

In practice

Low-cost ways of improving quality in early childhood education

Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a worthy aim. But how do you achieve it when financial resources are scarce to non-existent? This article shares some ideas of Christina Peeters, a consultant specialising in early childhood education who spent several months with the People's Rural Education Movement (PREM), a partner of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Indian state of Orissa.

Established in 1984, PREM works for the socio-economic empowerment of rural indigenous tribes through networks of community-based grassroots organisations. Many tribal peoples, who comprise 22 percent of Orissa's population, suffered from being forced from their traditional lands by economic development during the 20th century, and government schemes intended to alleviate their situation have not often reached an adequate impact.

The Indian government's pre-school programme does not, in practice, reach many pre-school children in tribal areas. Primary education is conducted in Oriya, a language to which most tribal children have not previously been exposed, and its culture and value system is frequently alien to tribal communities. Less than a quarter of tribal children in Orissa complete primary education, compared to two-fifths among the rest of the state's inhabitants.

In the Child-Based Community Development project implemented by PREM and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, there is an emphasis on awareness-raising, parent education, community mobilisation, pre-school education and the transition to school. The project, initiated in 2007, aims initially at establishing pre-school centres in 350 tribal villages. In the longer term, the aim is to showcase a model that can be taken up by local governments to reach more tribal children.

It was with a view to enhance the development of this model that the foundation asked her to observe how these newly-started rural pre-school centres were operating. Based on her experiences, the following are eight thoughts on simple, low-cost ways of improving quality.

1. Separate the toddlers from the pre-schoolers

I observed many situations in which children from 2 to 6 were expected to play in the same space, because their teachers were not aware that children have very differing needs at different stages in their development. Frequently, the play degenerated into fighting and the teachers could only try to keep the peace. Toddlers (aged 2 or 3) mostly play individually and need a safe haven, whereas pre-schoolers (aged 4 to 6) are becoming social and need interaction. Ideally toddlers should be separated from pre-schoolers into a safe haven area for them to play without being disturbed by the older children. When this happens for the first time, the toddlers will cry for an hour or two at being separated from their older siblings. But it is well worth persevering to get past this stage.

2. Encourage teachers to develop their own creativity

Teachers can hardly be expected to nurture confident self-expression and creativity in young children if those qualities aren't very well developed in their own personalities. At one teacher training



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session I observed a great sense of revelation among preschool teachers, after their initial reluctance, when the facilitator gave them paper and crayons and asked them to make drawings of their home villages. Many of the teachers had never drawn anything. Teacher training should also involve encouraging teachers to make up songs, to dance, to tell stories, to make handicrafts and model with clay, and so forth.

3. Encourage teachers to role-play and discuss

Where resources are scarce, teachers tend to have either no or inadequate training. Role-playing exercises can be a quick and effective way to get teachers to think about how situations look through the eyes of a child, but they need to be done properly. That means getting a group to observe the role-playing exercise, and afterwards discuss how effectively the “teacher” in the role-play was able to communicate or demonstrate activities to the “children” or to meet a particular child’s individual needs.

4. Get children practising their use of language

Using language is closely related to the socialisation process, so teachers should try hard to encourage children to speak more confidently – especially in cultures where parents do not tend to talk to their children, so they join pre-school either silent or speaking only quietly and using very few words. Simple techniques include telling stories through use of drama, so that children participate in the telling; drawing pictures and asking children to make up a story that explains the picture; and asking things like “tell me the names of other children who are wearing some red in their clothes today”, or “tell me the names of some square things you can see in the classroom”.

5. Ensure every child says something every day

Children who are not encouraged when they hesitate to join in an activity can quickly get into the habit of dropping out. Playing a simple game of calling out names once every day, in which the teacher can go around the group and make sure that every child in

turn says at least something out loud, can gradually build their confidence and encourage valuable playful interaction among all the children.

6. Combine storytelling with physical movements

It's a good idea to creatively combine storytelling with activities that involve the children in moving their bodies, interacting and playing. For example: "What noise does a cat make? Who can prowl like a cat? What noise does a mouse make? Who can be as small as a mouse? Play a cat chasing a mouse. Who can roar like a tiger? Who can jump like a tiger? Who can fly like a bird? Pretend you're a bird sleeping in the tree. Who can stand on their toes and reach up to the stars?" And so on.

7. Be creative in finding things to use as toys

The teachers I worked with were not always aware of the importance of play, or that toddlers need to train their eye-hand co-ordination by gripping things and using the muscles in their arms, hands and fingers at the same time. Often toys can be found without too much cost. With one group of toddlers I found a basin to fill with sieved sand, and sourced inexpensive items such as spoons, tea-strainers, funnels and little cups. The toddlers quickly became intensely concentrated in play, happily repeating and trying out movements with the sand for hours without getting bored – much to the surprise of their teachers. When the pre-schoolers in turn were given the sand to play with, they enjoyed making up games such as building nests for birds and baking imaginary sand-cakes.

8. Use materials that feature what children know

I saw some pre-school centres in rural areas that had charts on the walls featuring fruits and vegetables that the children knew nothing about because they were only available at more urban markets, not in their small tribal village. Wherever possible, it is always best to base toys, learning and teaching materials around items that will be familiar to children from their daily life and local culture.