

Malaysia: stronger teachers, stronger children, stronger parents and stronger communities

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The author is Project Director of Persatuan Guru Tadika (PGT – Association of Kindergarten Teachers) in Malaysia. In this article, he reflects on the rationale for the organisation’s ‘Growing up stronger’ rural preschool project, discussing some of its key ideas and the challenges and concerns that stimulated them. PGT has been working to develop a network of preschools for the children of the Tamil Indian workers on the rubber and palm oil plantations of Malaysia since 1988. Most of these plantations are remote from the big cities and, before PGT became involved, the workers had little contact with the outside world and therefore lacked information and news; had limited access to services; and had few facilities with which to support the healthy and holistic development of their children.

PGT started with the idea of training six preschool teachers who were at that time operating separately. But it quickly saw that, not only was there a need for many more preschools and teachers but, much more important, they should be networked together to provide a structure for expansion. Today, that structure has become an organisation that extends over all of the eleven states of Peninsula Malaysia, reaching out to around 6,200 children in over 224 preschools. PGT’s core strategy is to create and sustain a network of trained teachers, drawn from the communities, who work in partnership with parents, as they develop, energise and sustain rural preschools together. The point is to ensure the wide availability in isolated rural areas of quality early child development and education that is culturally and contextually

appropriate, and that uses local resources that are meaningful to young children.

The Malaysian Tamil Indians in the plantations were once unaware of the needs of their own young children in terms of early childcare, diet, health care, and education. However, over the years PGT, through its ‘Growing up stronger’ project, has changed the mindset of these parents. Now parents are more aware of the needs of their children and are keen to learn and participate in the early childcare development of their children.

Within the preschools, a major concern is to balance cultural considerations with the demands of Malaysian education which is highly competitive

and places high priority on school skills. To help PGT to get the balance right on this key issue, its project team made an extended visit to Tamil Nadu, India, in order to revive and reinforce their understanding of the richness and dynamism of Tamil Nadu’s cultural history, and to develop their skills in fields such as cultural transmission through the performing arts. Going further, PGT has hired a Tamil colleague from India for a two-year period to give special attention to the cultural component.

Thoroughness such as this is evident throughout the project, for example in the Government-accredited training of the teachers. This is to a regular schedule. It is organised at district level – where the training focuses on matters identified by teachers as needing

special attention, syllabuses and activities; regional level – where training focuses on community development skills and activities such as backyard gardening and animal husbandry to supplement their incomes; and national level – where training is about teaching skills. A more recent element in the training brings teachers into contact with information and communication technology.

This preparation equips teachers not just to deliver the curriculum successfully and to ensure that the preschools play their part in transmitting Tamil culture, but also to support parents as children's first educators. This means much more than just helping parents to develop their skills and qualities in early childhood care and development: it extends to enabling parents to fully participate in all aspects of the preschools. As a result, Parent Support Groups (parent/teacher committees) now operate at estate level; and District Committees of parents operate at a higher level. These entities are strong and active forces that hold the programme accountable for meeting local needs, promote the well-being of children, and help to find sponsors to contribute to the preschools financially or with resources.

Teachers' rapport with parents is a prerequisite to their work; and by effectively promoting the interests of parents, the project has managed to build a very large constituency: the strong link with parents is a main reason why PGT has been disseminated so widely despite its limited resources. To sustain, strengthen and widen this constituency, PGT puts out a newsletter four times a year. This has proved very effective in terms of communicating throughout the national network of preschool teachers, to parents, and to

other NGO's. Parents contribute to the content of the newsletter, something that helps make it important as a device for creating a thorough understanding among its membership, as well as among the public, about the work that PGT is doing and why it is doing it.

The teaching materials that PGT has developed for the children are designed to stimulate proactive learning and are backed up by highly participative activities. Typically, children enter an environment that immerses them in the topic that they are investigating and learning about. The walls may be covered by pictures and artefacts, the room crowded with games and toys and other devices to engage their attention. Children can move from activity to activity, often choosing what they will do next and for how long. Their teachers know their interests and work with these. But they also encourage children to try new things, develop other abilities and interests, fulfil their potential. While independent and personal work is encouraged, so is group work. Music, art and performance feature strongly; and the project takes learning through fun and play very seriously.

