

Opportunities for Children of Migrant Labour

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Introduction

In its broad and philosophical sense, the greater purpose of education is undoubtedly that of enabling every child to reach his or her full potential. The conviction that *every child can learn* seeks to capture this sensibility, even while keeping in mind that learning processes may vary with the individual child's developmental stage, pace and motivation to learn. Another dimension to be factored in is the external environment within which learning is experienced and transacted, namely the socio-economic background of the child that quite often dominates and thereby, critically affects the development of learning.

A compelling instance of constraints imposed by context on children's learning capabilities as well as the challenges faced in putting together institutional processes may be found in the experience of children of migrant labour populations in large metro cities. Comprising largely of rural households migrating from different states to work on construction sites, where subsistence and physical survival are itself uncertain, investment in education is inevitably a low priority. Apart from this, the transient nature of parental employment offers little stability (structurally, as well as, in time) to the children and presents multiple obstacles to developing a systematic educational process.

Keeping these considerations in mind, the Azim Premji Foundation initiated in 2007, the *Education for Children of Migrant Labour* (ECML) programme for children of construction workers through setting up of centres at two sites in Bangalore, with the support and involvement of the builders themselves. The aim of the programme has been to bring primary schooling children of this group into the mainstream within one year, as mandated by government norms, through the implementation of a curriculum specifically tailored to their needs. Most children who come to the centres have been previously listed as dropouts in government records.

Schooling has not been a pleasant experience for these children. It is one of being pulled up for

missing school, not being able to read or complete their homework as, inevitably, lack of continuity is extremely challenging for such children in understanding concepts and there are gaps in learning. It is hardly surprising to find such children losing interest in school and learning. In addressing their educational needs, it is critical, therefore, to keep in mind this constraining context and uncertainty.

Instances of children who have been at the centres (see box) suggest that for some, the ECML initiative has undoubtedly provided an opportunity for dramatically improving learning and realisation of potential. There is data to support the view that even at the broader level, the programme may have had a positive impact on children's lives through positive educational outcomes. As per records, the Bridge Programme has covered around 1700 children over the past 12 years and of them, 745 children have successfully made the transition to mainstream schooling. Furthermore, since tracking children whose families are constantly on the move has practical limitations, it would mean there could be children who have continued education elsewhere but are not in the records of the centres.

'I want to learn, and I know I can'

*Snippets from the lives of children who were at the Centre**

Sumati came from Raichur with her parents. In Bangalore, she was expected to take care of her nephew. When the baby was enrolled at the Centre, her parents were persuaded to enrol her at the Government school, following which she came to the Centre for a year to be able to transit to regular schooling. Hesitant, shy and labelled as a dropout earlier, Sumati is today a PU (+2 equivalent) student and enjoys being on stage, often anchoring programmes both at her school and during the annual function at the Centre.

Seven-year-old Bhima came from Andhra having dropped out of school earlier on. Once

at the construction site, his parents brought Bhima and his two brothers to the Centre. Bhima and his brother, a year younger, were enrolled at the local Government school. The youngest also came to the Centre and was placed in the playgroup. Each of them came to the Centre for a couple of years before transiting to regular school**. Today, all three are pursuing graduation courses with English as their medium of learning. Bhima is a budding choreographer, one of his brothers, an artist, is pursuing a degree in Computer Science and the third is in the Commerce stream.

Vishnu came to the Centre when he was seven, not having been to school for over a year. He was enrolled in class IV at the Government school and spent some time at the Centre. Vishnu went on to study up to PU. Although he did not complete his college degree, he has confidently started a business of his own as a contractor for house maintenance.

* Names of children have been changed.

**At the time, Government rules did not mandate one-year for bridge courses.

Crucial aspects of the programme

This article looks at three distinct yet inter-linked aspects of the ECML programme - the culture and routines of everyday practice at the centres, the curriculum and the crucial aspect of the involvement of all stakeholders in the children's learning process so as to reflect on what perhaps made it possible for many of these children to learn, develop and continue schooling.

A culture that builds trust and confidence

The ECML initiative is rooted in the belief that every child can learn and experience success in their learning and development, provided they get an opportunity to learn at their own pace and get adequate support to do so. A critical feature of this programme is providing children opportunities to enjoy learning in an environment where they feel safe and cared for, as most of their schooling has been erratic and therefore, a poor experience.

