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Learning in Inclusive Classrooms

PEGGY MOHAN

Private schools in Delhi that buy land for construction at concessional rates have to make 20% of their seats available for children from the economically weaker sections. Everyone, except the educationists, knows that schooling is mostly about inclusion, about becoming a part of a group that is destined for success. A teacher from one such English-medium school with four EWS students assigned to her for remedial tuitions, traces their evolution over three years from sitting in incomprehension to enthusiastic participation.

When one visits an inclusive classroom the most striking image that one comes away with is that of a young child from a marginal background sitting withdrawn, trying to concentrate on the lesson, but ultimately giving up with a tired yawn, and looking out the window or down at the floor in relief.

It is easy to blame the teacher for this failure of inclusion, especially when one hears again and again of teachers actively discriminating against these children. And it is easy to conclude that all that needs to be done is to sensitise the teacher, so that she begins to treat the marginal child better.

When private schools in Delhi were allowed by the government to buy land for construction at concessional rates, the quid pro quo was that they block 20% of their seats for children from the economically weaker sections (EWS). While many schools did to some extent comply with this, it was not until 2007 when the Delhi High Court made it mandatory that genuinely poor children began to appear in the elite classrooms.

As a teacher in such an English-medium school in Delhi I was assigned four EWS children for remedial tuition in reading at the start of this year. These children, admitted in 2007, were now in class 2. In addition to these remedial sessions, twice a week, I also taught them English and western music.

Complex Problem

It was soon clear that the problem was not simply about reading. Prompts that helped the others in the class to read song lyrics aloud did not work with these children, who remained silent. At first I treated it as a language problem: the children did not understand the words, so reading out the start of a line did not help them. However, when the playing field was levelled and the songs were in languages equally foreign to all the children in the class they would sing the lyrics with confidence and gusto. We had seen this sort

of thing before: the school has a number of Korean children who would spend their first few months in school looking on silently and attentively, only to begin speaking English on their own one fine day, without extra help.

But as time went by I began to see our EWS students becoming more withdrawn, and almost giving up. The problem was more complex than I had imagined.

Genesis of Mass Education

Mass education is strongly linked to the sort of social change that brought about the industrial society: parents, no longer tied to the land, but forced to commute out of the home to work, did not need to be persuaded to park their children for the day in institutions. These institutions too, for their part, echoed the ethos of the factory age: children divided into age-graded batches, timetables with pre-planned breaks for refreshment after set tasks, the learning agenda broken down into chunks that fit into slots in a larger schedule, and a strong overarching hierarchy with a mostly one-way transmission of information from teacher to an ideally passive class.

Parents who were not a part of the industrial society did not instantly opt for sending their children to school, because they were not in need of institutions to park their children during the day. Their work did not take them far from home, and, indeed, their children were generally involved in that work too.

When parents from marginal communities send their children into the schooling system what they are hoping for is that their children will become a part of the more privileged world that the schools are connected to. They know that they are propelling their children into unknown spaces where they will mostly have to fend for themselves. But they calculate that the risk is worth it: for their children to stay outside the world represented by the schools would mean a lifetime of remaining on the margins. Lessons in a language the children can understand, and a feeling of connection with the world of the home, are not the issues uppermost in their minds.

The world over the transition out of the margins into the beginnings of a middle

An earlier version of this article was presented at the conference on "Innovations in Teaching/Learning Processes and Practices: Social Inclusion and Exclusion and the Classroom" on the occasion of national consultation on "Inclusive Classroom, Social Inclusion/Exclusion and Diversity: Perspectives, Policies and Practices", India International Centre, New Delhi, 7-8 September 2010.

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class is a repeat of almost the same story: one lost generation of children that bears the brunt, sitting month after month in the classroom uncomprehending, waiting for the moment when it will all make sense, when they will begin to see with new eyes.

