

SUPPORTING SCHOOLING



A collaborative effort at helping vulnerable children cope with school

Background

NGOs involved with children in India attempt, through a variety of strategies, to ensure that children from the poorest sections of society have access to elementary education. These strategies include running alternative schools and non-formal education classes, bridge courses and education camps. In recent years, the general



trend has been towards enrollment drives and advocacy for the right to education, and support classes for new school entrants. More and more

NGOs are now adopting these latter programmes. This document outlines the joint journey of two NGOs in their collaboration in one such effort, and the evolution of their approach and strategy. It is an attempt to share the experience in the hope that it will help others working in the field to benefit from our learnings.

Centre for Learning Resources (CLR) has, since its inception in 1984, been involved with the training of school teachers as well as those teaching outside the school system - teachers in Non Formal Education (NFE) programmes for school drop-outs or child labourers, teachers running study classes or support classes for first generation learners attending government schools, and teachers in various other NGO initiatives in elementary education. With the change in perspectives and strategies of NGOs running educational programmes, CLR has also periodically reviewed and revamped its training approaches and materials. India Sponsorship Committee is one such partner with whom we have worked for many years.

India Sponsorship Committee (ISC) started around 30 years ago in Pune as purely a sponsorship programme. Support was provided to children from slums who were already attending school. Funds were raised internationally, and disbursed to specific children in the form of clothes, learning materials and cash.

Around 1990, the focus began slowly to change. It was felt that the sponsorship money was reaching a very limited number of needy children. The large numbers of children still out of school became an area of concern, and the organisation started

work with the poorest families, especially focussing on children. In this direction, a balwadi was opened to give children a head start towards primary education. Income generation activities and loans for home improvement were provided to families in order to ease their practical difficulties, and make the home environment more conducive for children's development.

ISC also began to focus more specifically on out-of-school children and the girl child. To address these issues, Non-Formal Education (NFE) classes were started in the slums in Yerawada.



Children who were working in tea shops and as helpers with motor mechanics, as well as girls employed in domestic labour, were encouraged to join these NFE classes. This is where CLR's involvement with the programme began.

During this period, in its shift from sponsorship to a community-based approach, ISC also got involved in the national Campaign Against Child Labour (CACL). In keeping with the common position of the CACL, most member organisations of CACL, including ISC, began to concentrate their efforts on mainstreaming out-of-school children. CLR was involved in this new aspect of ISC work too, and changed its training strategy to suit the new situation.

Intervention with ISC in Phase 1 : NFE Programmes for Out-of-School Working Children

In 1992, ISC was running several NFE classes in the slums of Yerawada. The teachers were from the community, mostly those who had passed Class 7, and some who had passed Class 10. Most had no background at all of teaching. ISC conducted their initial training in-house, concentrating mostly on getting the new recruits to understand the importance of education, skills

of community contact, and so on. In 1995, ISC approached CLR to train these 'barefoot teachers' to help children attain basic functional literacy.

At that time, we felt that a simple formulation of essential skills in language and mathematics provided a good basis for the NFE teachers to run their classes for basic literacy. This was in keeping with the state competency-based curriculum. It was an easy-to-follow agenda for them, and one that could be easily evaluated by themselves as well as by the project. Accordingly, we formulated training programmes for the teachers based on understanding the basic competencies children needed to acquire, and how to teach these basic skills to children using an approach that was child-friendly and interactive.

For the NFE teachers, who had themselves only recently emerged from a school system based entirely on rote learning, it was extremely difficult to understand the importance of actually creating understanding as opposed to just teaching children how to pass a test. However, we and ISC persisted, and some of the teachers began to appreciate the importance of this approach and use it. The attendance in the classes improved steadily, and children began to enjoy the learning activities and materials they were exposed to.

Lobbying To Enrol Children In Schools

At this time, ISC was also conducting enrollment drives trying to get children into school and providing coaching to older children attending class 4. Both CLR and ISC, as members of the network Action for the Rights of the Child, were involved in intensive lobbying with the municipal corporation to allow children to enroll in school even if they did not have birth certificates. This effort, along with those of other organisations and networks, resulted in an official directive that children could be admitted without birth certificates.



The issue of child labour has always been a complex one, and the solutions too are not simple. Public perception (and until recently, government rhetoric) tends to look at child labour as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of poverty. Until recently, most interventions centred on providing basic literacy skills to child labourers. It was argued that the families of these children could not survive without their income. Until poverty was eradicated, children would continue to work, and needed to be given some education so that they could improve their skills and escape exploitation. The earlier phase of the NFE programme of ISC too was based on this rationale.

However, in the early nineties, the perspectives of NGOs and government agencies working with children underwent a paradigm shift. With the declaration of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, childhood began to be looked at not as a privilege of the rich, but as a right of every child. India signed the CRC in 1995 and gave state sanction to this view.

Around the same time, Myron Weiner published "The Child and the State in India," a thoroughly researched and compellingly argued indictment of state policy and the attitude of civil society on the

issue of child rights, particularly child labour. Weiner argued that while legislation has not made much of a dent on child labour in India, implementation of compulsory education has worked the world over to take children out of labour. This has happened long ago in the developed countries, but more pertinently, in South Korea and other countries in South East Asia in the last few decades.