The following paragraphs illustrate how such a culture developed over time through conscious effort.

- For teachers, the focus is on building trust, so fear or threat (even implicit) is never used to motivate or discipline children. New teachers learn by observing how others handle situations. Children trust their teachers and share thoughts and problems with them.
- The classroom pedagogy consequently emphasises learning together, allowing children to discover, to have free and open discussions and dialogues. For instance, during the bi-weekly sharing meetings at assembly time, children often talk about their feelings when they get upset due to problems at home. They talk about quarrels between parents, father's drinking habits, mother being beaten or quarrels amongst neighbours. The environment during these meetings is of calm, concern and care. Teachers listen to what children say without passing judgements. Sometime later, teachers may visit parents at their homes to discuss how their behaviour impacts their children.
- When they join the Centre, children are at different learning levels across age groups. They work together in level-based groups, irrespective of their age. Teachers use multiple strategies to deal with the mixed feelings generated amongst both older and younger children about working together. They assign specific responsibilities within a group, ensure that each child is provided positive reinforcement at every step and that children's groups change as they advance in their learning. Eventually, it matters little to children that they sit in mixed-age groups.
- While there are three age groups at the Centre, each with a specific curriculum, younger children are not prevented from sitting with older siblings. This may continue until the younger child settles down. This has helped in building a culture of care and sensitivity amongst the children too.
- Children get milk in the morning, lunch and a snack in the evening before they return home. Teachers eat with the children and this fosters a strong bond between them.
- Some children display behavioural issues in the beginning: beating children, running around, throwing things and not putting toys and material back in place. Teachers work on changing these habits through reasoning and gently explaining what is expected of them and why. Sometimes, older children also help by talking to them.

- For the children who are mainstreamed, there is a strong sense of belonging and they look upon the Centre as a second home. Most visit the Centre before going to school and when they head back home, joining the rest for the evening snack and to complete their homework. They also take responsibility for the care of younger children by serving the food, cleaning up and helping the teachers in the classroom during school vacations.

The curriculum: a modular approach

The programme adopts a developmental curriculum approach that includes all children regardless of their ability. Children are placed in the appropriate age group - infants and toddlers (6 months to 3 years), pre-school (3 to 6 years) or the primary school group (6 years and above). For the younger groups focus is primarily on health and nutrition with some stimulating experiences and building of oral language.

The effort has been to build a flexible curriculum covering different domains of learning. New children are encouraged to move around and get oriented to on-going activities and the environment. If it seems likely that they may stay on for a while at the (construction) site, they are enrolled in the government school nearby. Thereafter, teachers at the Centre assess children to gauge their learning levels, before placing them in appropriate learning sub-groups.

A modular approach is followed for this group since children are expected to be mainstreamed within a year. Each module is a complete unit as the children's continuity at the site is uncertain and it covers both Kannada and English, mathematics and environmental studies. Basic concepts are frequently revisited in the course of teaching. This helps to introduce a concept to a child who has just joined and at the same time, the revision helps the others. The focus is on providing basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Children are encouraged to be curious, active and enthusiastic learners with opportunities to listen, discuss, play, create and engage in drama and art and other activities. Materials and resources found in day-to-day life are used to teach different subjects. Teachers have been part of the process of developing these materials and are consequently able to use these in an informed manner.

Mathematics concepts are understood with the help of manipulatives and students work with a

variety of materials such as 'fake paper notes' while learning currency, bundles of sticks help in understanding the concept of place value, a real clock is used to illustrate the structuring of time and materials like pebbles, beads and bangles are introduced to enable the understanding of different concepts.

EVS classes include brainstorming and group discussions, role-plays, visits to the bank, post office, railway station, bus stop and petrol bunk that help make children more aware of their surroundings. The emphasis is on encouraging children to ask questions and share their understanding and experiences.

Kannada is the basic medium of instruction along with some elementary English. Teachers provide help with Hindi to those whose mother tongue is Hindi. Enacting stories, poems, riddles, and employing 'authentic' materials like newspapers, wrappers etc. contribute to language learning. Activities such as *Word for the Day* benefit children and are enjoyed by them.