Or to put it a little differently, the objective of these parents' experiment in sending their children to an elite school is nothing short of social transformation, sending their children on a one-way trip to a brave new world. This is always fraught with chaos, as it entails the children discarding an old way of life and reinventing themselves. Unlike the Korean children, who are middle class to start with, and whose parents are in a position to step in and explain lessons when necessary, the ews children are in the process of constructing a brand new identity.

Route to Inclusion

It is painful to watch children sitting mute in the classroom day after day, losing hope, even when one knows that there is a lot going on in their heads, gestating silently, waiting till it all comes together and the silence is broken. It still looks like a lot of time being wasted, and an inefficient route to inclusion.

The question remains as to what is the best stage to begin this inclusion. There are two main factors to consider here: what is psychologically best for the marginal child, and what will bring about acceptance from the other children in the class. Marginal children derive their new identities not so much from the teacher as from their classmates.

According to some teachers, the earlier ews children are integrated into the class, the better the chances of them being accepted by the others.

But the problem is that we simply do not know, yet, which is the best way to go. Our experience with these ews children is not encouraging. We cannot say for sure how well they are learning, whether this is merely a bottleneck that will resolve itself in time and after a lot of heartache. We are still in the midst of a very dark patch, with no light yet showing at the end of the tunnel. In class 2, the ews child is visibly struggling, and we simply do not know how to step in and make this transformation easier, because the child

is not just picking up new words for known concepts and categories, as our Korean children are, but grappling with a whole new world.

Three Scenarios

For the moment there seem to be three ways in which this inclusion might be done effectively.

The first approach would be to decide that the ews child should not be thrust into an alien environment as early as primary school; that early schooling is most effective if it connects to the world the child knows outside. All research on integrated curricula show that learning should build on foundations the child already has. Children this young are not yet in a position to use their intellect to cut through problems linked to language and culture. At a slightly later age, with fundamentals well in place, and basic confidence, and some introduction to English in a local language medium school, the child might do better at finding a place in an English medium classroom. Postponing may actually save time. Starting later, when the child is able to learn faster, could be a more efficient way to integrate the child into this alien classroom.

India is one of the few countries where primary and secondary schools are not completely separate entities, but part of the same institution. This has led to a notion of school admission as something that happens only at the start of primary school. But in most countries entry into secondary school entails a new process of admission, often preceded by a national exam as major as our class 10 board exams.

An intake of ews students in class 6 might work, as students perceive the primary and the secondary sections of their schools as different entities, with different cultures. These new ews students, having passed a prestigious entrance exam, would also feel confident about belonging in the new school. And if they enter in sufficient numbers, truly a 20% quota, they would become a significant presence, and lose the tag of being stray recipients of charity.

In Trinidad and Tobago the government made a successful intervention on this issue

(see EPW, "Right to Education: Lessons from Trinidad and Tobago", 29 May-4 June 2010).

The only question that remains is whether waiting this long will, as ews parents fear, result in the children getting stuck in a cozy Hindi-medium niche forever, understanding their lessons but not entering the more empowering English-medium world.

A few private schools in Delhi have opted for another route: these schools have their primary education in Hindi-medium, thereafter phasing in English as a medium of instruction during the first two years of secondary school. This approach has created genuinely inclusive classrooms: the non-English-speaking children do well in primary school, with their parents able to help them with their schoolwork. And then, by the time these children reach secondary school and the class is socially integrated, the shift to English-medium is eased by the slow pace of transition, with the English-speaking children able to cushion the process for the others. This may be the most humane solution of all.

Then why must we make the switch to English at all? Well, once upon a time a powerful lobby decided that retaining English as a medium of education conferred major advantages upon their privileged offspring in job placements later on, creating a discernible elite class distinguished not by crude details of genealogy, but by knowledge of English. Since this need to know English has not changed, an even more unassailable lobby has added its voice in support: the poor. The poor have learned that English is not going to go away, and that the only option left for their children is to join the game. Everyone except educationists knows that schooling is mostly about

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inclusion, about becoming a part of a group that is destined for success. Parents know that the right classmates count for much, much more than all the learning the teacher standing in front of the class could hope to impart. So what we need to think about is focused courses that initiate the marginal *not* into the world of classroom discourse, but into the sort of language their more privileged classmates use.