With this belief spreading among NGOs, ISC began to re-look at the NFE classes, and started to look at these as bridge classes to enable children to enroll in school. Especially with younger children, ISC began to make a concentrated effort at putting children attending these classes back into the formal school system. Large numbers of erstwhile child labourers were encouraged to join school. This involved a lot of hard work in the community, resistance from parents, and liaison and sometimes confrontation with the schools. However, this was not as difficult as it was earlier, because the government education system too had begun to concentrate efforts on enrollment. The Maharashtra Government directive that birth certificates were not required for school admission relieved the parents and NGOs of this problem, and added to the momentum Education For All at the national level was to be achieved by 2000.

Problems of New School Entrants

However, once in school, the 'push factors' began to take over. The attitude of most government school teachers towards these new entrants was never very enabling. They did not feel they had to make any special efforts for them. In fact, ISC staff often felt that teachers thought they were doing the children a favour by allowing them to sit in the class, as many of them were rather older than their classmates, and very obviously poorer.

The 'burden of incomprehension' began to get too heavy to bear for most new-entrants. It became apparent that these children were not going to be able to complete 7 or even 4 years of schooling. If they stopped attending because of failing in exams or because they could make no sense of what they were being taught, they would soon



drop out of school altogether. And once they dropped out, they would drift back into the labour force. Even worse, if they remained in the school system and did not learn even to read and write, they would have gained very little, thereby engendering the feeling in the community that school education was worthless.

The Shift To Support Classes For School Children

In 1996, ISC introduced the concept of support classes for children mainstreamed into school so as to ensure that they remain in school, and improve their academic performance.

In 1999, the CLR undertook a study of the programmes for out of school children run by 5 NGOs supported by Terre des Hommes Germany India Programme in Marathwada. The study looked at the success (in terms of enrollment and retention in the formal system) of three different strategies used by the NGOs : running NFE classes, running intensive bridge courses, and running support classes after enrolling all children. It showed clearly that the last was the most effective strategy by far for drawing children away from sporadic work, like cattle minding and other domestic activities, and into full time schooling.

This only supported the growing understanding among NGO partners that this is where the strength of NGOs lay : in motivating children to attend school, in keeping up the pressure to improve the formal government school system, and in running the support classes essential for keeping the most vulnerable group from dropping out.

Shift In CLR's Approach And Strategy

CLR's experiences in training NFE teachers to teach the basic primary level competencies to out-of-school children had often been frustrating. On the one hand the teachers who were coming to us were without even a high school level of education, and not really properly literate, leave alone competent to teach at the primary level. On the other hand was the desperate need to get the children in NFE centres at least up to the Class 4 level before they dropped out of the classes. On top of this was the issue that many NGOs, especially those from outside Maharashtra, could only send to us a group of trainers for NFE instructors, and not the instructors themselves. This worsened the common problem of transmission loss during this cascade model of training, because of the low level of education of

the eventual target trainees that is, the NFE instructors. With a few groups of NGO teachers, we struggled to achieve the impossible, before realising that it was indeed impossible.

We then underwent a lot of introspection on some fundamental issues:

What were these NFE teachers actually capable of doing?

What were their needs for this limited goal?

What was the way to avoid transmission loss, or minimise it?

What was the place of the NFE class itself in the social scenario, where all children needed to be mainstreamed in school?





We too believed that supporting school-going children to cope with school would be the most effective strategy to follow.

We then went on to design and conduct training programmes for CASP-Plan, an NGO running support classes in 72 villages in Mawal taluka of Pune District. This was an opportunity for us to develop our training modules to suit this unique new group - they were better educated than the old NFE instructors, and more in the 'activist' mode, interested in making education actually happen in their village schools, with the support class being only one of the components in the process. This intervention gave us an excellent field to develop a much more holistic training programme for support class teachers.

For CLR, it was a complete re-orientation of approach, from attempting to turn NFE teachers into a better version of a school teacher, to attempting to build their capacity to support community efforts to make elementary education a reality for children in their community.

By now ISC too had completed the change in their strategy from NFE for out-of-school children, to support classes for helping vulnerable school goers to cope with school. And when ISC approached us for training support in 2004, we too were in a very different position from our earlier interaction with ISC almost a decade ago.

Intervention With ISC In Phase 2 : Support Classes For School Children

After a gap of several years, a request came from ISC for training for their teachers for Mathematics. It was interesting to find in the needs analysis session that teachers had themselves come to the understanding that children's basics were weak, even though they may be in Class 5 or 7. This put them in a better frame of mind to look at very early levels of mathematical skills, something that they had earlier taken for granted.

With our better-developed understanding of the way these young 'barefoot teachers' looked at

formal education, we decided to use the school textbook as the basis for starting off the discussions - what do children actually need to learn in Classes 1 and 2? We then went through an interactive process of analysing all the steps that would need to be followed in order to reach this level of skill, and where the 'hard spots' were located. That set the agenda for the training sessions.

