

Early childhood education in rural India

Exploring mechanisms to improve home–school links

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The discussion in this article is based on the wider context of the experience of the People's Institute for Development and Training (PIDT) over many years in organising non-formal schools in rural India. It also takes into account a study that PIDT did in collaboration with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, "Acculturation of the child to schooling – a multi-ethnic study". Though the study mostly dealt with primary school-ready children in non-formal education (NFE²) schools between the ages of 6 and 14, it provided useful insights into how pre-school education should meet children's developmental needs, thus opening villages to possibilities for integration and change without compromising indigenous values and skills that have sustained them so far.

Acculturation of the child to schooling – PIDT's experience with three rural communities

PIDT found an eagerness for education among both parents and children, and among girls as well as boys. The villagers with whom PIDT works understand that education increases opportunities, improves lifestyles, enlarges household management capacities and introduces skills that are valuable for girls as well as boys, even within the traditional social structure. However, there is still a struggle to integrate formal education values into community practice. In fact, according to parents, a major complaint about boys who went to government schools was that they did not want to work so much as to eat and dress well, and buy expensive things like watches or bicycles. Success in their studies came second.

On the other hand, many a bright girl was seen aiding her brother with his assignment rather than doing her own work, believing that education was

more important for boys than for girls, because of the way they had been placed into different roles.

Clearly, the acculturation to different values at home and school, with obvious divisions between parents and children, creates distrust, distancing and disorientation. In order to develop good individuals and responsible citizens, it is essential to seek commonalities, or an understanding of differences, so that children can learn to balance changing and competing worldviews while retaining their identity and roots.

While girl-child education is a major step forward in these communities, equal education must still be translated into expanding opportunities for women. Education has become desirable for girls, where it was previously considered unnecessary; but it is used in ways that co-opt it back into gender-specific roles such as increasing a woman's marriage value. Given that mind frames and social structures take time to change, girl-child education is a first stage towards equal intellectual opportunities, with the caveat that other factors beyond mere access to education need to be addressed.

Even though children may grow up to develop values other than those of their parents or teachers, they will do so consciously, with a basis for comparison and with a good foundation, if a set of educational values has been emphasised from the outset. But if they start from a value vacuum, they may be always at the mercy of circumstance, never really owning their lives.

The challenge, then, in meeting the physical, social, psychological, emotional and intellectual needs of

children, for their holistic development in a pre-school setting, is to provide care and nurturing of children as individuals and as members of a community, as well as intellectual stimulation and knowledge acquisition. This concept of early child development should be communicated to parents who may have different expectations of pre-school and of formal education.

A smooth transition from home to school: lessons from the study

Lesson 1: A considerable amount of early learning for children is emotive and takes time.

Hemlal, a quiet tribal child, was well looked after by his elder sister, who taught him to read and write and consoled him if anyone bothered him. The first day Hemlal attended class he sat with his peer group; but perhaps he felt threatened because he switched to sitting next to his sister for about a month before he sat separately again.

Little children with older siblings were often given freedom of expression. They were also dependent on their mothers, in differing degrees, with breast-feeding sometimes continuing to 6 years of age. The NFE school setting was in the open, allowing elders to be onlookers when they wished, to keep intact the emotional synergy in the upbringing of the children.

It was observed that young children learn from the way in which lessons are given as much as from the content. For example, children who were disinterested, distracted or not able to answer, not only understood when constantly encouraged by the teachers, but answered questions with interest and with a significantly enhanced response time.

Perhaps the feeling of security this provides is fundamental to the child's ability to focus on the lesson and to the development of flexible mental pathways needed for intellectual growth. Emotional investment, support and respect for the children by the teacher are crucial for proper socialisation and must not be sacrificed in the pursuit of early education outside the home. Thus, by involving the family in the teaching process, allowing siblings to sit together and parents to look on, or by ensuring that the teacher provides adequate emotional

support to the children, the transition from home to school can be eased.

Lesson 2: Interactive experience-based learning develops the cognitive and social skills necessary for future learning.

Sanjoy was a serious boy. He was getting particularly confused between the numbers 6 and 9. The teacher momentarily lost patience and scolded Sanjoy severely and the boy burst into tears. When the teacher changed the mode of instruction by using stones and twigs, the little boy overcame his grief and managed to learn very quickly.

