



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Designing a pathway for holistic learning

Lessons from a life education program in tribal ashram schools

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Abstract: Almost 60% of India's demographic dividend lives in rural areas. There's an urgent need for capacity building to secure their future. Although many organizations are working to address this issue, guidelines for designing capacity building programs are few. This paper explores learnings from a life education program, Shikshan Mittra, to provide insights in designing programs for school children. Using a theoretical framework on best practice for holistic learning, it identifies features like participatory planning, adaptability to context and support from experienced educators during implementation as key elements in an effective program. Despite being designed for tribal ashram schools, lessons from this program are widely applicable, because the activities can be customized but the guiding principles remain the same. It is useful for teachers and parents, who intend to design such programs, as well as policymakers and institutions who are planning interventions for developing an integrated, multi-dimensional educational system.

Key words: *Skill development, tribal, ashram schools, BAIF, learning by doing, alternative education, holistic learning, experiential learning, life education, school interventions.*

1. Introduction

The crucial role of capacity building in India is widely acknowledged, from discussions about India's demographic dividend to those promoting overall well-being and reduction in inequalities. The demographic dividend is understood as the eventual rise in economic growth due to a rising share of working-age people in the population (Chauhan & Arokiasamy, 2018). The fact that this is a time-specific opportunity, and short-lived, makes it imperative that we address the issue of capacity building urgently (Chauhan & Arokiasamy, 2018; Gudaganavar & Gudaganavar, 2014).

Even as the government machinery is trying to improve national education, many non-governmental players are entering the education sector. Obviously, for-profit private

institutions have a role to play, but in rural areas, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities are also increasing participation and spending on primary, public education initiatives. Despite allocation of government resources, education and health are still prioritized under the CSR banner of companies in India (Pradhan Sanjay & Ranjan Akhilesh, 2010). Yet most focus on infrastructure building or providing learning materials and support with monetary or non-monetary incentives. Important areas of education like promoting sports, development of libraries, teacher training, do not get sufficient attention under CSR activities (Kundu, 2018). And so, the contribution potential of non-governmental actors to capacity building remains untapped.

The first step to build capacity is providing access to basic education for all. The term 'basic education' refers to the broad range of activities, in various settings, both formal and informal, that aim to meet the basic learning needs of people. Specifically, for rural areas, this implies that education should contribute to rural development and wellbeing. This then includes food security, health, employment, management of natural resources (Atchoarena & Sedel, 2003). The expectations of what schooling should provide children have changed, going beyond traditional disciplines like maths, science, history etc. However, there is no well-defined path to help schools meet these expectations. In fact, as our focus expands to include intangibles like problem-solving and critical thinking, in addition to the numerical skills, which can be assessed easily, it becomes challenging to design content for students. This paper aims to address this gap by exploring the lessons learned from a life education program, and recommending guidelines that can be adopted by teachers, NGOs and policymakers.

2. Background

Established by Dr Manibhai Desai in 1967, the Bhartiya Agro Industries Foundation (BAIF) promotes sustainable livelihood in rural India. BAIF, later renamed BAIF Development and Research Foundation, aimed to provide sustainable livelihood to the rural poor through climate-resilient agriculture, management of natural resources, livestock development, watershed development and agri-horti-forestry as major income generation activities. The aim was to give developmental support for the entire family unit. With this in mind they started the Shikshan Mitra Program (SMP), to cater to the needs of the children from tribal families.

2.1 The problem

Tribal students mostly receive their primary education, if any, from ashram schools. These are residential schools, with free lodging and boarding facilities, and many other economic incentives to encourage parents to send their children to school, rather than engaging them in paid or unpaid labour. Yet there is a dichotomy between formal education and practical life in the current education system. It ignores possibilities of career development based on natural and other resources in rural - tribal areas. Consequently, most educated tribal youth lose their knowledge of local productive resources (Tikhe, 2010). As the quality of their formal education is not up to the competitive standards in urban areas, they are forced to engage in unskilled, unorganized jobs, which do not provide reliable income. All these factors discourage youth and parents from investing the important years of childhood and puberty in school and lead to mass eviction of tribal students from the existing system. As several studies indicate, tribal populations have the lowest enrolment and retention rates, as well as learning outcomes as compared to other socio-demographic groups (Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS), 2017).

It is known that a community cannot foster development unless its population is educated, at the same time it can also not retain this educated population unless there is an attractive economic environment (Atchoarena & Sedel, 2003). If the rural-tribal youth are to contribute to the country's demographic dividend and consequently enjoy the economic benefits it offers, then their education must provide them with context-relevant knowledge and skills.

2.2 The solution

The education system should not only impart textbook knowledge and open new avenues for progress but also strive to develop a sense of pride in one's environment, lifestyle and community. Moreover, it should impart values as well as practical knowledge and life skills relevant to one's context. Life skills are defined as the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour which enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (Bharath & Kishore Kumar, 2008). SMP tries to achieve this goal through a variety of activities, each with a specific approach and method of implementation.

