

ENRICHMENT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION: MAPPING PEDAGOGICAL ALTERNATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The mandate of the Universalization of Elementary Education has been seen to be accompanied by the creation of parallel alternatives of education for the marginalized children in many developing countries. In this sector an area that is progressively gaining significance is that of collaborative interventions by the government and voluntary organizations. This paper addresses the pedagogical practices in alternative schools across diverse contexts and the mainstreaming challenges. To gauge the impact of such interventions in a comprehensive manner this study was taken up in varying socio-cultural and community contexts in India. Under the Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education, four sets of institutions were studied for their teaching learning processes. The pedagogical processes in the areas of language, mathematics and environmental studies were comparatively analysed in relation to their respective curriculum and learner contexts. One major dimension of the study was to explore the strategies adopted for the mainstreaming and the possibilities of upscaling of these interventions. The analysis of the pedagogic processes revealed their tremendous potential in enriching the mainstream system through innovative practices in teaching, creating optimal learning environment and relationship building with learners.

KEYWORDS: Alternative Schools, Learner Contexts, Mainstreaming, Marginalized

INTRODUCTION

In context of the developing countries the mandate of the Universalization of Elementary Education has been accompanied by the creation of parallel alternatives of education for the marginalized. The most vulnerable students, the most disadvantaged students, and the students most in need of academic intervention can be found in alternative schools (Arcia, 2006; Muñoz, 2004). The enrollment in alternative education continues to grow (Carver & Lewis, 2010). However, little is known about student outcomes in these schools (Lange & Sletton, 2002; Lehr et al., 2009). This paper addresses the pedagogical practices in alternative schools across diverse contexts and mainstreaming challenges.

In the sector of alternative education, an area that has emerged and is gaining a lot of ground is the Government-NGO Interaction. The NGOs and the government, in this vision, share the objectives and the basic approach, as a partnership, continuous dialogue and review of each other's strategies. The relationship between the government and non-government sector, in the area of basic education, is showing signs of this emerging partnership. This is because the government realizes and has reiterated in its official and other policy documents (be it NPE 1986, or the SSA 2002), that the magnitude of the problem in the education sector is 'too large' to be resolved by a single delivery system. As the SSA document (2002) highlights, the focus on the most vulnerable groups of children who are out of school would require a partnership with NGOs and a commitment to a 'rights based equity oriented approach'. Thus the NGOs have to conceive a partnership-role with the government in all aspects, be it implementation of government sponsored schemes, creating

innovative and alternative models, or working closely with the community, under this supporting government initiative model.

In this regard, under the Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education (PESLE), four NGO partners namely, Aga Khan Education Services, India (AKES, I), Bodh Shiksha Samiti (Bodh), Dr. Reddy's Foundation (DRF), and Society for All Round Development (SARD) were addressing school based issues of quality education from pre-school level upwards, focusing on learning improvements of children belonging to economically weaker communities, minority groups and working children in urban and rural areas. In addition to the differing length of project involvement, these NGOs had different contextual histories, profiles, expertise and even mandates. These NGOs were engaged in evolving innovative pedagogic approaches and validating them in select government schools across the state of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

The researcher had the opportunity to study the pedagogical processes across the four NGOs under PESLE. The study was guided by the following Research questions:

- How are the pedagogical processes influenced by the field-level micro realities existing in the set ups under the four NGOs?
- What are the possibilities and strategies of consolidation and upscaling of the innovative pedagogies in the mainstream education?

Hence, the objectives of the study aimed to understand the following:

- The nature of curriculum and planning as contextualized in the school and in the vision plan of the NGOs, to meet community needs and aspirations.
- Pedagogic processes which support children's learning with respect to
 - The nature, form and structure of learning tasks and activities and how they relate to the curricular components and planning practices adopted by the specific NGO.
 - Enactment practices and classroom dynamics which relate to the NGO's notions of curriculum, learner development and teaching-learning material.
 - Nature of assessment and support provided to children's learning good pedagogic practices in consolidation as well as mainstream schools

METHOD

The methodology adopted involved the following approaches:

- Documentation analysis of the curriculum framework drawn up by each NGO.
- A study of the planning diaries of teachers to understand the approach, rationale and focus of short term and long term planning.
- On site observations at the macro (community context and school) and micro level (classroom) in consolidation as well as mainstreaming / outreach schools.

