

A background of special education and years of experience in running a Hindi medium school for migrant children in Kolkata (1994-2004), often left me and some of my close associates reviewing the educational needs of children, especially those from the lower-income groups. My experience during these years confirmed what many people already know - a schooling system of 10-12 years with a fixed syllabus for all neither respects the individuality and ability of each learner nor equips them to cope better with life. Moreover, in trying to fit into the system, most of those at the margins ended up being pushed out, losing their survival skills in the bargain.

In 2004, along with some associates, I decided to set up a Bengali medium school for the 10-14 age group, who were at their creative and critical best. They were also the most vulnerable and likely to drop out of school. Moreover, that age group was expected to have acquired basic literacy and numeracy and therefore, be ready for the various curricular experiments we had in mind.

The Beginnings (2005-2011)

We found a space in an area called, Chetla, near the famous Kalighat temple in south Kolkata. As we surveyed the registered slums in the neighbourhood, we repeatedly presented the new school concept to the residents for a couple of months. Seventeen children enrolled and *Shikshamitra* began in April 2005. Most of the children had been going to government schools, some had dropped out. All were disgusted with their schools and had come to try out something new. *Shikshamitra* school ran for six years and, till the very end, the enrolment number fluctuated between 25 and 30.

The initial period of turmoil

We found that these students were restless, aggressive, openly exhibiting their suspicion of and disdain for the teaching community; they were prone to violence and were averse to learning. While teaching, learning plans had to be postponed; art and clay work helped to calm them down to some extent. The children were invited to do role-

plays on topics like break time, classroom teaching, closure time at schools, games played outside, time spent at home. Under the garb of acting, children narrated stories of humiliation and torture endured as the marginalised, both in their previous classrooms and in their neighbourhoods and how they had resorted from revenge to submission and resignation at the end.

The role-plays gradually built a bridge of understanding and initiated the democratic practice of students and teachers sitting together discussing issues, difficulties, positive moments and also reviewing school activities, along with suggestions. Cooperation, care and efforts made to learn and own up to mistakes were rewarded with encouragement and open appreciation.

To ensure and uphold the dignity of physical labour and sense of ownership, the teachers and children were engaged in the everyday maintenance of the school. A roster listed the different tasks - dusting, mopping, closing doors and windows, cleaning toilets, ringing the bell etc - and the names of those in charge. It took a while for the school community to accept and value the practice, of course, with exceptions.

After settling down in about six months, the school ran for six to seven hours, five days a week. The curriculum involved a lot of music, art, crafts, hands-on work, dance, theatre, games, films, visits to streets, the old dock, bazaars, art galleries, horticultural park, crafts organisations and often, these were integrated with the regular academic subjects. The emphasis on the arts was so strong that some parents who came to admit their children thought it was a music and dance school!

Learning Bengali

Sixty percent of the students, between 9 and 14 years, who had formally passed classes II, III and IV, had not achieved the basic levels of literacy and numeracy, some even failing to write their own names in Bengali. Ensuring basic reading and writing skills in Bengali now became the foremost challenge. We tried different methods

that had previously worked well elsewhere. Faced with repeated failure, we turned to the *Reading Guarantee Scheme*, initiated by Prof Jalaluddin. With this method, most of the children learned to read and write within three months while some took a little more time.

The method involved:

- Interpreting a picture or a story from the children's own perspectives. The learners constructed a new text in their own language with help from the teacher. The method made reading meaningful and enjoyable. Learning and retaining words became easier as they came with a context.
- Simultaneously, the Bangla *Barakkhari* chart with combinations of consonants and vowel signs (*matras*) was introduced. It was used to construct simple words (without *sanyuktakshar*), reinforcing correct spellings. Further, it helped learners with dyslexia, otherwise unable to insert the vowel (*matra*) signs correctly. Before we introduced the *Barakkhari*, we made sure that the students knew the Bengali letters and the vowel signs.
- A third component that we added was the use of appropriate worksheets, which later became very popular with learners and teachers.

We soon discovered how crucial it was to use appropriate texts in simple language: just because they were all beginners, it did not mean that the older children would enjoy the same texts that were being used for the younger age group! There was a dearth of right kind of appealing texts as those by renowned authors, otherwise very good, were not effective for these beginners. The context and the language of many texts appeared unfamiliar to the first-generation school-goers.

Short reading material, not exceeding a page, written in large fonts and well-spaced out was preferred. So, we, teachers and students, started creating our own texts often in the classroom. Teachers created short versions of stories from Grimm's Fairy Tales, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Sukumar Roy, Leela Majumdar and other authors. The entire school was caught in a frenzy of writing small and big pieces, simple in language but complex in thought. *Shikshamitra* began printing these with the students' illustrations. Within a year, there was a magical rise in interest in the library books, their illustrations and designs.

Learning English

Unlike Bengali, we did not have a tried-out path in

teaching English to first-generation school-goers. We got tips from places like the *Isai Ambalam School* and Auroville and used techniques from special education. We evolved our own English package through experimentation. Some methods used are:

- Students were helped to master phonic skills for word attack and spelling and acquire a basic vocabulary of fifty words within three months. More words were subsequently added. Word attack, a decoding skill, is the ability to connect the printed word to the spoken word and is basic to learning to read. It also helps in decoding similar-sounding words, such as chant and pant.
- Using that basic vocabulary (nouns, verbs, articles, adjectives, prepositions) they were quickly introduced to step-by-step construction of very simple sentences. Once they became confident of building, writing, reading sentences and saying them aloud within five months, students started writing on their own. This was followed by writing short descriptions leading to writing paragraphs and small stories by the end of the year.
- Illustrating a text, read or written, was encouraged. It helped the teachers to understand how much the learner had grasped. Interesting affordable materials emerged out of this process.
- Other things were tried simultaneously -- listening to carefully chosen songs and stories, watching movies, interacting with teachers and visitors in English. All these helped children develop an ear for the language.

