi sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

We hope these curated resources have inspired you to not just find contextual resources to help you learn and connect with your immediate surroundings but perhaps also given you ideas to create your own resources along with your students!

Here are a few nature education resource repositories and organizations for further exploration:

Nature Vidya developed by Nature Science Initiative https://www.naturevidya.org/

Palluyir Trust for Nature Education and Research https://palluyirtrust.org/

Round Glass Sustain's Infographics & Explainers https://roundglasssustain.com/explore-infographics

Zoo Outreach Organization https://zooreach.org/

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Bhaskar Sati

Roshni Ravi is an educator interested in conversations that lie at the intersection of nature, arts, mental health and teaching-learning.

She currently works as Project Coordinator at Nature Classrooms, Nature Conservation Foundation.

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Resources to Plan Impact Assessment

Samuhik Pahal Team

Professionals in the development sector recognize the importance of assessing the impact of their programs. However, all assessments require a deeper understanding of impact evaluation and its relation to the intervention and the desired change. To that end, real-world examples and practical guidelines for designing and implementing impact evaluations help.

UNICEF program managers focus on core building blocks such as theory of change, evaluative criteria, and evaluative reasoning. Beyond goals and objectives, they also investigate any unintended consequences. Learn more about their approach here and watch this video to learn about the various elements of impact evaluation process and managing its various stages.

The MERL framework is a useful tool to capture the lessons learned from assessments—both positive and negative—and to track the project. 'MERL' is an acronym for four related elements of project design and implementation: Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting, and Learning. More information about the framework can be found on Pacific Islands Development Program's website, here.

Speaking about frameworks, NONIE (Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation), established to enhance impact evaluations among development professionals, provides an approach for aligning impact assessment methodologies and designs with programs and policies.

Consider referring to their framework here to sharpen your research design. Both are useful frameworks when presenting your projects to funders.

While impact evaluation has traditionally been led by donor agencies, more and more donors are realizing that active involvement of target groups in impact evaluation can create long-term impact.

For many organizations, one of their primary concerns is how to engage partners, beneficiaries and stakeholders in a respectful manner, while also leveraging and developing local evaluation capabilities.

You can refer to this document, which has been utilized by USAID missions to provide practical guidance in the areas of planning, commissioning, and implementing locally led assessments.

Each domain such as education, health, humanitarian relief assistance, governance, climate change, or microfinance, requires applying specific evaluation methods. The 3ie and the Asian Development Bank video lecture series on impact assessment provides an overview on this in addition to covering some of the core concepts in impact evaluation. Watch the videos here to deepen your understanding.

Over the past years, impact assessment has emerged as a critical component of program development. At the same time, the changing needs of decision-makers, and the decision-making process, have become increasingly complex.

These resources can help us reflect on how far we have come, how we are doing in terms of practise and effectiveness, and on present and future challenges and opportunities.

SAJAG

Other Resources

World Bank Open Knowledge Repository

Impact Evaluation in Practice, Second Edition (worldbank.org)

Government of Australia

Choosing appropriate designs and methods for impact evaluation (industry.gov.au)

Community Ownership in Evaluation

Reshape How We Think about Development and Evaluation

3ieimpact – Evidence Maps

Primary and Secondary Education Evidence Gap Map

MOOC

Online course on evaluating social programs

Poverty Action Lab

Online courses on Impact Evaluation

USAID Evaluation Report Template

Evaluation Report Template | USAID Learning Lab

Acknowledgement: The Samuhik Pahal Team acknowledges the help of Binoy Cherian, Rahul Mukhopadhyay, Indira Patil, Dwithiya Raghavan and V. P. Vishwas for their help in compiling this set of resources on impact assessment.

This piece is taken from an issue of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of Impact Assessment. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

What is Capacity and How to Build It

Learnings from Experiences of Resource Organizations

S Routray

Capacity is a complex thing. But at its core is the idea of the ability to do things and the process of gaining this ability and executing it. The capacity in question might be for something concrete at the individual level. For example, it might refer to the ability to take a class on the number line with young children and contribute to their understanding on the subject. Or it might refer to some more abstract and intangible individual attainment; e.g., the ability to interact with colleagues in a non-judgmental fashion without the burden of personal expectations. At the organizational level, similarly, it might refer to something concrete, like learning to work in a new thematic area such as making coding fun for high school students. Or it might refer to something far subtler – like the ability to create a culture of meetings in the organization where these are conducted democratically, with all voices being heard, respected and given equal importance.

In this piece, we share with you a few audio-visual resources of interactions with Resource Organizations from Wipro's Partners' Network, that cover the whole range of this terrain. In these videos, organizations share a bird's eye view of their journeys, and tell us fascinating stories of learning to work in the various areas they have chosen for themselves.

Jodogyan

Jodogyan is a Delhi-based non-profit that has been active as a resource organization, working in the field of math learning in schools, for more than two decades now. In the videos that we share, two senior people from the organization discuss many relevant themes related to capacity building. They link processes related to capacity building to questions about motivation and experimentation in pedagogic processes.

In this context they foreground the centrality of the classroom as a site for learning for everything related to school education. They stress the need to link insights borne from classroom practices to policy making and program development exercises. They also highlight the importance of keeping abreast of relevant research. They also foreground that processes of capacity building at the individual and organizational levels are slow and organic, and need time for their unfolding.