- Analysis of teaching learning material, planning and evaluation records available at the school sites.
- Focused group discussions/interviews, with teachers, students, parents, community members, school development committee members, mother's group, training coordinators and programme coordinators.

The sample schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- The length of intervention of the NGO in that school
- The enrolment and dropout figures
- The nearness or remoteness from the road in terms of accessibility
- Representativeness of socio demographic characteristics of the community

Partner Profiles

Aga Khan Education Services, India (AKES,I), the oldest and largest PESLE NGO, is a private, non-profit social service agency of the Aga Khan Development Network with a comparative advantage in the provision and development of quality education within its own institutions (Network Schools and Day Care Centres) in urban and rural areas in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. AKES, I joined PESLE to widely share and disseminate its best practices as developed through its School Improvement Programme. The present study was conducted in the areas of Andhra Pradesh.

Bodh Shiksha Samiti (Bodh), joined PESLE with considerable capacity, urban experience and comparative advantage in collaboration - specific experience. Bodh has evolved educational programmes that specifically focus on raising the social and educational standards of communities, both in urban (Jaipur) and rural (Aiwar) Rajasthan. Through innovative community based classroom practices, resources and comprehensive training programme for teachers.

Dr. Reddy's Foundation (DRF), Under PESLE, DRF developed the SCOPE Project in 1999 with a view to develop school as a valued resource in the community, while strengthening the participation and achievement of 'children at risk' (this includes girls, working children, exploited and marginalized children) in formal education. The SCOPE programme developed in response to the need for making the government schools more responsive and interactive to children rehabilitated from hazardous working conditions through the bridge schools/residential camps. DRF was addressing the entire schooling cycle, from pre-school to long-term vocational courses. At the time of study, DRF was intervening in fifty-four government schools in twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad and adjoining municipality areas of Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh.

Society for All Round Development(SARD), joined PESLE to further strengthen its commitments to educating the Meo-muslims, the most marginalized community in the Mewat region of Rajasthan. As a part of its strategy, SARD evolved Community Based Organizations(CBOs) and strong Parent Teacher Committees(PTCs) as for a to organically link a rather insular and reluctant community with the school.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Some Insights on the Curriculum Framework

The interventions made by the partner NGOs under PESLE enabled them to continuously evolve and enrich their curriculum. On the one hand, each NGO partner faced the challenge of reaching out to marginalized groups and on the other hand, had to strive towards enriching schooling experiences, through systemic interventions. Thus, the 'breadth' or

the coverage of the curriculum across all the NGOs extended beyond the formal curricular areas of language, mathematics and environmental studies. The curricular inputs in these areas were found to be deeply grounded in the socio-cultural context of the communities, from where the children were coming. A diverse range of activities planned in accordance with the abilities of individual learners, helped the teachers to enact learning experiences which were highly motivational and stimulated creative thinking among children. The planning records of teachers showed evidences of 'balance' and 'coherence' among individual/small/ groups/ whole group activities in the day's routine. The monitoring of the planning and enactment of curricular experiences enabled the teachers to bring 'continuity'.

The curriculum as enacted was analyzed with reference to the following parameters:

Relevance

The researcher found strong evidences of curricula being relevant and sensitive to the context of the community where the interventions were made. The context specific inputs in the curriculum in the consolidation phase paved the way for creating meaningful linkages with the stakeholders. In the mainstreaming / outreach programmes, the inclusion and thrust on co-curricular activities and creatively prepared Teaching Learning Material (TLM) significantly affected the motivational level of children, raising the attendance and community support to the Government schools, as well.