This third option is the one the best English medium schools have already started doing without realising it. Poor children sit in classrooms which, by class 2, are essentially only in English medium. They sit in silence, first developing their comprehension skills, steeping in a wash of language floating over their heads in class and on the playground. Then through drama classes, and song lyrics in music class, they get used to reciting language adapted to the sort of situations that are real for their age

group, learn strategies for expressing themselves in words and structures they will have to use in the real world. Later, with confidence in place, and properly included in the class, they will break the cultural taboo on speaking up and venture into the more daunting activity of asking and responding to questions in class. If one can be patient, and tolerate the prolonged look of bewilderment on these children's faces, there is supposed to be a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

As I sit and revise this article, ironically on *Hindi divas*, a day I spent teaching English in all the class 2s in my school, I see a glimpse of success. Today, all of a sudden, two of my four EWS children broke their silence and began eagerly participating in a class about verbs, raising their hands again and again, and calling out verbs for me to write on the board. The others in the class would chime in to make sure that I understood

the words they meant to say. One of them was on par with the best, and the other, who had always sat silent and frustrated, was alert and active, and beginning to get it. The other two were also emboldened to try, and I believe they will soon be in the swim of things too.

There is great danger in basing major policy on abstract notions and untested ideas, such as the belief that children can learn any language easily, and that all that needs to be done is to throw them into a mainstream class and consider the job done. This is as insensitive as the notion that babies do not feel much pain, since they cannot verbalise their hurt. In a complex and unequal social situation such as an inclusive classroom learning does not come easily. We need to take time and study the problems marginal children face in the classroom, designing ingenious curricula that genuinely help them, and be patient and give the experiment a chance.

POSITION: STATE PROGRAMME MANAGER
LOCATION: PATNA, BIHAR



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

Background

The Aga Khan Foundation is implementing a long term multi-sector programme in Bihar to address issues of chronic poverty among marginalised communities. The programme works to empower and improve the socio-economic conditions of communities and engages with public systems to enhance capacity and delivery of development programmes. The programme aims to build livelihoods, strengthen local institutions, develop human capacity, and improve access to education, health and financial services.

The programme's approach is to work at state and village levels, learning lessons from implementation and working to improve systems. Lessons derived from an inception period from mid 2008 to 2010 have provided a plan for the next five years (2011-15).

The Aga Khan Foundation is now seeking candidates for a new position to be the senior-most manager of the overall programme in the state of Bihar.

The position will lead a multidisciplinary team of ten members (direct reports), with plans to expand. The position reports to Director Programmes, Delhi. The State Programme Manager will:

- Lead on development and direction of the state programme strategy.
- Lead and be accountable for effective performance of the programme.
- Lead on organisational development and manage AKF's human resources in the state.
- Represent AKF and build productive relationships with the state government, civil society organisations, implementing partners and private sector entities.
- Lead on creating and pursuing opportunities for donor cultivation and resource mobilisation at state level.
- Manage and be accountable for financial and administration resources utilised by the state programme.
- Lead on annual planning and budgeting processes for the state programme.

Required Qualifications

A postgraduate degree in one of the programme's sector priority areas. The candidate should have 10-15 years of work experience in rural development, including a minimum of 5-10 years in a senior position leading a field implementation programme. Experience of implementing multi-sector programmes involving education, health, livelihoods and civil society and leading multidisciplinary teams is highly desirable. Mature managerial, representational and inter-personal skills, and strong communication in Hindi and English (verbal and written), are essential.

To Apply

For further details on the positions, refer to www.devnetjobsindia.org. Please send your applications by **18th December 2010** at akf.spmbihar@gmail.com with a covering letter and an updated CV with three references, stating State Programme Manager in the subject line. Only shortlisted candidates will be contacted. An indication of your present and expected salary is mandatory. Visit us at www.akdn.org.