Website: https://jodogyan.org/

JodoGyan Video Playlist:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmc8c2ZHF-scq_gQkjTmIIF9xqqnxpNGd

Nature Conservation Foundation

Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) was set up in 1995. It works in the fields of conservation, biodiversity, ecology and human-nature interactions. Research, education and conservation are the modes through which it intervenes in the field. Their offices are in Bengaluru and Mysuru, but they work all over the country in these

areas. When Wipro Foundation approached NCF for conversations about the possibility of starting a nature education program in schools, they thought of it as a great opportunity.

They had done some work in this area, especially within the framework of science popularization earlier. To be able to execute the Nature Classroom Project, NCF used this experience as a springboard and started talking to relevant organizations and individuals. They also took stock of already existing research and learnt from similar initiatives from across the world and India to build their capacities for this program. To learn about the fascinating journey of how an established organization built its capacities to do something new, please watch the videos on the NCF playlist whose links are shared below.

Website: https://www.ncf-india.org/

NCF Video Playlist:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmc8c2ZHF-sfeHiSxOlpMCCemezdz2bbJ

Vikramshila Education Resource Society

Vikramshila is a technical support organization that works in the area of education in the state of West Bengal. It was founded in 1989. As the founders' initial competencies were in the area of early childhood education, that is the domain in which they started intervening first. The organization had a steep learning curve in the first few years of its existence. It soon started working on all aspects of K12 education. Learning how to do this has involved working through formal channels such as participation in workshops and training programs for team members. The organization itself has been learning from its membership of the various forums and networks it is a part of. These are more outward facing.

Inward facing processes include study groups, apprenticeship of new team members including courses/field immersions for them, and facilitation of informal interactions etc. Many of the processes of capacity building at Vikramshila have involved relatively finer aspects of organizational culture, such as learning how to keep the teacher at the center and a foundational reflexivity. For Vikramshila, building one's capacities as a member of its team also means successfully internalizing these values and then having the ability to translate these in the field.

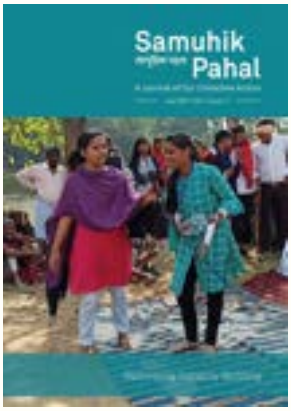
Website: http://www.vikramshila.org/

Vikramshila Video Playlist:

https://youtu.be/9FyUOi6rGkE

In Conclusion

Capacity refers to both an individual's ability as well as an organization's or a team's bandwidth to do something. It can be something concrete and measurable. It can also be something subtle, intangible and impossible to measure. Capacity building processes need to be seen as unfolding over long time horizons and sometimes can be seen only in conjunction with other aspects of organizational culture. Building our abilities meaningfully to contribute effectively to teaching learning processes entails asking the following questions continuously – what are we here for, and what is it that we want to achieve.



This article is taken from an issue (1.11) of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of Capacity Building. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

In Quest of Togetherness: 'Sangati'

Nivedita Dwivedi

The Detective and the Historian

Imagine that you are a detective. You will probably relate the nature of your work to solving jigsaw puzzles. As a detective, you will be required to put together the missing pieces and arrive at a plausible explanation of the situation/event you are examining. This explanation that you arrive at will be a theory that you will formulate, which, according to you, will be the most convincing explanation of the situation under examination. The strength of the theory you formulate will depend on the strength of the evidence that you have in support of your theory.

Now, imagine you are a historian. What kind of work do you think you will be required to do as a historian? Do you think it will have any similarity to the work of a detective as described above? Does the possibility sound too far-fetched to you? If you will pause and reflect for a while, you will realize how similar both tasks are.

A historian is also a person who pieces together parts of a jigsaw puzzle and tries to make sense out of these. Out of the various pieces of evidence available to her, in the form of artefacts, archaeological remains, written and oral narratives, paintings, coins, and so on and so forth, a historian tries to place these in context, weighs them for their authenticity, relates them to other existing pieces of evidence and narratives, and then tries to formulate a narrative or a theory based on these, which, to her, sounds the best explanation for the situation under examination.

Again, the strength of the theory formulated depends on the strength of the evidence provided. A historian, thus, also understands that a theory that she is putting forward is not sacrosanct but is falsifiable, and thus liable to be modified or discarded in the wake of stronger counter evidence emerging. Also, since it is a theory based on her interpretation of the evidence in front of her, the historian also realizes that there may be equally plausible alternate explanations or interpretations of the same evidence, which may lead to other theories.

So, essentially the process of rewriting and reinterpreting lies at the heart of the historical process. However, this reinterpretation needs to conform to the standards of scientific enquiry.

The strength or weakness of all such theories depends on the strength or weakness of the evidence the respective theories are based on and the interpretations provided. Thus, by virtue of the very process involved in the construction and reconstruction of History, there is bound to be a possibility of the existence of multiple histories.

History as 'Detecting' the Past: Learning through the Sangati Curriculum

All of us have studied History as a subject throughout our student lives. How many of us have been encouraged to visualize it in the manner above? I am sure many of us haven't. The above visualization is something that is provided by the Avehi Abacus Project (AA) launched in 1990, through one of its programs titled 'Sangati'.

The above analogy (between the work of a detective and a historian) is drawn in the third kit of the Sangati program, titled 'How Societies Developed'. Sangati is a three-year supplementary program that is being transacted with students of classes V to VII in the municipal schools of Mumbai by their regular school teachers. It comprises of six kits which are transacted mostly once a week, with a variety of pedagogic strategies. These involve the use of group-activities, surveys and data-analysis, self-reflection, art-craft, drawing upon knowledge outside the school, and visual material that is attractive, eclectic and interactive.