Provisions for Holistic Development of Learners

The common thread running across all enactment efforts was that the children were considered as responsive, active learners who could construct meaning through sharing of ideas (collaborative approach), drawn from their family and social life. The 'themes' in AKES,I's curriculum, projects and field visits in their enactment efforts and the community oriented activities and TLM development in Bodh, facilitated the construction of knowledge in children. The engagement of DRF with working children and SARD's interaction particularly with the 'Meo-muslim' community, created a space for more effective mainstreaming. In all the NGOs the integrated nature of curriculum made provisions for physical, mental, emotional and social development of learners, through a varying range of activities.

Flexibility

AKES,I's curriculum provided flexibility within a structure, the one by Bodh was characterized by its openness. As its frame of reference, AKES,I used state curricula and had additionally worked on 'curriculum benchmarking' and developing training modules for teachers which provided broad guidelines that were not prescriptive by nature. It had drawn from the implications of Multiple Intelligence theory, to provide flexibility to teachers to explore different ways of handling the content. Bodh's broad curricular provisions gave autonomy to teachers to select, sequence and organize learning experiences for their students. Like AKES,I, DRF also adopted the state curriculum as its frame of reference and focused more on evolving strategies for enactment. SARD's curriculum broadly followed the 'minimum levels of learning' (MLL) pattern of the state curriculum, but the effort was also on continually evolving innovative practices and strategies for enactment, particularly TLM.

Processes of Language Development

The teachers in Bodh related learning activities with the iconic memory of children, in the younger age group. The use of the picture - word matching activity in language learning, where the object shown in the picture was from the children's immediate context, enabled them relate to it easily (e.g. tree, goat, huts, hand-pump etc.). It was a 'word to alphabet' approach, moving from the familiar 'word' to the unfamiliar 'symbol'. In a similar activity in an outreach school

of AKES, I situated in a tribal area, the flash cards showed singular plural forms of objects along with the names in the local tribal dialect, as well as in Telugu language.

Teaching of English language in class I of DJHS, Hyderabad (Consolidation school of AKES, I) took the form of a game activity, where children would pick up a slip having some word written on it. They would be asked to construct a specific number of sentences using that word. According to their teacher, this sentence construction exercise not only helped in developing the expression and articulation skills of children, but also incorporated their understanding of the environment.

It is significant to note that the teachers did not visualize the enactment of curriculum as a subject specific domain. Rather, they focused on the understanding of knowledge as an integrated experience. They valued the initiatives taken by children to give a direction to the flexible learning tasks planned by them. In a government school of Imamguda (Mainstream School of AKES, I) a Vidya(education) Volunteer told how they used 'wedding cards' brought by children as reading material. A story telling session in a Quality Education Centre(QEC) of SARD took a creative dimension when each child was asked to add a sentence to the already built up story. The support material in DRF's language learning programme included flash cards, worksheets, workbooks, story books, textbooks and newspaper clippings etc.

The progress and proficiency of learners in language was continuously assessed through their active involvement in listening, speaking and writing. Informal activities like 'Bal Sabhas'(children assemblies) in Bodh and environment building also provided situations for learner assessment, in a non-threatening manner. In fact, through such fora of engagement, teachers became familiar with children's vocabulary and experiences and used them for subsequent planning.

Strategies for Development of Concepts in Mathematics

The development of concepts in mathematics was initiated informally through simple play activities at the pre-school level, itself. Children were seen to be taking keen interest in 'smaller / bigger', 'less than / more than' concepts of simple logical thinking. The extensive use of locally available material, such as twigs, pebbles and tamarind seeds helped the children in counting and performing other mathematical operations. The children in many schools could construct multiplication tables mentally. A class five student, Anjane Volo in a mainstream school of AKES, I situated in a tribal area, could effortlessly construct the table of 31, by oral multiplication.