Our experience with working with other groups of support class teachers also helped us in another way - we were able to address their concerns of grouping and planning in a multi-ability class setting with some practical ideas and strategies.

Teaching of Mathematics Level 1

The first year of training in this new phase (2004-5) addressed basic skills in Mathematics. After the initial discussions, the pattern of each monthly training session focussed on one or two crucial issues in early primary mathematics. Some of the topics covered in this training were :

- the concept of number and numeral
- place value and its significance in understanding multiple digit numbers
- what “carrying” and “borrowing” actually implies



Children using graded, self-learning cards for mathematics

The concepts were first discussed and clarified, using concrete materials.

Teaching activities and materials were discussed, role-played and internalised by the trainees. The supervisors too sat in on the sessions, so that they could give support in the field.

One of the interesting aspects of this training was that after an initial informal assessment of their own content knowledge, the teachers were very open and frank about their misconceptions, lack of knowledge, or fear of mathematics. This is in stark contrast to school teachers who may have the same problems but are rather resistant to admitting them. This made the training much easier for us and also much more participatory.

Teaching Reading and Writing

Another situation that arose was not really surprising to us at the CLR, but confirmed what we already suspected. Though at first they had insisted that they had no problems in teaching Marathi, the fact that children were not in fact learning to read independently kept cropping up during discussions in the Maths training. At the end of the first year's training, the teachers themselves expressed a desire to look at the issue of reading and writing in a series of training workshops.

These language learning workshops were specially designed keeping in mind the home situations of the children, where reading material is not available. The focus was deliberately shifted from 'reading the textbook' to 'reading with meaning' from the very start, even when introducing the alphabet and small words.



Using the Sentence Maker : Children construct their own sentences and read them.

Some of the activities that the teachers found particularly interesting to implement :

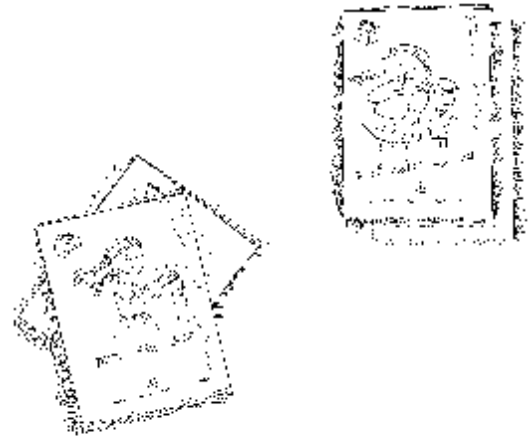
- Active games involving reading of phrases and small sentences.
- Composing reading passages based on happenings in the children's lives.
- Using the daily newspaper for alphabet recognition, word reading, comprehension activities etc.
- Making a class wallpaper with children's and teachers writing.



Using charts especially designed for an interactive teaching-learning process

However, the textbook was kept in the picture, as a teaching-learning aid for reading and writing, which is its rightful place.

At various points in the year-long intervention, we kept referring back to the state syllabus for Marathi, and to the state textbook. This added to the confidence of the teachers that what they were doing was not all that strange, but related to what the children needed to do in school.



Teaching of Mathematics Level 2

A third round of training was requested by the teachers, this time involving higher order Mathematics skills, which they also participated in enthusiastically. For example, teachers found that they would themselves grasp the concept of converting mixed fractions to improper fractions after working with pieces of chopped-up fruit.

In many ways, their own learning had to precede their training. This was an interesting experience for them, more so as they had a much greater receptivity and a friendly training atmosphere.

Playing board games that reinforce addition and subtraction skills



For CLR, it was an extremely satisfying experience as the training needs emerged from the teachers and we were able to respond appropriately because of our own conceptual growth over the years on what was relevant for support class teachers.



Understanding fractional numbers through concrete materials



A game involving multiplication concepts and skills

Looking Back, Looking Forward

If we look back at the experience of the past few years, we can summarise the learnings as follows:

For children of poor families, full time schooling in the formal system is one good way to keep them away from child labour.

Even with fairly good schools in India, children do need support outside school. Children from poor families who usually attend government schools have an even greater need for this support, and a community-based NGO has a big role to play in providing this.

A technical support organisation that is open, flexible and responsive to changing needs can greatly contribute towards building the capacity of NGOs to provide this support.

Our association with ISC continues. We are both now looking at ways to enhance the support teacher's role as a vital link between the child's home and school. This may take the form of membership of PTAs, of advocacy and lobbying in the PMC for better school facilities. We also jointly plan to engage in assessments of children's learning levels to leverage better teaching in Pune municipal schools.



The Centre For Learning Resources (CLR) is a non-profit educational institution established in Pune in 1984. The CLR acts as a technical support organisation to NGOs working at the grassroots level, and to government and private schools. It works primarily with teachers, teacher trainers, and others involved in the education of economically and socially disadvantaged children at the pre-primary and elementary stages of education. It also works with trainers and field workers involved in the care and development of children in the birth to 3 years age group.



Centre For Learning Resources

8 Deccan College Road, Yerawada, Pune 411 006

E-mail : clr@vsnl.com

Website : www.clrindia.net