The vision underlying the program can be summed-up as follows. Learning according to AA:

- is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes;
- is a continuous process, grounded in experience;
- is a holistic process of adaptation to the world;
- involves an understanding of the give-and-take between the person and the environment;
- implies knowledge acquired as a result of the interaction between social and personal experience; therefore, underlying all this are value systems.

–(AA website, 2001).

The six interlinked themes flow logically and seamlessly into each other. The journey starts with understanding oneself, one's body and the needs that all human beings possess. While the needs are common to all, they are met in diverse manner, and not provided for equally to all.

All these needs are met by resources provided by the earth. The second kit then moves on to 'Our earth and the web of life' that we are a part of. The attempt here is to understand our place in the universe and how complex and prolonged the process of evolution of life on earth has been. It is hoped these inputs will form the basis of creating feelings of humility towards nature.

The third kit then moves on to 'How societies developed' over time, across the world.

Learning About Our Social World Through Activities

Avehi Abacus Project

This kit encapsulates the history of human civilizations from early times to the 1950s. The focus is on phenomena, structures and processes, rather than on isolated events or characters. History is looked at as a collective heritage and is constantly connected with the present. Historical events are located in the context of the geographies they are enfolded in, adding more layers to understanding why they happened, and how the conditions prevalent in the space influenced them.

The fourth kit focusses on our society and 'The way we live' in the present, discussing various issues such as caste, religion and gender discrimination, and understanding our conceptions about patriotism, democracy, and the influence of media etc.

As change is a constant and continuous phenomenon, the next kit then focusses on 'Understanding change', and analysing it better, so that we can 'create the society we want' by developing a discerning mindset about the prevalent development paradigm to differentiate between 'change and progress'.

The curriculum ends with a forward-looking note and helps understand how to 'Prepare for the future', as an individual and as a society. The entire curriculum is designed to be interactive and joyful, to replace "teaching' by a voyage of exploration to discover facets of ourselves, our society and the world, to accommodate the understanding that each child thinks and learns differently, to encourage students to express their thoughts and share their life experiences, to help them cope with different situations and make the right choices, and determine better futures for themselves and those around them" (AA, Dear Teacher..., 2001).

Crossing Boundaries of Learning

Although, the Sangati curriculum is not discipline-based and restricted to subject-boundaries, yet just for the sake of comparison, Kit III, titled 'How societies developed', can be related to History.

However, it has a very different take on how and why students need to be made aware of 'History'. First and foremost, it does not talk about one single 'History', but of multiple histories, of kings as of common people, of wars as of their futility, of path-breaking events as of their impact –positive or negative depending on social locations of different sub-groups, in India and the world.

It does not limit History to dates and times, to kings and the boundaries of their empires, or does not try to colour it one way or the other. Instead, it encourages students to live it, to explore and to discover it, to go through the excitement of finding the pieces of jigsaw puzzle and trying to put them together in a way they think is most plausible.

It, then, does-not discredit one arrangement of jigsaw puzzle in favour of the other, instead it gives the message that many different arrangements are possible, and all will equally have to stand the test of falsifiability. It titillates and challenges the minds of the students, encouraging them to play with ideas and look at things holistically.

Avehi Curriculum Vs Textbook History

History, in the school textbooks in Maharashtra, is generally presented as a finished product that must be accepted as it is. This is completely in contrast to the alternate vision of Avehi Abacus, where it is treated as a process and a journey of exploration, waiting to be undertaken by young and curious minds. One views 'History' as a dynamic living process, the other as a static end-product that is too fragile to be tampered with in any manner and must be taken in the form it is presented, no questions asked.

In the context of attempts to rewrite history, Neeladri Bhattacharya states, "The past does-not come to us with a unitary truth embedded within it; the facts that historians mine do not ever speak with one single voice. As our perspectives change, we look at the

past in new ways, reinterpret events, discover new meanings within them, pose new questions that could not even be formulated within the limits of earlier frameworks of analysis. So historians tell different stories of the same past, refigure evidence in diverse ways in the act of rewriting history – an act that enriches the conceptions of our past." (Bhattacharya, 2002).

So, essentially the process of rewriting and reinterpreting lies at the heart of the historical process. However, this reinterpretation needs to conform to the standards of scientific enquiry. It needs to be based on legitimate evidence. It needs to put those evidence out in the open for scrutiny and examination. The theories that are put forward need to be falsifiable. Each and every statement that is made needs to be supported by some evidence and also has to be open to challenge in the face of a counter-evidence.

We also need to realize and acknowledge the efforts of those who have been trying to put forward counter narratives, challenging and questioning the above process of fabricating history and providing an alternative vision, that is based on the principles of enquiry rather than a final word that is considered to be sacrosanct. In such a vision, the values of today are tested on the anvil of the past values and vice versa, making them the stuff of real life and not as the deified glorious past or a binary of good vs evil. Avehi Abacus Project and 'Sangati' are the living embodiments of such a vision.

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This article is from an issue (1.10) of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on Social Science Education. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

Learning During COVID Times

Samuhik Pahal Team

Bringing Education Home

Teachers from Gubbachi Learning Community supported 35 children from a community with no access to running water and electricity in Bangalore. The teachers decided to take the learning to their homes as there was no way these children could take online classes. The teachers found innovative ways to introduce math concepts to children, using the material around them. They would then leave them with worksheets to continue the practice. Gubbachi Learning Community is a nonprofit working for the educational inclusion of out-of-school children in the city of Bangalore.

