
SITE VISIT: Innovative Approaches to Early Childhood Education in India

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In the mid-eighties, Bodh Shiksha Samiti began as an initiative programme for providing primary school education to children of the urban poor in the slums of Jaipur, Rajasthan in India. What began with a school in a single slum, has, over the years, expanded to seven slums.

Initially, Bodh created what they envisioned to be an ideal primary school. The school was designed, on the one hand, to reflect the aspirations of the slum dwellers and respect the dignity of children, and, on the other hand, to eschew certain existing practices, such as corporal punishment, which were prevalent both in the community and in other schools in the neighbourhood, as well as within the wider context of the city. This ideal school was visualized to implement a curriculum which would respond to the whole life-space of the students, their material deprivation, emotional stress, and intellectual suppression. Thus, Bodh sought to evolve a model of primary education based on democratic principles and to provide children with a nurturing learning environment based on trust rather than on fear of teachers. This model also viewed parents and community members as active stakeholders, not only in the setting up of the school, but also in its day to day operations and curricular issues.

In time, younger siblings of the slum schoolchildren tagged along with their older brothers and sisters, and the need for catering to the preschool age group was recognized. This led to the inception of Bodh's preschool centres in 1993, first with a pilot grant funded by Aga Khan Foundation (AKF India), followed by full project funding from AKF, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and British DfID (ex-ODA).

Bodh's concern is as much social as it is educational. The organisation tacitly endorses a vision of social change which is community centred, community determined, and based on the principles of equality, human dignity and democratic functioning. Bodh solicits the collaboration of residents. The first priority for Bodh, therefore, is always to generate a sense of ownership for the programmes on the part of the community. Bodh schools are intended to provide fora for the communities to discover for themselves the value of the collective and to eventually work toward this vision.

Approaches, curriculum and practice. The curricular and pedagogical approaches of Bodh essentially emerge out of the broad vision of social intervention mentioned above. Schools are set up to function in a democratic framework, and the spirit of democracy characterizes the

interactions among teachers, between teachers and functionaries, teachers and children, teachers and para-teachers (mother teachers and child teachers), teachers and community, and among the children themselves.

The approaches developed by Bodh over the years place great significance on community and parental involvement in the education of their children.

The curriculum and practice evolved and operationalized in the Bodh approach seek to make education interesting and activity-oriented, and thus reject rote learning. There are not rigidly defined classes, but only loosely constituted samooths (groups) based roughly on age and ability. The system also allows for periodic regrouping on the basis of assessment of capabilities.

The pedagogy adopted in the preschool and early primary classes is largely play-centred and activity-oriented, and teaching is done in an integrated manner.

In the development of curriculum and material for the preschool programme, the teachers gain familiarity with the children's dialects, traditional stories, games, songs and customs, and they use these as part of their pedagogical tools and activities. For example, traditional stories are recited and dramatized with puppets and pictures; traditional songs are sung by teachers and children. In all of these the children's active participation is solicited. For example, children chorus the teachers in songs; teachers ask questions while telling stories or during puppet shows to which children respond; children take turns in reciting stories or singing songs; and games are played with much zest, noise, and the teacher's participation.

This, however, brings us to a pertinent and related question: how does the Bodh philosophy translate into its curricular practice? Bodh's approach to curriculum and pedagogy seems to stem from a set of convictions of underlying assumptions. These are:

- a child is qualitatively different from an adult in the manner in which she/he knows, understands, and relates to the world;
- what the child learns at school is only part of the broader socialization and learning he/she imbibes from home, neighbourhood, and the larger society;
- a child learns best through meaningful activities;
- learning takes place best when it goes through a process similar to the one that knowledge has evolved through; and
- there is considerable individual difference between children in style and pace of learning, even within similar age and ability clusters.

The pedagogy. We received the impression that the pedagogy adopted in the preschool and early primary classes was largely play-centred and activity-oriented. The teacher initiated an activity which normally lasted for half an hour or so. Learning of mathematics was not separated from that of language or drawing. Children were encouraged to learn independently through their own activities, play situations, and stories. In subsequent classes, however, subjects were demarcated to some extent

Operations. Every Bodh teacher, in the slum schools as well as in other schools, visits the household of one child in her group on average every day. She shares her impressions of the child's progress, and gets to understand the parent's perceptions, which she records in the cumulative assessment record book of the child, which is prepared monthly. This home visiting process truly seems to work to build a real partnership between home and school through the child's progress.

