

An Experience of Working with NCERT Textbooks

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Background

This is an account of a project involving improving the quality of education in a primary municipal school in Basti Hazrat Nizamuddin, Delhi

Heritage conservation is often seen to be delinked from socio-economic development. The Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative¹ is an example of rethinking conservation and demonstration that heritage conservation is a stepping stone for socio-economic development.

The Humayun's Tomb-Nizamuddin area in Delhi has continuously evolved. It has been inhabited since the 13th century. Over the past 700 years, prolific monumental tomb-building happened in close proximity to the Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, a revered Sufi saint. Following an MoU for a public-private partnership (PPP) between the Archaeological Survey of India, Central Public Works Department, South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) as the public partners and Aga Khan Foundation and Aga Khan Trust for Culture as the private partners in 2007, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture commenced a major urban renewal initiative spread across 224 acres. The project aimed to improve the quality of lives of people living in Nizamuddin Basti while conserving the built urban heritage and environment development.

Since 2007, a multi-disciplinary team has worked with local communities to fulfil these objectives. The project's principal focus remains leveraging the cultural assets for the community's benefit while developing a 90-acre city park and conservation of almost fifty monuments. The project addresses the community's needs in health, education, livelihoods, open green spaces, sanitation, solid waste management and cultural revival in difficult circumstances where the population density is 70,000 people/sq km.

The Aga Khan Foundation has been engaged in the School Improvement Programme in the

SDMC school in Nizamuddin since 2008. This has resulted in the physical improvement of the school infrastructure, including using the building as a learning aid, improved academic levels of children, enhanced capacities of SDMC and AKF appointed community teachers and an active School Management Committee.

Background of the children in the Nizamuddin SDMC School

Most of the children enrolled in the SDMC schools – in Nizamuddin and elsewhere - come from socially and economically disadvantaged families. Their parents work in the unorganised sector in areas like domestic help, daily wage labour, rag-pickers, rickshaw pullers or begging – sectors where employment is not always regular. In addition, many of them are first generation learners. Some of the children also contribute to the family income by engaging in either rag picking or begging. In essence, the children who are studying in the SDMC school are those who have not been able to secure admission in any other school or those whose parents cannot afford any other school or who have crossed the age limit for school admission in other schools.


Status of the school in 2007

The physical and academic state of the school was clearly visible as soon as one entered the school. It was equally obvious that both needed to be addressed urgently. Aga Khan Foundation chose to study the situation and engage with the community before deciding on a plan of action.

Physical improvement of the school

The status of the building and infrastructure was lacking in practically every way. One of the earliest activities included a workshop with the children and the community on how they would like to see their school. Many of these suggestions formed the basis of the physical improvement plan of the school. In addition, the school building was used as

¹www.nizamuddinrenewal.org for details



a learning aid and it was linked to the neighbouring park which also had be freed from encroachment and landscaped.

Using the building as a learning aid included using the classroom spaces and corridors for adding different boards such as dot boards, grid boards, sentence boards, calendars, measuring scales to name some. The doors opened to form angles. The grills on the windows and stairs included abacuses and designs to improve gross and fine motor skills. Safety norms were met by increasing the width of the staircase and adding another door to each classroom.

Educational Status of the School

To understand the educational status in the Nizamuddin School, the Aga Khan Foundation invited the Central Institute of Education (CIE), University of Delhi to participate in the process. This served as a baseline and enabled us to develop an intervention strategy that would lead to an improvement in the quality of education offered to children and greater engagement between the school and the community to make the school more accountable to the community.

The baseline study also assessed the academic levels of children. The academic levels of children suggested that greater work was needed on language and mathematics. Further, the classroom processes focused exclusively on completing the syllabus from the textbooks and had negligible processes and practices to that would contribute to a learning environment in the classroom.

Educational Improvement in the school

One of the major interventions was a change of strategy in the way that textbooks were used in the classroom. In 2010, new textbooks were published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) following the recommendations of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2005. The new textbooks are activity- based and focus on experiential learning. Further, the textbooks encouraged application of the learning in the classroom to their lives. The children, however, did not seem to benefit from this changed approach.


Classroom observations and discussions with the teachers revealed that the children were struggling with learning to read and thereby impacting all further processes. This was found to be the case even in children of grades 4 and 5. The teachers pointed out many reasons for this that included the

home environment and the change in textbooks. Many of the government teachers believed (and some still do) that *it is impossible to learn to read without first learning the alphabet*. Further discussions indicated that the teachers had not received any orientation or any kind of in-service training on using the new approach or the new textbooks. There was a need to discuss the change in approach and methodology as well help teachers devise strategies to work with textbooks.

The following trainings were designed around the theme of using the new textbooks in the classroom. An incident involving the government School Inspector indicates the deep seated attitude regarding learning to read. One of the resources that we used during the training was *Padne ki Samajh* (Understanding Reading) published by the Reading Cell of the NCERT. The discussion was around the methods by which children learn to read and the challenges involved. The School Inspector entered the classroom, took one look and said, ‘Why are you teaching all this? Teach the teachers how to teach ka, kha, ga (the Hindi alphabet)’ and walked out without waiting to engage on how language can be taught and what were the guidelines in the NCF.

The Aga Khan Foundation, however, continued with its approach of helping the teachers use the textbooks in the spirit with which they were written. The benefits of continuing with this approach began to show results in the academic attainments of children. The classroom environment began to change when the AKF-appointed community teachers and government teachers began to make joint plans and work together. The children’s performance showed a significant improvement in the annual assessment conducted by the Aga Khan Foundation independent of the school examinations. The assessment in 2013 had indicated that only 26% of children in grade 5 were able to read a text and answer questions based on it. By 2017, this figure had gone up to 71%.

An effective methodology that emerged was the use of video recording of the classroom. During the workshop, a session was recorded in which the teacher was taking a lesson based on a pre-determined lesson plan in class. The recording of the lesson was analysed as a group to identify the strategies that were working and the strategies that needed to be improved. This strategy proved to quite effective in helping teachers improve as well as in designing the training programme. NCERT



resource books such as *Kaise padheyen Rimjhim* (how to teach *Rimjhim*- the name of the textbook) proved to be quite effective.

Engagement with the community

This is the third major intervention in Aga Khan Foundation's School Improvement Programme. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RtE) mandates the creation of a School Management Committee. After initial resistance, a School Management Committee has been formed. It has been growing in strength and regularly monitors the functioning of the school and submits reports from the School Inspector to the Director with a copy to the SDMC Counsellor.

In addition, Aga Khan Foundation creates several opportunities for the community to engage with the school through regular events and meetings.

Points to ponder

What should be the way of introducing new textbooks, especially ones based on an entirely new approach if the expectation is that the approach be adapted?

What is the academic support mechanism for teacher on new developments if the primary source of support and monitoring, that is the School Inspector, does not agree with the new approach?

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