Making Online Learning Fun

Makkala Jagriti offered various webinar sessions to parents and children on how to make learning easier by producing basic learning resources that can be found simply around the house. Mohammed Ismail from Hale Sampigehalli Anganwadi has been practicing his everyday activities with his mother over YouTube sessions.

Teamwork, Makes the Dream Work

Thanujitha lives in Anjanapura, a suburb located in Bangalore. School closures due to the pandemic had affected Thanujitha's regular education. Bangalore-based Makkala Jagriti, which provides safe and friendly spaces for children from marginalized communities, has been sending out everyday activities to Thanujitha to ensure that no barriers affect his learning continuity. His father, Lokesh, a factory worker, has also been taking out time to support his son.

Learning by Doing

(Left) Children from Gubbachi reuse waste to create projects designed to help them learn how to be socially responsible.

(Right) In a Gubbachi EVS class in Bangalore, Grade 5 children look on intensely as their teacher demonstrates the concept that air has weight. This abstract concept was made concrete through demonstration.

A Breath of Fresh Air

Working in community spaces has also meant that restrictions on location do not bind daily activities like circle time for Gubbachi. Here children from the Kariyammana Agragara community enjoy their daily circle time and rhymes out in the open under trees.

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

Various studies show that malnourishment has a direct correlation with children's ability to focus on learning processes. Children attending Gubbachi's classes at Sulikunte Dinne received a boiled egg, a banana, and a Nutribar. Gubbachi also served lunch (from Adamay Chetana) to the children in the absence of the Akshay Patra meal.

Teachers with Resilience

Nalina, a bridge teacher, does a Read Aloud with her students in one of the sheds used by Gubbachi teachers for daily sessions at the Kariyammana Agrahara community. Since these sheds were not secure enough, teachers had to carry materials every day in their backpacks. In January 2020, there was a sudden increase in children wanting to join Gubbachi's bridge program in the Kariyammana Agrahara community. Housekeeping jobs in the area seem to have been a big draw for many families.

Support from Volunteers

Through the pandemic, volunteers continued to teach the children. In this photo, a volunteer tutors children for the NIOS Grade X Examination.

The Gubbachi ProActive program was initiated in 2018 for preadolescent migrant children who are at risk of dropping out of school. This program is designed for small learning groups at different levels of learning.

Community Learning

Online classes were not an option for children of construction workers and daily wage earners. Parents helped identify places near their homes for children to take the classes undisturbed. Seventy-five children in classes 1-3 in Kodathi GHPS were divided according to their location. Gubbachi teachers met them near their homes and helped the children continue with their lessons.

Photo Credits: Gubbachi Learning Community and Makkala Jagriti

This article is taken from an issue (2.1) of Samuhik Pahal that focuses on the theme of Learning at Home. You may want to read more articles on this topic here.

Demystifying Mathematics

Finding Joy in Numbers

Aastha Maggu

In our education system the teaching and learning of mathematics, is more often than not, abstract and procedural. Students seldom gain conceptual clarity. The fear of math is accentuated by notions like it is alright to not be good at the subject or it is not useful in life. In this article, we discuss the experiences, approaches, and struggles of organizations working on improving mathematics education in India, and the various techniques and materials they use to make learning math joyful for children.

Aavishkaar – Palampur

Aavishkaar is one such organization. The Aavishkaar team is aware that students, struggle to understand the fundamentals of mathematics. Sandhya Gupta, co-founder of Aavishkaar shared that their work focuses on facilitating educators and young learners to adopt a creative, curious, and critical thinking approach to education as the present system does little to hone children's curiosity and fails to provide them with safe spaces to make mistakes and learn.

They use teaching-learning materials and techniques that make learning math a visual, relevant, contextual, and engaging experience. They work in the public schools of Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, and Assam. They also closely collaborate with grassroots organizations across the country. The Aavishkaar team conducts training courses for teachers who are capacitated with the required knowledge, skills, and mindset.

Aavishkaar runs a learning center for students from first to tenth grades in Palampur. They also frequently hold online and residential camps for students where they deep-dive into particular themes. The team uses a framework that helps children participate in sessions and critically engage with concepts. Their five-step framework includes introducing the concept in a fun activity, working on a problem in groups and arriving at solutions, discussing their selection in the class, engaging on extensions of the problem, and finally reflecting on the essence of the concept.

The team begins each session with what they call 'Ganit Charchaa', where they generate a discussion in the classroom. The aim of this introductory activity is to encourage children to participate in the lesson without any inhibitions and reinforce that there can be numerous ways of solving a problem. Sandhya shares, "For instance, in 'Ganit Charchaa', the activity can be asking children to count certain items arranged in an order. The children use different ways to arrive at the total number of items. Children count the items by grouping them into different shapes such as a triangle, square, etc. This exercise allows children to arrive at the solution using their own rationales. Activities like

Aavishkaar Palampur

these instill confidence amongst children as they realize that there are varied ways to look at something. Children also learn to acknowledge and respect each other's opinions."

Dispelling notions of fear against, or inability to enjoy, mathematics is consciously undertaken by Aavishkaar's educators. They have observed that children and teachers both share this uneasiness. The educators are encouraged to discuss experiences of mathematicians that drive home the point that learning math the right way can be fun.

Aavishkaar's educators often explore a real-life problem in small groups. For instance, to explain linear equations, children can be given a problem in which a local shopkeeper has to procure a particular item such as pens from a wholesaler. The wholesalers charge different costs for the item and are located at varying distances. Questions such as which is the best deal, writing a general equation for finding the cost of procuring that item, representing the deals on a graph, etc. are then posed to the children.