Curriculum materials are created from local resources and opportunities, reflect local realities, and replace more generic, outside materials. For example, children learn that 'G' is for Goat (an animal that they play with/keep as pets) rather than for Grapes (something that is not found in their environment). Overall, the materials themselves have evolved into well-respected products that have been accepted by the national library in Kuala Lumpur as resource materials. It has also registered PGT as a book publisher. PGT owns the copyright of its materials and sells them – especially to urban private preschools – to generate income.



Malaysia: Growing up Stronger project | photo: Puspa Krishnan

Physical environments should immerse children in what they are exploring

Outcomes

Children from the 'Growing up stronger' project do better and obtain better results compared to those who have not attended the preschools – and their parents say they enjoy going to school. Some children from these rural settings have obtained better results than their peers in well-off urban settings, taking on roles as head students, class monitors and library prefects, and performing well in sports. Once such children were considered shy with inferiority complexes but now they demonstrate leadership skills, and are more motivated to participate in classroom and extra-curricular activities, thereby reflecting an all-round improved mental and physical development.

For their part, parents have also become more interested in their children's education – but, at least as important, they are adjusting their work patterns to meet the needs of their children. Once they might have disappeared at 5.30 am to start on the two jobs they had, returning after dark. Now they are finding ways to ensure that they have more time with their children. Via the Parents Support Groups,

they also work with the teachers on health awareness campaigns, women/mothers/fathers days, harvest festivals and children's day events. And above all, they are convinced of the need to sustain their preschools, organising local fund-raising activities to supplement and upgrade the resource centre, and fund teachers' salaries and equipment. Beyond this, they are aware that the Government has to play a positive role in reaching out to the children in the plantations, and are lobbying for the Government to fund preschool programmes for all children. The increasing strength of the Parents Support Groups is beginning to produce results.

Similarly the teachers, the majority of whom are young, are also more committed to early childhood care and education and to the children. With the training they have received, they have gained a new sense of self-confidence and are able to communicate more effectively with the children, parents and the community – even to estate managers. Despite receiving low wages compared to urban and Government preschool teachers, they are more committed to their profession and to providing community services, sometimes outperforming local leaders in the community. On some estates, their wages have been increased to acknowledge the significant roles they are playing.

Ensuring sustainability

The PGT preschools are a model of what can be achieved on small budgets, and on the proceeds of local fund-raising efforts. But to remain viable, PGT is soliciting public investment in the preschools to complement the more consistent contributions that

it has secured from the estates to meet the costs of maintaining infrastructure (playgrounds, premises, latrines, and other basic amenities). The need now is for structural support for the teachers' salaries and teaching materials from local and national Government. To achieve this, it is working with elected representatives, inviting them to visit its preschools, and take part in its seminars and training sessions. Interest is strong and the need for preschool provision

is recognised. Its lobbying activities also extend to the Ministry of Rural Development and include the Department of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education. As a result, the Government is aware of the importance of preschool facilities in rural areas. Now PGT is awaiting a policy decision to fund the work. Here it faces a major challenge: there is no precedent in Malaysia for a 'real' NGO to emerge from civil society and be eligible for Government investment. □

How children see things

It's so important to be aware of how children see things so you can understand children better. We encourage creativity in the children, and we give them the time and means to express themselves – even though this doesn't really fit into the very competitive Malaysian education system.

One of our schools had some VIP visitors a little while ago and naturally all the teachers were very anxious to impress them with what the children were doing. In one room, the VIP's were fascinated to see the amount of imagination and observation that the children were putting into drawing and painting. They particularly liked the work of one boy and watched as he drew a chicken and then painted it in beautiful glowing colours.

But then, to the horror of everyone, he suddenly stuck his pencil through the eye of the bird making a hole. Once we got over the shock, we wanted to know why he had done this. I visited his home, just casually. He was very pleased to see me, and showed me everything – including his pride and joy, his pet chicken. They were very close and he hugged it and played with it. And then I saw that the bird was blind in one eye.

I wonder what the VIPs made of his behaviour – and I wonder what we might have made of it too, if I hadn't visited him in his home.

The lesson for us all was that his creativity was accurately expressing reality as he saw it. This is one reason for encouraging children to be creative: it can give us insights into who children are, how they see the world, how they think, and so on. But we go further than that in the 'Growing up stronger' project: we believe that creativity is anyway a very important element in holistic early childhood development.