As the program is complementary to formal education, schools participate voluntarily. Once a school adopts the program, all stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, non-teaching staff and student representatives meet with the BAIF team. The program is customized for each school based on two important aspects: need assessment and

availability of resources. For example, if a school shows a large number of students affected by scabies or lice, they can prioritize scabies or lice eradication campaigns for their basket of health-related activities. Resources such as land, water, time are also taken into account. Once the list of activities is finalized, an annual plan is prepared, and teachers can choose one activity to supervise throughout the year. As groups of students work on these tasks, dedicated student committees are formed for each activity, based on interest. Currently the SMP has student committees for kitchen gardens, floriculture, health, vermicompost etc. Initially all the work done by committees, from problem assessment to planning and execution is supported by the BAIF team. However, once the students are trained, the responsibility is handed over to the school entirely. Learning by doing is the core focus of SMP. At the end of each academic year, schools undertake self-evaluation, appraise the BAIF team of their progress and discuss the shortcomings in the execution of the program. Apart from development of technical skills for their context, the program also aims to develop skills like problem-solving, planning, teamwork, leadership etc. among the students.

The first phase of the SMP was implemented in 85 government and private aided tribal ashram schools in 15 districts of Maharashtra during 2003 - 2009 as a part of Jan-Utakarsh Project. In the second phase, the extended program was implemented in 48 ashram schools in Nandurbar district. The program is currently being implemented in 3 schools in Akole district and 4 schools in Nandurbar district in Maharashtra.

3. Theoretical framework and field experiences

To discuss the learnings from the three phases of implementation a theoretical framework consisting of four perspectives on learning environments is used, which are particularly useful while discussing this program (Buoncristiani & Buoncristiani, 2014).

- Learner-centred
- Knowledge-centred
- Assessment-centred
- Community-centred

They are relevant since the SMP tries to create these four interconnected spheres of learning, and each experience gained in the field can be set within this framework to develop a better understanding of the basic principles of program design.

- 1) **Learner-centred environments:** These are environments that pay attention to the skills, knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to the educational setting. The structure of SMP places students, and participatory planning, at the centre of the program. Language is often a barrier that prevents schools from becoming fully learner-centred, especially if students cannot express themselves in their own language. The school in Rajbardi employs a Shikshan Sakha, a volunteer for the program, who speaks the local language and can communicate with the students in their language. This results in a richer database of traditional knowledge and practices from that particular school. In Raisingpur, the kitchen garden committee noticed teachers frequently taking the produce from the garden. In response, they met, discussed the problem, and put a new rule in place, to fine the harvesting of produce without permission. Of course, the teachers also respected the spirit of this rule and paid the due fines. Having their objections heard and addressed was empowering for the students, and it created a sense of ownership of the program, contributing to its sustainability. The best way for creating learner-centred environments is to develop this awareness in teachers, who can then help students to use their knowledge for creating pathways to new understandings (Buoncristiani & Buoncristiani, 2014).

- 2) **Knowledge-centred environments:** These account for the need for students to become knowledgeable. In addition to the knowledge students bring with themselves, they should also be learning something new. In SMP, best practices in agriculture from the rest of the BAIF ecosystem are funnelled through the activities, to the students. The hands-on experience in vegetable plots, floriculture or vermicompost, helps foster an integrated understanding of the different subjects they learn in school and their daily experiences. How is health connected to nutrition? Or nutrition dependent on soil quality? Ideas are best introduced when students see the relevant uses of that knowledge. When students use math to find the area under cultivation or to calculate expenses, the lessons are more likely to stay with them. A simple example is the SMP experience of a hand-washing demonstration. The importance and the steps of handwashing are explained in schools repeatedly. Yet students rarely comply. The health committee was given a demonstration. After their play break, they were asked to wash their hands in a bowl of water and observe the change in colour. It was so

effective that the committee repeated this demo in all other classes. And had fun doing it. Teachers reported that now, students not only wash their hands regularly but also remind their friends if they occasionally forget. Such a small behavioural change has a huge impact on student's personal hygiene. And this is possible by using the right pedagogy for delivering new knowledge.

- 3) **Assessment-centred environments:** Assessments serve two functions, to find ways of improving the program, and to understand what students have learnt. Feedback reports from both students and teachers are useful for addressing shortcomings of the program. To gain an understanding of the student's progress the best experiences came from the handover process during the first phase. In the last three months of the project, the school and student committees were prepared for taking over the project completely. Out of the 48 schools, 41 participated in the planning process and 38 executed the planned activities. Students took the initiative to raise funds creatively, by selling produce from their kitchen gardens or charging a nominal amount for giving other students a haircut. In a few schools, they managed to make deals with the contractors who provide the school kitchen with vegetables. By selling produce to their kitchen they got to have their cake and eat it too. The resourcefulness, planning and persistence shown by the students during this handover phase provided a clear assessment of their progress. Such qualitative, observation-based assessments are just as valuable as numerical assessments in a skill development program.
- 4) **Community-centred environments:** These refer to the school level communities, as well as the larger community involving families and nearby households. This aspect is especially crucial in ashram schools, which are residential schools and students have little interaction with adults who are not their teachers. SMP helps the students reconnect with the knowledgeable elders in their communities by facilitating interactions. In turn, students also participate in village-level events like Gram Swatchata Abhiyan (Clean Village Campaign). Most students come from small hamlets nearby and don't live in the village where the school is, so such activities help in giving them a sense of belonging. In Moramba, students of classes 7th to 10th organized themselves to take responsibility for washing the clothes