Children work in groups to answer certain questions. They are later requested to explain the rationale behind their solutions to the larger group and they are nudged by the facilitators to use mathematical reasoning to arrive at those answers. Teachers are encouraged to discuss extensions of the problems raised by students in the session and some that they themselves deem to be relevant. The students are then made to reflect on the essence of the concept through individual and group discussions.

Sandhya added, "These children tell us that since the educators allow them to make mistakes and not scold them for it, they enjoy participating in the sessions. We need to make them feel safe in a classroom and the progress they show will be remarkable." The Aavishkaar team hopes to reignite curiosity and passion for mathematics in each child.

Palakneeti Parivar

Palakneeti Parivar was set up in 1996. It works on social parenting and providing holistic education to children living in a slum of Pune. Khelghar is a project started by Palakneeti Parivar with the aim of reaching out to the underprivileged. There are about two hundred children from the Laxminagar slum of Kothrud in Pune participating in the activities at Palakneeti's learning centers. The parents of these children work at construction sites. They hail from areas facing droughts in Maharashtra, and from neighboring states of Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

These children do not get the required learning support in their schools or families. The Palakneeti team, through play-based

Palakneeti Parivaar

activities, attempts to correlate conceptual learning with the experiences of these children. Their focus is on increasing children's proficiency in mathematics, Marathi and life skills. Based on the grades they are in, and their learning levels, children are divided into eight groups. They have two hours of sessions daily at the learning centers run by the team. The focus remains to engage closely with children in primary grades.

Sumitra Marathe, who leads the mathematics program at Khelghar, along with two other volunteers, shared that the children often

find the math taught in class to be crude. She added, “We try to dispel these fears about mathematics by making the children understand the foundational concepts and visualize their lessons. Our two-step pedagogy learnt from Navnirmiti involves using objects to introduce concepts. Then we continue to help them understand the numbers and symbols. The problem is that children can count the numbers from one to two hundred but when you say twenty-three then they do not understand what twenty-three means. We give them sticks or some pebbles or pseudo currency notes and ask them to represent twenty-three objects.”

Using games to make children understand concepts makes the learning experience joyful for children. The team uses a lot of tools to break down, what may seem as, complex concepts for children. They organize games around shopping where children are given objects and then asked to add or subtract based on the prices and quantity of each object. They have three by three meters snakes and ladders games printed, where the children play using mathematical operations. Sumitra adds, “It is heartening to see the children enjoy these games. They can play them for hours. We simultaneously ensure that they are able to relate these activities with the operations taught at school.”

The team also uses calendars as a tool to teach children. They are inspired by the work of Arvind Gupta, an educator who has worked on using toys to teach science and math to children. In his videos, he shows how the calendar with just numbers one to thirty can be innovatively used for improving children’s understanding.

The team, through the usage of relevant materials, ensures that children visualize what they are learning. They use dotted sheets and notebooks with squares in them and tell children to visually perform each operation. For instance, if three and two need to be added, then children would be asked to represent these with distinct colors and their sum in another color.

To introduce concepts related to measurement to children, the team asked children to map all the taps and the broken taps near their homes. The children were asked to calculate how much water might be available in all the taps and how much water must be wasted in one minute through the taps that were leaking. The older children went ahead to repair the taps that were leaking. The Palakneeti Parivaar team understands that children’s learning abilities vary across groups, and they provide three levels of worksheets.

The education system fails to provide adequate time and appropriate methods to students to learn the foundations of mathematics. Working with a pedagogy that incorporates games and activities to strengthen math concepts, the Palakneeti Parivaar team believes that each child can rediscover the joy of learning mathematics.

Better Education Lifestyle and Environment Foundation

Better Education Lifestyle and Environment Foundation (BELIEF) is a non-profit based in Pune city that works to address issues in education, health, and the environment by creating replicable models of sustainable development by providing services and capacity enhancement of relevant stakeholders.

BELIEF

With the vision of improving primary and elementary education, BELIEF has initiated its Early Childhood Education (ECE) program with fifty-four anganwadis in Pune. The families in the area have migrated from drought-stricken regions of Maharashtra - Latur, Solapur, Marathwada and Western Maharashtra - and the surrounding states of Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. They work in the vicinity of construction sites.

Most of the stakeholders in our education system including educators, policy makers, and parents have been taught mathematics using mechanical processes that have had limited real-life applications.

In ECE, anganwadis play a pivotal role in delivering pre-school education to children aged three to six years. Anganwadis are pre-school centers running across the country under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). The workers at these centers are also tasked with collaborating with other stakeholders such as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), and Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), among others, to monitor and support the health and nutrition of children and expecting and lactating mothers.

The anganwadi workers are responsible for various services such as immunization, delivering supplementary nutrition and supporting other services. Inadequate handholding and contextual training to anganwadi workers on ECE and lack of support from parents results in compromised learning experiences of young children.

The BELIEF team tries to overcome gaps in implementation by envisioning the institutionalization of change. Atul from the team says, “We believe in bringing in sustainable change by strengthening the system. The role of each stakeholder becomes especially important in this context. For instance, in the case of ECE, we believe that everyone, from Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) to parents, should have a basic orientation of ECE. Presently, the team has prioritized working with Anganwadi workers and parents.”

They conduct training for anganwadi workers every fortnight. These two-hour-long sessions expose the participants to appropriate pedagogy and teaching-learning materials suited for young children. They initially focused on perspective-building where the workers were made to understand their role, its importance in the development of children, etc. After every four to five months, BELIEF conducts in-person training for them as well. The workers remain connected through a WhatsApp group.