It was interesting to note that in almost all the consolidation schools, the children were good in mathematical computations and insisted that we gave them sums to work out. The concept of measurement was being developed through actual measurement based activities in many schools. In the Government Primary School, Pendiya, class III children were using a thread piece (sutli) to measure the length of the school verandah while class V students were measuring the radius of circles drawn by them, as a group activity. The children in class III, DJHS were estimating lengths of objects around them and then measuring accurately with scales. The concept of cost price-selling price was being developed in DJHS, through a 'market' activity, where children would bring artificial currency slips, and make purchases (as a group activity). The children were thoroughly enjoying the surveying of goods, (displayed with their rates) taking decisions as to which item was to be purchased and negotiating prices.

An evidence of process based learning facilitation, was narrated by a teacher in SARD, who demonstrated a step wise construction of multiplication tables through collections of pebbles in small heaps. How the small heaps add up and how equal heaps were shown by multiplication, constitutes a logico inductive thinking approach.

A Vidya(education)Volunteer in Imamguda Government Primary School (Mainstream, AKES,I), demonstrated seven ways of representing mathematical operations. She showed us the construction of multiplication tables through various modes of visual depiction. She also showed us a ‘multi-purpose grid’ which had numbers written on it. The grid could be used for identification of digits among younger children and for mathematical computations by children of higher abilities.

In the Government School, Rajiv Gandhi Nagar, Balanagar Mandal, Hyderabad, the children under group C (low competencies) of the Learning Improvement Programme(LIP) were coming to the black board, one by one with tamarind seeds in their hands showing dependence on concrete forms of learning of mathematical computations. The children of group B in the same school could relate measurements to their daily life situations. When asked, they promptly said that ‘wire is measured in metres while oil in litres’. Our interaction with children gave strong evidence that children learn mathematics through their daily shopping activities, as well.

Teaching of Environmental Studies

The teaching of environmental studies was seen to provide situations and experiences, where children actively relate to their natural and social world. The discussion approach adopted in Bodh, SARD and project / field trips in AKES, I provided rich opportunities to children to understand phenomena, patterns and cause-effect relationships. The multiple activities and methods such as games, role play, storytelling, field visits, and experimentation, aimed at developing among learners the ability to observe, classify, hypothesize and draw inferences. The children’s natural urge and curiosity to know about their environment was acknowledged and valued by their teachers.

The children enjoyed performing simple experiments such as, germination of seeds, separation of common salt from saline water, collection of leaves and insects etc. Not only could they experiment, but they could also extrapolate their inferences. For instance they were able to explain the separation of salt from water, of excess salt from water, and even of excess salt from dough by dipping it in buttermilk . It was a very effective instance of scaffolding provided by the teacher in this learning experience. The teacher enabled them to think of various possibilities and then encouraged them to arrive at the most appropriate ‘hunch’. It was a strong evidence of *hypothesizing* and *inferring*.

During our interaction with children (Government schools, Alipur and Monaka, SARD), children were asking us many questions (related to their physical-social environment) which intrigued them, such as:

- “Where do frogs go during winter?”
- “Why do men drink?”
- “Why does a buffalo salivate excessively”?
- “Why does a cat look like a tiger?”
- Why do potatoes and onions grow under the ground?”

These were only a few of the several questions children asked us during our interaction with them. The nature of questions posed by them was indicative of their sensitivity, keen observations skills and a desire to make sense of their environment. These traits in children certainly have implications for using inquiry based strategies for organizing learning experiences.

Some of the questions posed by us, interestingly had multiple responses from children, which were embedded in their fantasy, imagination and native theories. For instance, when we asked the children whether the cow and buffalo are feminine or masculine, the children said, they are feminine. The reasons they gave to support their answers were:

- “both deliver young ones”
- “both have big eyes just likes girls and women”

The multiple responses given by children related to their socio-historical and cultural beliefs and were drawn from their own visualizations bordering on fantasy. There was an element of logical reasoning, as well. The learners here emerged as vibrant thinkers with keen inquisitiveness.

