

Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti is the home to India's pluralistic traditions and the shrine of the revered 13th century Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, visited by pilgrims of all faiths. This 700-year-old settlement is home to a community of over 10,000 people and over 70% work in the unorganised sector. The Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Aga Khan Foundation is a public-private partnership project that aims to use heritage conservation as a stepping-stone to improving the quality of lives of the community in Nizamuddin Basti since 2007.

The programme interventions in the area were designed based on a Quality of Life survey, where the poor quality of education of children emerged as a major issue. This was not surprising as Nizamuddin Basti is 98% Muslim and the Sachhar Committee report of November 2006 had already identified education, particularly in women and girls, as a major issue. In Nizamuddin Basti, this problem was compounded with most of the children coming to the municipal primary school being first-generation school-goers.

The Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative worked on improving the municipal school through improving the physical infrastructure, school management, classroom processes and engagement with the community.

## Background

The parents of children enrolled in the SDMC school may be classified as literate, but it is a wide range and their occupations and home environments were rarely conducive to learning. The limited literacy of the parents, their long working hours, absence of print material at home, the need to take care of younger siblings, early exposure to domestic violence and abusive language, characterised the lives of the children in the school.

The nature of Nizamuddin Basti is such that it attracts people from all over India, though there is a predominance of people from the Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. This also means that a significant number of children enrolled in the school do not

speak Hindi at home, which is the language of instruction in the SDMC school. Exposure to spoken English is even more limited.

So, if we try to identify the common factors that define children enrolled in the SDMC primary school in Nizamuddin, they would include – from a resource-poor family, almost definitely Muslim, little academic support available at home (some may hire another young person in the Basti as a tutor) and, quite likely, the language of instruction different from the mother tongue.

## Status of school in 2007

The primary school in 2007, when the project began, was a desolate place with barely 50-60 children coming to school, even though the enrolment was over 100. The school did not run for the minimum number of hours it was supposed to and curriculum transaction was not a priority for the teachers.

The school building and its maintenance did not help towards creating a learning environment and did not even meet the SDMC's safety standards. Classrooms were poorly lit and ventilated, had uncomfortable furniture and no classroom displays. The teaching-learning process was characterised by rote learning interspersed with physical punishment. The teacher-child relationship was tense if not one of fear and classroom processes were uninspiring. The attendance of the children and teachers was irregular. The academic levels of the children were neither age- nor grade-appropriate; worse was the teachers' attitude who did not think that the children were worth teaching and the parents' attitude who felt that their children could not learn.

## Process of school transformation

It is widely accepted by the community of Nizamuddin Basti and visitors that the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) school is a transformed place. The transformation of the SDMC *Pratibha Vidyalaya* has taken place under a people-public-private partnership with the SDMC, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Central Public Works Department (CPWD) as the public partners and Aga Khan Foundation and Aga Khan Trust for

Culture as the private partners (together referred to as Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)). One of the motivations behind creating the changes was our strong belief that every child could learn if given the right opportunity and environment to do so.

The work in the school began after discussion with all the stakeholders. First, we had a discussion with the community through several cluster-level meetings to get their opinion on the projected changes. This also included a visioning exercise with the parents and children on what their idea of an ideal school would be. Parents and children shared what they would like their school to be.

Second, an internal assessment of the physical infrastructure was carried out – bearing in mind that changes in the infrastructure and processes in the school would lead to an increase in the number of students enrolled in the school. This included condition assessment and gap identification with SDMC norms. In addition, a specialist architect was identified to help design the building so that the school building itself could be used as a learning aid. This is called the *Building as a Learning Aid* (BaLA) approach.

Third, the academic levels of the children were assessed in Hindi and Maths i.e. literacy and numeracy with the help of the Department of Education, University of Delhi, to help design interventions.

Based on the baseline assessments and analysis of the situation, the following areas were identified for intervention by the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative. These were as follows:

- Physical improvement of the building and improvement in infrastructure
- School management
- Classroom processes that include curriculum enrichment and other strategies
- Engagement with the community
- After-school programme so that the children continue their education

### **The Nizamuddin model**

The Nizamuddin model is essentially working on most of the determinants that improve the quality of education and indeed the quality of life. It is for this reason the project works in the areas of early childhood care and education, primary education, health, livelihoods, sanitation, solid waste management and culture.

This article focusses on two elements of classroom processes and curriculum enrichment i.e. language teaching and arts intervention as a change to help children learn.