Learning numeracy

This was somewhat easier to achieve. Manipulatives, or concrete materials, were developed in-house. Some outside materials from organisations like *Jodo Gyan* were converted to suit our needs and pocket.

A variety of materials were designed on a single concept and these were used by different learners, including the ones who were numerically challenged. Usually, maths manipulatives remain restricted to the junior classes. For the first time, appropriate manipulatives in algebra and geometry were skilfully developed for middle school levels. A marked increase in understanding of concepts was noticed in the middle school with the aid of manipulatives.

Other subjects

We were free to try all the rich pedagogic practices developed all over the world for the teaching of standard school subjects like history, geography and science. Going outside the class into the neighbourhood for local surveys and interviews, discussing current issues, studying history and geography from local to global, doing hands-on experiments and repairing with easily available materials, emphasising on ecological science and appropriate behaviour, involving in day-long cooking classes, doing art at art galleries, relating theatre shows to the texts being read, fun annual exams with parents as judges, learning to assess one's progress – the school was ready to try out all that would reinforce learning.

Open zone technique

This encouraged practice and independent learning. In a span of 45 minutes, students were expected to work by themselves to complete a given number of worksheets in various subjects, without any teacher intervention. Procedures were also put in place to enable self-correction. Of course, rules were flouted and there were irregularities. Yet, independent learners were in the making.

Art

Art and all that it encompasses simply became a way of living for us as it took root in the lives of both children and teachers. Art was not merely a class or an extra-curricular activity. It was everywhere: on walls, on doors, on notebooks, on paper and on cloth. It even entered most of the exams.

Films, songs and music

These, very often, were chosen as texts, as these brought out the best in children with dyslexia since they did not have to read the text. They participated in discussions, activities, often, much more perceptively than the others and filled in the related worksheets with as much interest as the others.

School closes down

In spite of its rich pedagogy, *Shikshamitra* could not attract a sufficient number of students. Fathers, in particular, preferred traditional schooling. Finally, it had to be wound up for a host of other reasons including, a dearth of funds and introduction of the RtE. Most children were admitted to government schools. Some continued schooling, going on to college while others took up jobs.

Shikshamitra Resource Centre

Shikshamitra had started sharing its pedagogy with organisations from 2007. As the school closed down in 2011, the organisation started training others, creating and supplying materials as a full-time activity.

Bengali training

Shikshamitra started sharing the method of accelerated reading and writing in Bengali through 3-day workshops. We found that it excited teachers from varied backgrounds. The process of interpretation of a text, voicing one's views and being involved in creating a text of one's own filled the teachers with a sense of empowerment and joy. They felt confident in going ahead and trying the method. We trained many government school teachers, both from Kolkata and other districts of West Bengal as well as from private English medium schools.

We even trained NGO teachers working with children in very difficult circumstances on railway platforms, in bidi-making and rag-picking communities, tribal children and children in various slums of Kolkata and other towns. Many of the groups created texts suiting their own environment. The teaching-learning materials, worksheets and the books developed by *Shikshamitra* have always been in good demand.

English training

Our training Foundations of Basic English became very popular and is one of the most sought-after programmes of *Shikshamitra*. It has been delivered in several states of India, in the northeast, Bihar, and Haryana. It has been used in the Azim Premji Foundation schools, several schools in Bangalore and also in Bangladesh. Teachers with weak foundations in English found the programme extremely beneficial, learning English afresh in a novel way.

Government school teachers of classes II to VII (primary and middle school) have used the programme successfully; some have used this as a quick remedial measure to teach primary school children who have missed the bus in primary schools. The resource teachers of the Haryana government commented after the training that for the first time, the programme told them what actually needs to be done in the classroom instead of mere theorising as regular workshops do. As in Bengali, the time-tested worksheet compilations and workbooks ease the learning process.

Maths training

Requests for workshops in maths came from the same government and non-government schools and learning spaces that had availed of the languages training.

Our maths materials have been bought by schools and individuals from all over India. Some schools made their own materials to cut down the costs. It was through these workshops that *Shikshamitra* discovered that maths learning was most effective when participants made their own set of manipulatives. This practice has been encouraged

since then. Resource persons have been created in different organisations and schools for teaching maths and Bangla. However, finding English teachers remains a challenge.

Shikshamitra continues as an Educational Resource Organisation, to disseminate its pedagogic knowledge, provide material support and act as an advisor to many schools, organisations and even parents in several states of India. We are driven by our conviction that learning is for every child - only opportunities have to be created.



By profession a special educator, **Sudeshna Sinha** has been largely involved in establishing experimental elementary schools (*Aashirvad* Vidyalaya, at St. Joseph's School and *Shikshamitra*), developing curriculum, pedagogy, materials, books and assessment tools. Teachers' training and writing and preparing books and documents for teachers and children in lucid language have been her areas of interest. Designing methods and materials for effective teaching, especially languages, is her specialization. She works as a resource teacher and has taken classes at the Teachers' Centre, Modern Academy of Continuing Education, *Digantar*, Azim Premji University and Wipro Foundation. She is a resource consultant to an alternative school in Bangladesh and to the Techno India Group of Schools in Ariadaha, West Bengal. She had been also been a consultant to the Oxford University Press. Along with her organisation, *Shikshamitra*, she is currently, also one of the resource providers for the Wipro Foundation. She can be contacted at shompare@gmail.com