Outreach and Mainstreaming

Addressing the educational needs of deprived and marginalized children through sustained mobilization of their communities, the PESLE partners had taken up the enormous challenge of upscaling their interventions from consolidation schools to outreach in the mainstream Government Schools. The major roadblock to introducing innovative pedagogic practices seems to emanate from the different kinds of school/classroom settings which prevail in the Government schools. The teacher pupil ratio is much higher. Similarly, the class room settings differ in consolidation and outreach schools. While, AKES,I had class based organization in its consolidation as well as outreach schools, Bodh and SARD had multi-group teaching in consolidation, but class based situations in their outreach schools. DRF’s intervention was directly in class based situations in the Government schools. The high teacher pupil ratio in outreach schools creates different challenges for monitoring and evaluation practices from those followed in the consolidation schools of Bodh and SARD, where the teachers can efficiently handle the small groups of their learners, on a daily basis. To get ideas about handling large student strengths, lessons can be drawn from the monitoring and recording practices followed in AKES,I, which have been evolved through action research and joint problem solving. The formats in AKES,I, are sometimes structured. Perhaps, a provision for narratives / descriptions would enrich their approach.

The Government school teachers, through training experiences as well as direct observation of Resource Teachers, were increasingly seeing merit in planning for better teaching. They also saw how the children blossom when they are given opportunities and are also joined by their teachers in creative co-curricular activities (singing, dancing, drama etc.) which are an integral part of curricular activities, in the curricula of all the NGOs. They are increasingly realizing the worth of ‘preparing indigenous TLM’ rather than using readymade TLM.

The earlier recorded evidences (AKF,2006) state that wherever the NGO teachers were posted in Government Schools, the support they offered on a daily basis had shown positive effects. Indeed, the initial resistance faced by these Resource Teachers from the Government Teachers was gradually replaced by sharing of ideas. The Government Teachers could see a sensibility in creative use of TLM and having a meaningful interaction and involvement with the community.

CONCLUSIONS

The Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education(PESLE) had evolved through multiple approaches adopted by its partners in their diverse settings, with equally challenging contexts. The PESLE Partners have in their own ways tried to tackle the issues relating to their working with the Government school system. For DRF and SARD, mainstreaming has been the consideration right from the beginning and that too, through systemic interventions involving

the government officials, in those processes. In case of Bodh, the community pressurized the mergers of Bodhshalas (consolidation schools) with Government schools.

All through these processes, 'children's zest for learning' has been the most significant indicator of change. The children loved their schools and teachers, they enjoyed managing the school related practices and participating in the creation of TLM. The learner saw his/her peers not just as play partners, but actively involved in joint learning activities too. The non threatening practices in assessment never seemed to create situations of alienation from school for the children.

However, there still seem to be some mental blocks in the minds of the outreach school teachers regarding issues of discipline and activity based pedagogy. Teachers in Bodh outreach schools lamented, that their major time goes in performing the administrative tasks and it takes a substantial toll on their teaching time. Nevertheless, the NGOs are in their own ways observing, experimenting and modifying their approaches. The learning support programme of DRF is one significant example of it. The nature of support material is also being continuously modified. SARF through its 'Subject Fairs' creates a forum where consolidation and outreach teachers along with training personnel come to a common platform to enrich subject related pedagogy and TLM.

Thus, an analysis of the pedagogic processes has revealed tremendous potential in enriching the mainstream system through innovative practices in teaching, creating optimal learning environment, and relationship building with learners. While they have been able to make small breakthroughs in the mainstream system, sustained concerted efforts would be required for further quality improvement. The study supports the belief that there is a need to construct contextualized practical knowledge for critical social action through innovative pedagogies and taking cognizance of the inherent complexities in upscaling into the mainstream education.

The results of the study indicate the effectiveness of such partnership initiatives between government and non-government agencies, as well as the significance of the role played by the community and other social groups.

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