### *Language teaching*

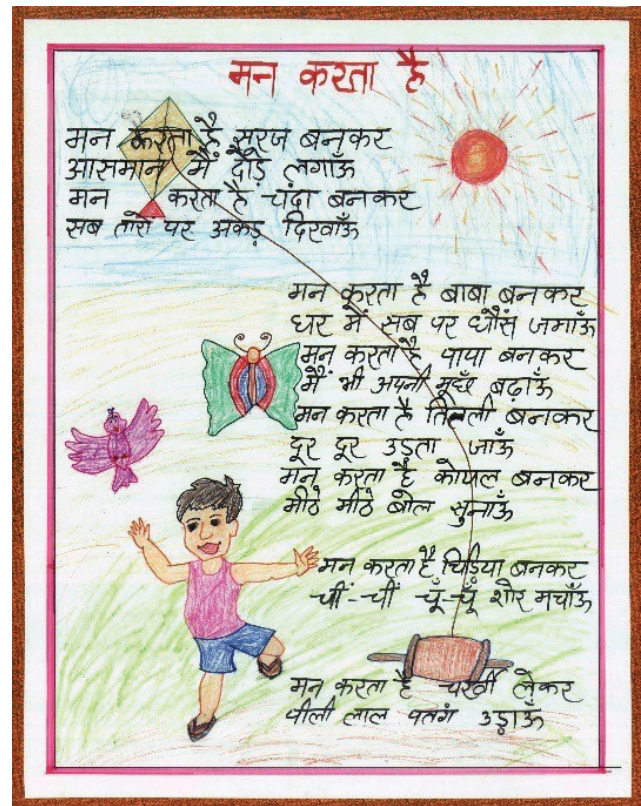
The most common strategy used to teach Hindi at the primary level is to teach the alphabet, then memorise the *barahkhadi* – which could be translated as the vowel-consonant cross table. Children are, then, taught short, two- and three-letter words without *matras* (vowel sounds) and then, small sentences using these words. Following this, children are supposed to read chapters in their textbooks and do the written work, mainly answer questions.

The SDMC school used NCERT textbooks that had undergone a complete change in the language teaching approach following the National Curriculum Framework, 2005 and used the *whole language teaching* approach. The teachers, unfortunately, had not undergone any in-service training and therefore, were not comfortable using the new textbooks.

The Aga Khan Foundation addressed this issue in the training programmes that it organised for the SDMC teachers and appointed community teachers. Teachers learned to make lesson plans following the new approach and made story maps, character pyramids, character analysis, the *6 Ws framework* - what, when, where, who, why and whom and were trained to identify the central idea and its relationship with other ideas in the story. They also learned how to ‘make’ these new types of exercises. Lesson plans for the entire textbook were made and this helped the teachers work with the new curriculum. Teachers were also helped to understand the philosophy behind the changed approach to language instruction.

Teachers prepared teaching-learning material during the training so that the children could learn to read in context - the major change in the new approach with lots of games. A library was created to facilitate language learning.

The training programmes also focussed on physically reorganising the class based on the activity being undertaken. The school transformation process had included changing the furniture to lightweight furniture that the children could change themselves as opposed to always sitting in rows. Children were not used to working in small groups, but they gradually



learned that each child needed to contribute when they worked this way. The teacher would call the children close to her during the story reading sessions adding to the enjoyment element in class. While the SDMC continued with its end of the year examinations, Aga Khan Foundation focussed on assessing learning in which the child was assessed for reading, writing, comprehension and speaking. The assessment also included questions that required the child to move away from the given text to use her imagination.

These multiple strategies helped the children improve their language skills and the enhancement in language capacities of children ranged from 20 percent to 80 percent.

#### Arts intervention

Given that this project is led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, arts intervention seemed like a logical way forward. The start was with a theatre and photography workshop where the children invited their parents with invitation cards that they had made. This was the first time that the community had been invited to the school to see a play. Space needed to be created for this intervention. Time had to be carved into the school timetable, resource teachers identified, and opportunities for the children needed to be created.

Two arts teachers were appointed and the timetable

was changed so that each child had access to, at least, an hour of art; theatre role-plays in language teaching; monthly *bal sabhas* and weekly special morning assemblies where special days began to be celebrated so that children could have a formal platform for expression. A magazine for children, *Rang Tarang* was also introduced for their writings and drawings. An element of cultural appreciation was also added with the heritage curriculum as well as environmental consciousness through the eco-club. A special set of activities were conducted on the designated 'bagless days.'

All these interventions have helped the children expand their world view, gain platforms for expression, gain confidence and positively impact attendance and thereby, regularity in attending school.

In Nizamuddin Basti, where the largest section of the parent community has poor levels of education but wants to educate their children, it becomes very important to engage with the community. Oftentimes, the parents fall short in confidence in engaging with members of the teacher community.

#### Points to ponder

The school has been transformed but the larger question of the continuity of the work without the additional resources provided/generated by the Aga Khan Development Network agencies

remains a question mark. Given the government's current levels of expenditure, it seems unlikely that additional resources are on their way. The Government of NCT of Delhi has sanctioned 26% for education, arguably the largest allocation. However, primary education falls under the local government, (in this case the municipal corporation) and so that allocation does not benefit this school. Here are some issues which present themselves as we go forward:

- The factors that facilitate learning are now very well known, yet government schools continue to be understaffed, dirty, unexciting places that do not inspire children to learn. There are many research studies on optimum hours of instruction, whether mid-day meals encourage attendance, whether the presence of toilets increases the enrolment of girls and we certainly know the importance of these. However, we seem to lack the intention of creating schools that invite children to learn. It would be great if the debates were on curriculum transaction, language teaching approaches rather than what we know about the basic requirements of a school.

- What will it take for the education administration to treat teachers as autonomous individuals who know what their children need and support them?
- Children in Delhi have not been going to school regularly since November for one reason or another – winter smog, severe winter, protests, riots and now COVID-19. While children from well-to-do families have access to digital classrooms, children from resource-poor areas do not. The maximum time the younger children from such families get on the phone is 25-30 minutes and they do not have computers at home. The SDMC has begun some form of digital support – but the impact remains to be seen. Children who are enrolled in 'public schools' under the EWS quota will face a huge learning gap as their classmates from more affluent families would have had access to digital classes.

What the impact of all this on not just going to school, but on all aspects of their learning will be, remains to be seen.



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