Creating an enabling learning environment at 12,000 Feet: SECMOL Alternative Institute

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"While [the children] may not be physically punished…a strong message is communicated to them that if they want to be accepted by the teacher and the society, they have to renounce any allegiance to their home language and culture. [W]hen the message, implicit or explicit…is "Leave your language and culture at the schoolhouse door" children also leave a central part of who they are, their identities - at the schoolhouse door."(Cummins, 2001)

Photo Credit: Krishika Shah

All I can hear is the slow thump of the bike as I manoeuvre it over the loose gravel and sand; and the sound of the wind sweeping the flat plain of the valley encircled by rocky, barren hills. I feel a nip in the air and look up to see dark clouds gathering on the horizon. I suspect I took a wrong turn at a fork in the road a few kilometres back. However, with no other humans in sight, I decide to persist. Climbing an uphill track, I am back on the serpentine tarred road; and a few curves later, perched on the hillside and overlooking the next valley, I get the first glimpse of my destination.

It stands in contrast to its surroundings – a verdant patch of habitation in the midst of miles of barrenness. I can hear the Indus flow in a gorge a few hundred feet below it, dividing the valley into two. As I ride the last mile towards the campus of Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), my mind is attempting to capture the first set of impressions in a phrase or a word – of the many that it suggests, one word lingers on,longer than the others: oasis.

The Story of SECMOL

Ladakh is one of the remotest regions in the country. And the people of Leh, one of Ladakh's two districts, are an ethnic and linguistic minority spread across habitations - which can be as small as 10-15 homes nestled on a hill - ranging in altitude from approximately 9,000 to 12,000 feet.

SECMOL Alternative Institute Campus
Photo Credit: Jamunalnamdar

Thegovernment schools here have been notoriously ineffective; and this is reflected in the dramatically low pass percentage of local students in the 10th board examinations, which stood at approximately 5% for many years. (Ganguly, 2001)

Sonam Wangchuk, one of the founders of SECMOL, had himself experienced the hopelessly dysfunctional schooling system as a child. He was fortunate to get an opportunity

to study in a school in Delhi where the encouragement of the teachers helped him come out of his shell; and he later went on to graduate as an engineer from a college in Srinagar. During his graduation years he offered academic support to Ladakhi students taking their class 10th examination – an experience that brought him face to face, yet again, with the dysfunctional schooling system in the region, and impacted him deeply. A year after his graduation, in 1988, along with a small group of other Ladakhi youths he set up SECMOL. (Ashoka India, 2002)

Even though centuries of living in harsh climatic and geographic conditions with limited resources, has led to the evolution of a Ladakhi culture that deeply values self-sufficiency and environmental sustainability, traditionally, the average Ladakhi child did not have to go through formal schooling. Children learnt in the fields and homes, watching and working alongside their parents, grandparents and neighbours. "The songs and stories of Ladakh's past would often be passed down orally while this work was being done. [And] each child would grow to become competent enough to build and maintain his or her own house, manage the farm or herd, and meet the family needs…The purpose of education was the preparation of youth for lives of meaningful work and the transmission of Ladakh's unique culture and values… [and it] allowed stable, prosperous communities to continue meeting their own needs. " (Mingle, 2010)

SECMOL started by offering courses for students who had failed (or were about to take) their 10th class exams, because as Sonam notes, "They were really in a very difficult situation because they were considered failures by the society. And these were students who had otherwise been on the farm producing their own food… But these children were sent to schools with the hope that they would fit into another sort of educated society. So they had lost the traditional skills and they had not acquired the new skills. … They were lost in between and therefore in a very depressed condition." (ibid)

With time, however, he realised that "If 95 percent of the products fail, not just in schools, in any system whether it is a car factory or jam factory, then it is not the product, it is the system … that has a defect, and the system has to be changed."(ibid) Based on its experience of working with the local students and the education system, SECMOL thus identified four main challenges: medium of instruction, unfamiliar and culturally irrelevant content in text books and curriculum, untrained teachers and communities' lack of a sense of ownership of their schools.

In the last 25 years, it has worked to address all four problem areas and has met with different levels of successes and challenges (Menon, 2010). Through the decades, however, it has continued its focus on helping students who fail the 10th class examinations. And this is done at the Alternative Institute campus designed by Sonam and built in 1994 on a barren patch of land in Phey, about 16 kilometres west of the Leh town – which I was visiting.

SECMOL Alternative Institute

It is windy outside and it has started to rain, but I am sitting in a pleasantly warm room attached to the campus-kitchen with a few friends, foreign volunteers and students - some of whom are feeding a few days old, abandoned kitten, in a corner. Chozang, an ex-student who now helps manage the day to day activities, begins to tell us about the institute: "We don't focus like a normal school on (official) curriculum, syllabus. We take the students who fail and try to re-build them (their belief in themselves) - Because once you fail your classes then everyone looks down at them – "Oh you failed, you can't do anything." We try to improve their confidence level…we call it a 'foundation year course'. All the students are from remote areas of Ladakh like Changtang, Nubra and all of them studied in government schools."