Children are encouraged to bring new words they have encountered. This encourages discussion and children get an opportunity to speak about their experience. The word for the day is put up in Kannada, English and in Hindi too if needed. Children may share words of objects, a feeling or an event. For example, at the initial level, children listen to a word, like *happy*, *anklet*, or an experience, like going to a *mela* in all three languages. They then go to the second level by making simple sentences in Kannada and some English using the word for the day.

A component on health in the curriculum encourages discussions on nutrition and hygiene. Activities like gardening and cooking offer interesting opportunities for learning and fun. Children learn about balanced food and about basics of cooking, like how of sprouting lentils, cooking vegetables or making chapatis. Cooking sessions also help to develop skills of estimation and measurement along with building language skills.

During gardening hours, children learn to grow and tend vegetable patches and share the harvest. A mango tree planted some years back yielded fruit this year. Children and adults made pickles together and distributed it amongst themselves.

These are built into each module and are largely formative. Since each child learns at his or her

pace, assessments are used to record the progress of the individual child. Children get opportunities to demonstrate learning in different ways. Teachers' continuous observations and detailed notes facilitate planning and preparation. Records are maintained along with individual portfolios for each child with the child's work. A summative assessment at the end of a module is done mainly with a view to preparing children for the pen and paper tests once they join school.

Involvement of stakeholders

Teachers

Teachers' are regular and committed to supporting children both in their learning and emotionally. Confidence building, sharing, working in groups, accommodating and adjusting to new students, are all worked on through continuous dialogue, sharing and participation. All of this contributes to the making of a smooth and confident transition of children into the mainstream.

Teachers speak at least three languages and try their best to make new children comfortable, coming as they do from different parts of India, speaking different languages. They maintain records of every child's progress. Since children often leave in the middle of a module with their parents who return temporarily to their villages, these records are crucial when the children return to the Centre.

Sharing and planning by teachers are intrinsic to the ECML programme. Once every fifteen days, teachers meet to reflect on the previous fortnight's experience and plan for the next. They also discuss issues related to the community, health and nutrition, tracking of children, administration etc.

Teachers make a concerted effort to keep in touch with the head teacher of the government school where children are enrolled to update records and to know about the progress of children for whom support continues at the Centre. They share information about the curriculum and the culture at the Centre with the staff of the government school emphasising that there is zero-tolerance for corporal punishment.

This interconnectedness between institutional spaces has a crucial role in ensuring that children feel motivated and continue regular schooling without fear. The staff of the Government school where the children go, often observes that these children are confident and though they might not always be at expected class levels when they join, it helps that they are motivated and open to learning.

Parents / community

To the community of parents, understanding and appreciating how the Centre functions as a formal learning space with a routine and a philosophy has come with time and constant dialogue. Given the uncertainty of their period of residence at the site, engaging regularly with parents has a crucial role in enabling continuity of schooling and mainstreaming. Teachers are in constant touch with parents and orient them to processes at the Centre.

Members of the community take part in day-to-day activities of the Centre. Mothers who have babies and are not working at the sites come in to help with the care of other toddlers. They serve food, narrate stories and sing songs to children. Community members also help in aspects like bringing in new children, celebrations, maintenance and upkeep of the premises including painting and cleaning. They are invited to share their experiences, talk about agriculture or their work at the site; about materials used in construction, safety precautions etc. Parents are encouraged to sit in the classroom and observe their children's learning.

A committee comprising parents, old students and representatives of the builders are responsible for helping the team at the Centre in tracking children, ensuring that children attend school regularly; motivating parents to continue children's education; educating the community about safety and security of children and so on. Parents are also encouraged to put money in a bank for their children's education if they can.

Lessons from the experience

There are certain key aspects of the programme that have enabled this. The first and perhaps the most important lesson is that the population we are looking at is limited by its vulnerabilities. What emerges then is the critical role of providing a safe and enabling environment. The second essential factor is the role and orienting of the teaching community in building a relationship with these children and in developing appropriate pedagogical practices. Notably, teachers play a crucial role in the successful transition to regular schooling, an aspect that needs to be emphasised and strengthened. The role of the curriculum emerging within this context in terms of method

and material is important, but contingent on the successful implementation of the above two aspects. Finally, the parental community may be seen as a potentially enabling factor

rather than a limiting one. Attention needs to be paid as to how their role in supporting the transition to mainstream schooling can be better leveraged.



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