The BELIEF team extensively uses teaching learning materials for children as they believe that these materials enrich their learning experience. To understand how to identify which object is greater in number, the team told workers to place three books and five pencils in front of children and request them to tell them the object that is greater in number.

Some children end up responding that books are more than pencils as they tend to get confused between two criteria of comparing area and number of objects. The workers are then asked to count the two items together (applying one-to-one correspondence) to help children understand which object is greater in quantity.

Archana from the BELIEF team, who conducts training for anganwadi workers, shared that the material need not be expensive and anything readily available can be used for creating learning opportunities for children. For instance, to help children

learn about patterns, the team suggested that the workers identify patterns in their surroundings using objects such as leaves, pebbles, flowers, etc. and discuss the same with children. This activity helps to build observational skills and increase understanding of patterns in children. After a few days, the children excitedly challenged their peers and anganwadi workers to identify the patterns they made. These activities expose children to the freedom and joy of exploration in education.

The BELIEF team believes that sessions on numeracy should be looked at in conjunction with literacy. For instance, children are encouraged to frame full sentences to express their mathematical understanding. If books are greater in number, then they would be nudged to understand and use the statement, "Books are more than pencils." If there are three balls in varied sizes, then to introduce the concept of comparing sizes of objects and expressing their findings properly, children can be asked "Which ball is bigger?" or "Which ball is the biggest?"

During the pandemic, the BELIEF team started reimagining the roles of parents in foundational numeracy. Over WhatsApp, the team shares activities with them through text and audio messages and the parents facilitate these activities for their children. These were activities that the children could do at any time of the day. These activities were created based on Aakar, the Maharashtra state curriculum for children between the ages of three to six years. The parents were required to engage with children for about thirty to forty minutes every day.

The team understands that the struggle to strengthen ECE is going to be long drawn out, as every stakeholder is used to the older system. They believe that if the practitioners and researchers work together, then meaningful interventions in ECE can be rolled out.

Swatantra Talim

Swatantra Talim

Since 2013, Swatantra Talim, a non-profit, has been working to build a culture of creativity and questioning skills among rural children aged six to sixteen years. It runs two after-school learning centers in Lucknow and Sitapur districts and works with five government schools in Lucknow district. To facilitate social change, the organization envisions co-creating every village as a center of innovation and building every child into an innovator.

The children in the region come from families with low literacy levels, culturally rooted orthodox value systems, and deep social inequalities. The lack of contextual education that fails to incorporate their experiences and traditional knowledge pushes these children further away from the public education system.

Rahul Aggarwal, co-founder of Swatantra Talim shares, "Our activities' focus is on making learning mathematics explorative and collaborative. We try picking problems that can be attempted differently. The idea that there is only one method of attempting a problem needs to be debunked."

The team uses *Khoj Dabbas* for their sessions. These could be described as a Lab-in-a-Box that equips each school with lesson plans, easy-to-follow activities, and locally sourced low-cost materials. These *Dabbas* enable educators to explain science, mathematics, language, and social science in an integrated manner.

For example, if the operations of multiplication and division are being explained in the session, then the teacher could conduct operations using contextual materials such as wooden sticks and eventually move to notebooks. This activity helps children understand abstract concepts by using concrete objects.

Khoj-Yaan is an extension of *Khoj Dabbas*. This experiential learning program focuses on expression, exploring thoughts, scenarios, and feelings in a 'fun and learn' way. It integrates teaching language, mathematics and science through puppetry, creation, puzzles, and games. Children in grades one and two are encouraged to make and play with toys.

For instance, the team using the story of the hungry caterpillar asked children to make their own caterpillars and weave a story. The children in grade three could modify the game of snakes and ladders to caterpillars and ladders where the facilitator could introduce new set of rules that help the children apply basic mathematical operations and become problem-solvers.

The children in grades four and five could be given puzzles such as sudoku that help them hone their logical reasoning and engage with numbers. Rahul adds, "The sudoku puzzle of a five into five grid can be conducted using five different objects and each object is five in number. These objects can be locally available materials such as sticks, pebbles, etc. Children enjoy doing these puzzles. Using such engaging techniques and materials, their fear of math starts to disappear."

To introduce the qualities of numbers, a game could be played in which a player can be asked to select a number and the other player must guess it. For instance, if a player selects any number between one to hundred, such as fifty, then the facilitator can nudge the other players to ask whether that number is odd or even or a multiple of any number.

The pedagogy of simulation and trying out different methods to solve puzzles and problems encourages children to keep track of, and reflect on, their performances. The Swatantra Talim team believes that developing robust foundational conceptual understanding and an environment of thinking and brainstorming, encouraging exposure to innovative ideas and thoughts, and real-life applications will give children a well-rounded understanding of mathematics.

In Conclusion

Most of the stakeholders in our education system including educators, policy makers, and parents have been taught mathematics using mechanical processes that have had limited real-life applications. Fear has traditionally been evoked to make them learn, and the essence of concepts was not expressed. An education landscape that adopts engaging, explorative, and contextual attitudes, curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching-learning materials can help children truly find the joy of learning mathematics.

You may reach out to the organizations featured in the story at: Aavishkaar - Palampur - info@aavishkaar-palampur.org, Palakneeti Parivar - sumitramarathe@gmail.com, Better Education Lifestyle and Environment Foundation (BELIEF) - connect.belief@gmail.com and Swatantra Talim - swatantratalim@gmail.com.