I spend the next few hours with the students of the foundation-year – hearing them make presentations and debate on questions of Buddhist philosophy, sing Ladakhi songs; having dinner with them, and answering their questions

on why I was visiting their campus! We later assemble in a large hall. A friend is facilitating an activity. "Each one of you has a story of change, a story where some kind of transformation has happened" she says, and invites us all to think of five fears that lie hidden within us; and five 'warriors' that may help us deal with them. She then suggests that we pair up and share our thoughts. My partner is a young girl who has recently joined the institute. She has listed 'exam' has her first fear. "We had an exam today no," she later explains in a low voice. "I could not answer. Means I had a paper, but I forgot." She pauses and looks down. I see her eyes welling up. "Last night I studied till 3 AM. Then I got up in the morning and studied again. But what I had studied they did not ask." She is sobbing gently now. I wonder if the twelve months at the alternate institute is really able to make a substantial difference to the lives of these children.

Next morning, I put the question to Tsetan, another ex-student who has recently joined as a faculty at the institute. He tells me that most students not just manage to clear their exams after spending a year here but, "most people go on to study further. And others…I mean they get the required knowledge, they get some ideas, what to do or not to do.""After passing from here, when we go back to schools they are astonished" he smiles. "Oh…he has improved a lot!"

So how does the institute manage to help students who are treated as failures even by their families and friends, and are habituated to a certain way of learning; and turn them into young men and women willing and capable of taking responsibility of their lives?

Of the different approaches that the SECMOL Alternative Institute takes, three key, inter-related, strategies seem to stand out.

Local language and content

Since Ladakh was annexed to Jammu and Kashmir in 1947, the official language of the region has been Urdu. When a six year old child joined school, she had to switch suddenly and completely from Ladakhi to Urdu – which is an alien language in most villages in Leh. As Sonam recalls, "It used to be a traumatic experience for the children to be in schools, suddenly welcomed with a beating stick, and then they are required to re-learn everything, all that they had known. Oma for dudh—you would be slapped if you said oma. Every time that they said something that they knew in Ladakhi so well, they would be insulted for not knowing it in Urdu. (Mingle, 2010)" In the 9th standard, Urdu, too, was abandoned and the medium of instruction in all subjects was changed to English – giving the students just two years to learn the new language and write their matriculation examination (all six subjects), in it. As Sonam remarks, "I do not know how this kind of design could come to be. It is what you would design for your enemy, not for your nation's future citizens (ibid)."

They also realised that it wasn't merely the language – the content of the textbooks too, were often completely alien to the students. Ladakhi history, culture, flora and fauna etc. found no space in these books and the overall curriculum - which were designed in Delhi or Jammu and spoke not of yaks and apricots but of elephants and rain-forests (Ganguly, 2001). Being treated as 'primitive' by non-local teachers, who often took the relevance of content for granted, exacerbated the alienation.

Textbooks using images familiar to Ladakhi children
Photo Credit: SECMOL

SECMOL understood that, as Cummins (2001) notes, "When [the children] feel the rejection, they are much less likely to participate actively and confidently in classroom instruction." And that "schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom. Whether we do it intentionally or inadvertently, when we destroy children's language and rupture their relationship with parents and grandparents, we are contradicting the very essence of education."

As the students who come to the SECMOL Alternate Institute are often from rural areas and can converse fluently only in Ladakhi, for the first few months they are encouraged to converse, make presentations to their peers, etc. in their mother tongue, as well as to share and learn more about their own culture. The faculty members are fluent in Ladakhi. And this process, thus, makes them feel accepted both inside and outside the classes. As they begin to pick up other languages - mostly English and Hindi/Urdu from their peers, foreign and domestic volunteers etc. (more on this later) the students begin to attempt a gradual and natural shift to the other languages, without being made to feel ashamed of not already being proficient in them.

SECMOL also has an active publication team which attempts to create an institutional "climate where the linguistic and cultural experience of the whole child is actively accepted and validated" (Cummins, 2001). In particular, two of their main priorities have been to (i) develop culturally and environmentally relevant text-books (such as for science and social science) for Ladakhi students and (ii) develop co-curricular content (such as children's books, a local magazine etc.) in a colloquial, written form of Ladakhi for popular consumption. This provides the readers with familiar motifs and contexts and makes it easy for them to make sense of, and begin to participate in, the academic discourses.

Rebuilding their self-belief

Another common theme that emerged as I spoke to several current and ex-students at the alternative institute, is how it hurt them to see their friends and families doubt their abilities when they failed the examination despite their best efforts. As Tsetannoted recalling his own experience, "What happened was I failed Urdu and Maths. I had worked so hard - I swear on my mother! But people at home also said…you must not have studied etc. So because of that I was very stressed. The system is like this."He feels the traditions of rural Ladakh which does not encourage children to publically or uninhibitedly express their opinions or interact freely with strangers also makes them diffident: "If there is a group sitting here…someone will say "Lets answer." So you say "You answer". He will never answer, because they have this habit you know…of bowing down. And the biggest mistake…Mother, father….whenever there are guests…they will say don't go there. They think the guests will say something. So they will tell the chid, "Aren't you ashamed? Just sit quietly." I mean, from 4/5 years you do this SO much. You give them in their mind…that if I say something what will others think?"