In rural communities in India, first-generation school-going children depend on tactile and sensory learning. They have a strong relationship with their surroundings, relying more on experiential than deductive reasoning for cognitive understanding. Elements of experiential learning should be incorporated creatively into the curricula so that the richness of sensory perception and intuition in the rural child is not lost, thereby preventing distancing between family and child.

Lesson 3: Cross-generational and sibling interaction and support are invaluable assets to build self-esteem and readiness to learn.

Sahida, a 10-year-old, was called to the blackboard to read out her letters. On seeing this, her 5-year-old sister, who was roaming outside the class, came running to stand next to her and tried to copy her.

Many children in rural India live in large and sometimes extended families where they naturally develop an ability to relate to people of different ages and form close relationships with their siblings. Older siblings often take care of younger children and become role models. Rather than cutting children off from this pre-existing support structure by age-divided classrooms, it proved productive to allow children of different ages to share the same classroom, even if they were at different learning levels. In this context, young children felt more pressure to attend to their studies, and elder children, in helping their younger siblings, better internalised the lessons. It was also the case that older children would often help younger brothers and sisters with homework after school.

Sibling support builds the confidence of young children, showing them how to interact in a strange environment with a broader social network of peers and elders. Family interaction within a pre-school context helps to ease the transition from home to public space and provides young children with immediate role models.

Although at the time of the study gendered social roles remained distinct, it is likely that learning alongside, and with the support of, their elder sisters, influences young boys' gender perceptions, providing them with female role models.

Lesson 4: Incorporation of local skills and culture helps to educate communities rather than creating alienated individuals.

Dates were in season. The children, while sitting in class, wanted to pick them and eat the tender seed inside. They made excuses of wanting to go to the toilet but instead went to pluck the fruit.

The context in which a culture is based is significant in retaining children's spontaneity and survival instincts. Local skills, folk tales, games, songs and dances form a strong part of early childhood education. Respect for traditional lifestyles goes alongside new opportunities, maintaining harmony between the generations and pride in their heritage.

Lesson 5: Values formed should be included in education delivery.

Firos, usually reticent, was called upon to recite the numbers from 1 to 100 so that others could follow. He succeeded and this encouraged him to take a more active role in class. Firos had complained to his mother that he had never been asked to lead, though he knew his numbers well.

Naively, the child associated his ability to articulate correctly as an ability to lead, which he obviously considered a very important role. Understanding a child's values would enable the teacher to develop the child's potential, breaking communications barriers that prevent children and parents from interacting effectively with the school system. This is more critical for girls, who often disengage themselves from education earlier than boys, due to social constructs and perceived limitations of their future roles in the community.

Conclusion

Observation of the acculturation process shows that learning in the early years includes broad developmental milestones such as body hygiene, greetings to elders and strangers, patience and concentration, communication with non-family members, recognition of unknown images, logical reasoning and the interchange of sibling dependence with peer group friendship.

Recognising the social integration and personal growth that early education fosters, the NFE schools established by PIDT sought to integrate the communication of social values, the culture and skill base of resident communities, the family support structure, interactive and engaging teaching methods, and most importantly, a nurturing approach. It was our experience that recognition and conscious practice of these qualities facilitates the transition process for children between home and school.

At the end of the day, the development of children's self-esteem and the opening of their minds to ideas and concepts beyond the local context were the key aspects of the acculturation that was initiated. The most important understanding gained through the study was that this process should be directed in a manner that retains family links and a child's sense of identity.

Notes

- 1 People's Institute for Development and Training is a voluntary organisation working at the grassroots of rural India in Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Delhi on issues of education, women's empowerment, child development, livelihood and environment, amongst the marginalised.
- 2 The NFE schools were held in shady areas outdoors, in locations decided by parents in the communities, and classes were taken in a circular arrangement to foster interaction between children and engagement in the learning process. Teaching methods incorporated games and songs and encouraged children to ask questions. The schools were set up to provide accelerated primary education to children aged 6–14 who had not had access to education, and were highly successful, with all but one child passing into the sixth level of government school at the end of the year.