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Alleviating Distress in Children through Social-emotional Learning Programs

Chirag Sutar

Children learning about emotions at a BMC school (pre-COVID). Photo by Apni S hala

From building self-esteem to reducing learning anxiety, social-emotional learning (SEL) has helped children with skills critical to their overall development. But has the curriculum been effective during the pandemic?

The pandemic situation has disrupted the academic benchmarks that children are expected to meet. Over the past 10 months, parents have struggled, and with them, disadvantaged children too have faced issues such as shortages of food, violence at home, struggles of access to mobile phones and data, etc. The emotional condition of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds needs special attention. While organisations delivering social-emotional learning programs continue to support children through the online mode, it has been full of challenges. How can social emotional-learning help children reintegrate when schools reopen? And why is it important to foster an environment that builds emotional competence now more than ever before.

Rohit from Mumbai-based organisation Apni Shala says, “Children are carrying a lot of emotions that they may not be able to navigate. They may not even know what is the emotion that they are going through. If we get straight away into learning, some kids will manage, but for most kids, it won’t be easy. We might set them up for another failure if we don’t keep their social-emotional well-being in mind.”

Since 2013, Apni Shala has been implementing the Collaborative Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework on social-emotional learning in 18 Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) Schools in L, and M West wards and several non-profit organisations. The L and M West wards in Mumbai have slum areas with highly dense populations.

Children are learning about measurements and making a bracelet Photo by SNC

Researchers, educators and policymakers widely use the CASEL framework to help establish systemic, equitable, evidence-based social and emotional learning for all students from preschool to high school levels. It covers areas like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Apni Shala has steadily worked on implementing this curriculum in public schools that see value in it.

Some of the key aspects of Apni Shala's SEL program involve bringing mindfulness to work and allowing children to experience their own agency in developing and understanding their lives. The organisation largely focuses on preventive interventions and refers cases that require counseling or therapy to partner organisations with expertise in the area.

Rohit says, "The principal's buy-in in the program is very critical for it to be successful. We first pitch our program to the principal of the public school, and after a signed agreement, we reach out to the officers in the education department to seek more permissions. Multiple factors determine whether a school agrees to implement the program or not. Often awareness about the benefit of social-emotional learning is less. In those cases, it is more important to build awareness around the subject first and then persuade the school to implement the program."

Typically, a social-emotional learning class lasts 45 minutes to an hour, where the first few minutes are dedicated to 'circle time' in which the facilitator sets the context for the day. The objective is to engage children in activities that lead to cognitive development, physical development, and psychosocial development. Educators believe that this is one of the most dynamic ways for children to experience different situations and learn naturally.

In Uttarakhand's Garhwal region, Space for Nurturing Creativity (SNC) has been running a learning center for over ten years. This center provides a holistic nurturing environment for children and adolescents. It helps them develop curiosity driven explorations towards independent and co-learning and creativity. It fosters mental well-being and ability to live harmoniously as well. Meditation, music, and encouragement for original thinking are central to SNC's approach for holistic mindset development of children. More than 90% teachers of the government schools, where SNC works, have eagerly adopted these practices. Those engaged in delivering the program have reported spontaneous expression of creativity by the children after its adoption.

Archana from SNC says, "Before children start learning alphabets at our learning center, we encourage them to observe nature, as they get more involved in the inner process, they get nurtured. Music is also an intrinsic part of our curriculum. We do

Art of Play educator conducting circle time with a football team at Khel Mela in Ambala. Photo by Art of Play

one hour music sessions every day and also allow them the opportunity to listen to music at night. We have found that they are more energetic, and it helps them in their day-to-day activity."

One of the significant changes that SNC has seen in the children is how it has prepared them to manage their emotions and interact with the surroundings. Every year the SNC team takes children for a visit to a new state. The team has found that the children manage themselves quite well even without adult supervision and are empathetic to each other's needs.

"If they see trash, they pick it up. If they see someone fight, they intervene; we have found that this way of learning is helping them to deal with different situations," adds Archana.

SNC also works through subjects like creative writing, history, art classes to pique the imagination of children. The team blends social and emotional aspects of learning by asking them about their opinion on important characters in history or asking them to imagine how they would have responded in place of a particular character. This often leads to exciting discussions from which all children get to learn.

SNC's program was significantly affected due to the pandemic as teachers couldn't engage with children in person as regularly as they used to, but from their experiences believe that it has added tremendous value in a child's learning process.

Hemant from Delhi-based Art of Play says, "The social-emotional component was always an important part of the education system and process. But it was not given its importance in the normal scenario. We did not have defined outcomes and goals specific to social-emotional learning. Now COVID-19 has exposed us to a very uncertain situation where a child is restricted within the boundaries of his home and exposed to different kinds of emotional pressures. COVID-19 has surfaced the well-being issue much beyond what we had imagined."

Art of Play uses the social emotional learning frameworks of National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and Emory University as a part of their sports curriculum for students, and modifies it based on feedback they receive from the ground.

The NASPE curriculum is focused on enhancing knowledge, improving professional practice, and increasing support for high quality physical education, sport, and physical activity programs. Emory University's Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning curriculum enhances SEL programs with key additional components such as attention training, compassion and ethical discernment, systems thinking, resilience, and trauma-informed practice.

As a part of their program, Art of Play cater to all genders and children with physical abilities from grade 1 to grade 8 and also provide teacher training on implementing their program to government school teachers. The organisation has an assessment module in place where the growth of the children is tracked based on their physical development and their social and emotional learning. At present, Art of Play reaches out to over 13000 children in Ambala, Varanasi, Faridabad, and Delhi NCR.