The teachers, the mother, and (mostly adolescent) children who have been trained to be teachers, wherever present, provide structure to the typical preschool morning, which proceeds in a planned, sequential, though not rigidly fixed manner. All activities are planned for systematically at the centre-level under the leadership of the teacher and mother teachers who maintain daily diaries, for which an hour is reserved every day. They record all that happened in the course of their work and make an assessment of what they were able or unable to achieve, giving reasons. The diaries then serve as the basis for teacher (peer) discussion groups. The depth of reflective thinking about what has happened and the planning for what will come next is impressive. Some mother teachers have become literate enough to write diaries on their own.

Coordinated environments. The preschool now provides the children with an environment which is somewhat different from the children's homes. An attempt is made to connect the programme setting to children's familiar settings through the informal (samoo) structure of the programme. There are also opportunities to connect the community and the school through local women's groups which meet every day to, among other things, discuss their children's education, cleanliness, health and nutrition.

It is from these women's groups that the cadre of mother teachers has been successfully trained and employed in the preschools. Similarly, some children, especially adolescent girls, through association and training have also been involved in the preschool programme as child teachers. Like mother teachers, they work as assistants to the preschool teachers, and now a salary is being considered for them.

Having involved the mothers in the child's preschool education has also created a channel of entry into the school for the children's family members, especially their mothers and older sisters. Through the preschool programme, interest and concern is aroused within families about the young child's process of development. This carries over as the children enter primary school.

At the present time, Bodh both operates its own schools and works with government schools. The link with government schools began when Bodh and AKF wanted to experiment with whether and to what degree their approach to teaching and learning could be transferred to government schools, where the circumstances are quite different.

Initially Bodh started with an "adoption" programme (now called the extension programme) that began with dialogues with the government schools to introduce the Bodh philosophy and pedagogy to teachers in the schools. Bodh had support from the local Ministry of Education personnel to undertake training of teachers in 10 government schools. They began with 1-2

classes per school, with a Bodh-trained teacher working alongside the government teachers. While there have been constant challenges, the approach is beginning to take hold.

Training. The effectiveness of Bodh's operations is the result of its training, which develops in the teachers the required competence, motivation and attitudes. To develop the desired skills requires an intense induction or training programme which aims not merely at developing in the participants a repertoire of knowledge and skills, but also in sowing in them the seeds of healthy scepticism about what has long been taken for granted about education, school, and children. They are trained for two months to assist the teacher. The training provides the women with an opportunity for debating and dialoguing on the various issues related to children, community, schooling, curriculum, pedagogy and so on.

The value of the initial training programme seems to be the emphasis on developing a worldview, basic awareness, and a positive disposition regarding children, community, and schooling, and not so much on skills development. The orientation of the training programme is not didactic; the participants are encouraged to bring forth their own experiences and skills into the programme.

Most mothers who were trained as mother teachers were initially illiterate; many have since acquired literacy and numeracy skills at the samoohs. But their other talents and skills, such as singing and the ability to relate to children, make them a valuable resource in the preschools.

The responses of children. Children in the Bodh classes were definitely confident and fearless in the manner in which they related to each other and the adults. In the primary schools, the difference in classroom climate between the Bodh classrooms and the non-Bodh classes were clear. In one of the schools we visited, the children of a non-Bodh class were more interested in what was happening in the neighbouring Bodh class than in their own; they were peeping into the Bodh class all the time. Presumably, they found the Bodh class much greater fun than theirs.

Bodh pedagogy involves, at times, a lot of noise too, and this was not always taken to very kindly by the non-Bodh teachers in the adoption schools. Obviously there was a certain difference in perception between Bodh and non-Bodh teachers as to what should be considered "good" classroom behaviour. The problem was less visible in schools where the Bodh approach has been more widely accepted by the school head and teachers.

The future. Currently Bodh has three programmes: its work with primary school children in slums; the preschool programmes in slum schools; and the extension programme with government schools. AKF is hoping to work with Bodh in the coming years to expand and strengthen Bodh as an institution, and to modify the slum schools to serve as local resource centres for further outreach.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
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