of the younger students every Sunday. This was done with their own initiative and was not related to any SMP activity. Yet once the sense of community was developed, the students embraced its spirit by going beyond the program activities. Another heart-warming story is from Talamba. There was only a single bathroom for girls and at the most 50 girls could bathe before school. Many others had to bathe outside in the dark, late in the evening or early morning. The health committee decided to take up this issue. They identified a suitable space - a small open bathroom for younger students - and converted it to a big closed area. They collected the required material like cement and bricks with the help of teachers and built themselves a bathroom. Now all the girls can bathe in a secure closed area before school. The importance of contextual relevance is highlighted by these experiences. No predesigned activity could have provided as much learning to students as they got from observing, and eventually solving a problem in their everyday environment.

4. Learning

The main takeaway is that programs can have these four perspectives of learning environments if designed with the following four elements:

- Participatory planning: Involving all stakeholders (students, teachers, non-teaching staff), in the design and planning of activities.
- Support from experienced educators: Input from experts, for using the most suitable pedagogies for the activities. Motivation from these experts to the field staff and teachers, and discussions of what is working and what isn't, is also a crucial aspect.
- Qualitative assessments: Developing innovative assessment methods with stakeholders to assess their progress and also improve the program.
- Adaptability to context: Flexibility in planning activities, to respond to the needs and requirements of the students, the school and the larger community of which they are a part.

Ron Miller, one of the leaders on the movement for holistic education, argues that *“holistic education is not defined as a particular method or technique but must be seen as a paradigm, a set of basic principles and assumptions that can be applied in diverse ways”* (Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi, & Liaghatdar, 2012). So even though each of the experiences listed above is an indicator of success, it is the process of learning (outcome)

which is more important than the output of the activities. One of the main challenges identified was changing the perception of what learning and its assessment look like, for all stakeholders including students, teachers and program funding agencies. With time, the initial apprehension and misgivings of the school administration and teachers faded and they began to actively participate in the program. Also, the program structure has been evolving since its conception, based on experiences of the field staff as well as inputs from students and teachers.

One interesting point is that each batch of teachers, field staff and students, undergo the same process of getting rid of misconceptions. Just because the program has matured and evolved doesn't mean that the initial process itself can be skipped to directly get all stakeholders to where we are today. The initial process, of questioning and reassessing assumptions, is extremely important, though it may seem frustratingly slow at times. And it is the main factor for participants taking ownership of the program at a later stage, and having the motivation and skills to continue the program without the support from external sources. If this process is not carried out every year, as new teachers and new student batches come in, the activities once again go back to being a checklist and eventually get pushed off the activity calendar altogether. This is the bane of all programs, the issue of sustainability, and to avoid going down this path it is important to design programs in which certain processes are repeated every year. Another solution is to build such programs into the ashram school curriculum; however, this is a challenging task, and it still has the same risk of becoming mandated activities which are carried out mechanically without undergoing the process of learning.

During interviews and group discussions in the handover phase, from BAIF to the school, the teachers were asked where they would find the noticeable lack of support from BAIF (or any other external agency), and surprisingly the answer was not funding, but motivation. Even though most schools had serious funding issues, the teachers and students brainstormed to scrape together sufficient annual funding. What they appreciated was the supporting role that BAIF played in addressing their queries and giving them positive feedback on their progress, which was their main incentive. Agencies planning interventions in education would do well to note this aspect, to ensure sustainability of their programs even after funding for interventions has stopped. Therefore, another learning from the research is that the connection between schools and the organization, and continuous motivation and interest, are key for long-term success.

5. Conclusion

To conclude the four elements involved in the design of holistic learning programs are: participatory planning, support and motivation from educators, qualitative assessments and adaptability to context. These provide insights on alternative methods of learning and also on the design of play and living spaces for children. They are also useful for policymakers who want to design holistic education programs and/or curricula in rural as well as urban contexts.

It must be remembered that there is no universal model for holistic learning programs since each culture and community has different needs. However, if all programs are designed with the same set of core principles, then they will not only be easy to replicate and adapt to different contexts, but also be useful for comparing programs and evaluating their impact. Wide-spread adoption of these principles by all stakeholders will hopefully put us on the path towards building an inclusive, integrated and multi-faceted education landscape in India.

Acknowledgements

This study was possible because of the BAIF Development and Research Foundation. Firstly, I would like to thank G.G. Sohani and Rajashree Joshi for giving me this opportunity to work at BAIF. Special thanks to Rajashri Tikhe for sharing all the content developed for the program and also for her valuable insight and suggestions throughout the year. I would also like to thank the entire Shikshan Mittra team, specifically Jitin Sathe and Ram Kotwal, for providing field level support.

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