While the organisation has adopted their curriculum to the online mode of delivery, it is evident that the engagement is not the same as it was offline. At present, the delivery of Art of Play's online SEL curriculum is restricted to short tasks done by children in isolation or in small groups with or without a facilitator. The challenges faced in delivering social-emotional learning programs online remain the same as delivering a regular school curriculum such as limited access to phone or data, lack of interaction with teachers and other children – the core of social-emotional learning.

Karnataka-based organisation Makkala Jagriti, which means 'Awakening of Children' has been engaged in delivering an online curriculum focused on social-emotional learning since the lockdown. The team too found that data and device were big challenges in the delivery of their program, but there was also an unexpected positive outcome.

Sunayana from Makkala Jagriti says, " Our focus was on addressing the social-emotional learning of parents and children by conducting activities and sessions to help them de-stress. One of the unexpected outcomes of the online sessions has been the involvement of parents in tasks given to children – that was a positive sign as it has helped in building a stronger bond between children and parents. Having said that, online classes are not a reality for the children that we work with."

Makkala Jagriti seeks to create holistic learning platforms and empower socio-economically deprived children. The organisation uses a curriculum that helps children in developing twenty-two life skills. The curriculum blends more than one life skill such as empathy and inter-personal skills or self-awareness and problem-solving, etc. so that there is repetition and reinforcement. The Makkala Jagriti team encourages teachers to appreciate children, help them in building confidence; besides, parents too are informed and encouraged to build a relationship of trust with their children.

COVID-19 has significantly affected the delivery of social-emotional learning program for Children with Disabilities too. Before the lockdown, children with disabilities interacted with teachers, support staff, and peers who understood their difficulties. The sudden disconnect has made many parents anxious about the future of their children's education.

Diana from Fourth Wave Foundation says, "Many parents were in a state of shock with the thought of remote learning and how children were going to keep up. They were also concerned about managing the new learning format and if they could support their children and adapt quickly, fearing dropout in case of non-connectivity."

As part of their remote learning curriculum, Fourth Wave Foundation has been focusing on three key areas under social-emotional learning - self-awareness, self-management, and decision-making. Of all the three, decision-making is perhaps the most critical and takes a long time to instill. Decision-making skills give children the ability to communicate what they need and when – perhaps, the most critical skill in times of the pandemic.

Diana says, "In the offline learning environment, we instill these important decision-making skills in the children. But in the remote learning environment, it is challenging to deliver the curriculum around this. We hope, that by the time children return to the centers, they don't forget everything that they had learnt. It will require a lot of effort to bring children back to their earlier levels after things get normal."

The challenges faced by Children with Disabilities are far more pronounced and requires expert intervention for them and their parents.

In Jaipur-based Prayas Special School, that works with children with intellectual disabilities - some with multiple disabilities - parents had to be counseled on how to keep their children transitioning into teenage more engaged.

Kalpana from Prayas Special School says, “Addressing the physical, emotional, and social aspects of developing sexuality in children with disabilities requires counselling and guidance. In the school environment, our teachers deal with these situations. But some parents find it difficult to understand that it’s a very normal thing in the home setting, and don’t know how to deal with it. We advise all parents to support children in engaging with nature, make art, dance, or listen to music.”

Teachers at Prayas are encouraged to visit the children’s home to talk to the parents whenever they can, as often parents don’t disclose their issues over the phone. The teachers have also been advised to refer cases that need support to the in-house physiotherapist or psychologist to address the challenges faced by parents.

The discourse around social-emotional learning in India has been around for 6-7 years. But it has been a challenge to implement these programs even in normal circumstances. The overall emphasis on social-emotional learning in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a welcome change. For instance, the focus on developing character and enabling learners to be compassionate, caring, rational, and ethical is laudable. There seems to be some openness within the education department on the benefits of using social-emotional learning and prioritising it.

Sunayana from Makkala Jagriti says, “The shift we see in the (education) department is significant. We certainly see more awareness of social-emotional learning. Given the present scenario, we anticipate that teachers will have to focus on this - such as reflecting on emotions and facing boredom etc. - for a large part, after the schools reopen.”

The COVID-19 situation has allowed educators to test their social-emotional learning curriculum for the online mode and understand its limitations. For now, it does not seem like digital media can be depended upon for delivering a curriculum that largely benefits from human interaction. But perhaps, after schools reopen, it could become an important tool to help children reintegrate.

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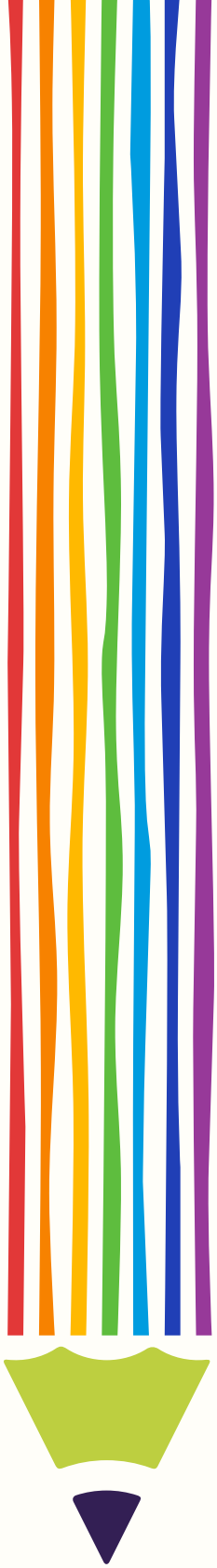
This article is taken from issue number six of the first volume of Samuhik Pahal. You may want to read more articles from this issue of the periodical here.



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