Recognising the complex roots and nature of the challenge the institute takes a number of steps to help the children start believing in themselves. One of the primary ones among these is to hand over the running of the campus – almost entirely - to the students. As Chozang explained, "The whole campus is run by democratic way…like a small government. There are elections every month so one student is elected as the coordinator (for one thing). That person may run the hostel. And every student has responsibility - like someone will be taking care of garden, someone will be taking care of cleaning or the solar batteries from which we get electricity, someone will be taking care of the cows that we have – milk

Students interacting with volunteers on campus
Photo Credit: Accessible Horizon Films

and everything comes from our own cows. So every student has responsibilities – They learn everything by doing."

Even as they pick up new skills, and learn to take responsibilities and live democratically among their peers, the trust that their new friends show in them goes a long way in helping them forget the trauma of having been labelled a failure, and to rebuild their confidence in themselves. "Like when a person is joining a shop or taking care of accounts" Chozangremarks, "they feel really confident of themselves. They feel like people are trusting them. And that's how they start to gain. And start learning more and more. Because then they like…you know like…they broke up. Once they fail…once the society…their family and everyone is like 'Oh you failed, you can't do anything', they are all like broken. And now here they come, and they do things and they see that people trust them…so that's what we do in the foundation year."

Given how central language is to one's sense of self, and how fundamental it is to participation in one's community and thus to one's sense of empowerment, the institute also lays considerable emphasis in developing the skills of speaking and listening in public forums. Every second month, every student, gives a presentation about their responsibilities. "Like what they learned in the classroom and while taking care of the organic garden or solar panels or taking care of a shop as an accountant etc."Chozang notes. Initially the presentations are made in Ladakhi and as the students become familiar with other languages, they are encouraged to present in other languages as well.

In addition to this, the good work that the Alternative Institute has been doing over close to two decades attracts a diverse set of foreign and domestic volunteers and visitors (Accessible Horizon Films, 2012). Many of them offer extra-curricular classes which can range from book-making to music or dance. Some also offer academic support or choose to just share their experience of travelling in different parts of the world or pursuing unusual jobs and careers. Interacting with such varied people regularly often gives the students new insights and opens up newer possibilities to them.

Effective pedagogy

While the stress during the first few months is on helping the students gain confidence through learning by doing various activities, the institute does not overlook the fact that retaking and doing well in the exams which they had previously failed, may be one of the biggest enablers and motivators for many students. They are thus also provided continuous academic support – a significant part of which is to help them break away from their old habits and become familiar with new ways of teaching and learning- which is centred around 'learning through using' and 'using what one learns'. For, unable to comprehend the text books or classroom discussions, the students in government schools here, as in many other parts of the country, often take to memorising content by rote. Asked why he had failed the Urdu examination despite having studied the language for 10 years, Tsetan responded, "But they don't teach like this you know! Their way of teaching…I mean…you cannot understand. What do teachers do? They read themselves…and then he will tell us the story (summary). And then he will tell us the appropriate lines…this for question number this."

"Here students are improving – here we improve by seeing others talk. When two people are talking …so we observe…how do they do it, and then we do it ourselves. Here, if there is science there is solar science (the campus is almost entirely dependent on solar energy and the students manage the solar network)or about the

Students discussing the environmental benefits of local mud-block buildings
Photo Credit: Accessible Horizon Films

environment. When you would read something of the local things and do practical things…then one would be interested naturally even about outside things."

The academic support continues throughout the winter when the number of volunteers and visitors dwindle, so that the students are ready to re-take the exam by the end of the academic session.

Conclusion

The SECMOL Alternate Institute has succeeded in creating an enabling learning environment for students who, as Sonam puts it, "were sent back home with a rejected stamp after spending ten precious years of their lives in schools" by (i) developing a nuanced understanding of the systemic reasons that are causing the students to fail, as well as the nature and seriousness of the personal challenges that the students face; and (ii) focussing on just a handful of strategies and implementing them well.

Given the limited resources that they work with, they do not, for instance, stress on having full time psychologists or career-counsellors on campus; but have instead chosen to focus more on creating an environment which is accepting of the children's language and culture, and thus of them. They realise that being seen as a failure by their friends and families often deeply shakes the children's belief in themselves; and that their comparatively secluded life in remote villages may not have prepared them well for the life that they must live. The Institute thus strives to rebuild and strengthen their confidence and self-belief by allowing them to take responsibilities and make decisions, and perhaps most importantly, by trusting them deeply.

SECMOL has not yet renewed its work with the local government and continues to face many challenges (Menon, 2010). However, as I leave the campus the next day starting on the road back to Leh, I am reminded yet again of the word that summarised my first impressions of the campus. For the thousands of students who have passed through its portals for over two decades, this Institute, indeed has been an oasis - rejuvenating their being, helping them prepare themselves, and setting them afresh - to discover new paths and move towards new destinations.

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