

COMMON CAUSE

A Romance With Public Causes Since 1980

FROM RIGHT TO EDUCATION TO RIGHT EDUCATION-STORY OF BODH

A SUCCESS STORY OF BODH

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Article 45 of the Directive Principles of the Constitution of India made it the duty of the State to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to age 14 **in ten years** (by 1960).

In the mid 1980s, realising that the country was nowhere near this target, with children from economically weaker sections being farthest in the process, a group of young people in Jaipur decided to initiate a process of education for children in the slums of Jaipur. The organization was called Bodh Shiksha Samiti .

These 'schools' were quite different from the traditional schools. The initiators believed in the need for the community to be an integral part of the education of their children. So classes were held in some community location—a room in a home, a terrace of a house, a verandah of the local temple or even the side of a quiet road. Since typically homes and other spaces are small in slum communities, classes were held in multiple locations.

Teachers were from within the community as well as from outside. Thinkers and initiators of the programme ensured that they understood the most important elements of pedagogy—that the child is hungry to learn, that the child would learn in an environment free of fear, that the child would learn by using his senses, hands and by moving around, that the child would learn by using his mind actively through questioning and expressing, that the child would learn when he is respected and validated irrespective of his/her socio-economic situation, that the child would learn only if he/she is encouraged irrespective of success or failure and so on. Teachers, of course, had to understand how to teach reading, writing and numbers but it was believed that no teaching would succeed in the absence of a positive learning environment. Those who were teaching had to have not only knowledge but a strong conviction in this basic methodology.

Around the late 90s, Bodh decided to move into the most backward rural areas of Alwar district and set up schools in the villages of two blocks—Umrein and Thanagazi. These villages had no schools—government or private. Some of the settlements were relatively easy to reach but others were on top of hills (Kraska) or through forests to access which one needs to cross a stream (Kalameda) or in remote areas where there were neither roads nor any transport system (Rund Binak). Reaching schools required tedious walks. In any case, most teachers stayed in the school during the week.

By 2005, these primary schools were opened in 40 villages. These are called community schools, samudayik bodhshala. They are located in the communities on land provided by the community. Good Earth Foundation started supporting Bodh from the beginning of its rural programme and the partnership has continued to become richer and stronger over the years.

Most schools have been functioning for 12 to 15 years now. Over time, some things had to change in response to new Government regulations. Bodh now is fully compliant to the norms and directives set out in the Right to Education Act.

As required by Right to Education Act, all schools are recognized by the relevant authority. Teachers' working hours are two hours more than the children's school hours. This time is used for preparation of lessons as well as visiting the families in the community to ensure admission and regular attendance of all children. Typically each teacher has groups of less than 25 children at a time (though multi level) to the prescribed RTE norm of 1:30. Working days in the year are way beyond the essential requirement of the RTE Act.

Here are pictures of how some of the norms of RTE are implemented in the community schools. It is important to mention here that this is done with minimal funds in the most deprived areas.

- RTE: ensure that the child belonging to weaker section and the child belonging to disadvantaged group are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds



All children belong to economically weaker sections and.....



.....children with disabilities have always been included in the schools.

- RTE: provide infrastructure including building, teaching staff and learning equipment, at least one class room per teacher, barrier free access, separate toilet for boys and girls, drinking water facility, kitchen if mid day meals cooked, playground, boundary or fencing



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All schools have a building. Indoor and outdoor spaces are used as seen appropriate



Outdoor play is built into everyday routine



Every school has toilets though children often use outside spaces!



Every school has a water pump which is often used by the villagers also



Trained teachers



Teaching learning material

RTE: provide free early childhood care and education for all children from 3 to 6 years of age



Bodh considers it very important to provide stimulation and opportunity to young children to learn. Every school has a pre-school run by a trained worker from the community. Often older children join in these sessions!

- RTE: No child shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education



When children are not able to work at the level of other children in the class, work is modified for them and they are taught in smaller groups. Bodh is able to successfully implement two important provisions-that of no child to be held back and also that of continuous comprehensive evaluation.

- RTE: no child be subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment

Child should be free of fear, trauma and anxiety



Teachers sit with the children creating a barrier free and fear free environment for the children

- RTE: school shall constitute a School Management Committee



Meeting of the SMC

Parents are encouraged to visit the school not only for the SMC meetings but to ensure that the school is functioning according to their expectations

- RTE: any person possessing such minimum qualification as laid down by the authority shall be eligible for appointment as a teacher



Trained teachers are appointed and a special induction training is held for 4 to 6 weeks by the coordinators to develop the attitudes and skills in the teachers that would help children to learn

- RTE: learning through activities, discovery, exploration and in a child friendly and child centred manner



Measuring, working out proportions, problem solving, application

Active, exploratory, child conducted learning

RTE prescribes that minimum number of working days should be 200 from class 1 to 5 and minimum numbers of working hours 45 per week including preparation time. In Bodh schools teachers have only two weeks off as summer vacation. A large chunk of time is used for residential training and brain storming during children's summer holidays.

Quality Education

The purpose of initiating an education programme in Bodh was to work towards equity in our society through providing quality education to children from the most marginalized sections of the society. The issue of quality has been addressed in the RTE Act in one line: 'ensure good quality elementary education conforming to the standards and norms specified in the Schedule'.

The assumption here is that if these provisions are put in place, good quality of education would automatically follow. The reality is that most of these provisions are only part of the hardware and do not in themselves ensure quality education. The software that goes with this structure needs to be designed and specific dos and don'ts need to be included. For example ensuring that teachers attend school is essential, (RTE: a teacher would maintain regularity and punctuality in attending schools) but only the first step of the process. Engaging with the children (rather than spending a large part of the day chatting outside the class) is the second important step. Creating a suitable learning environment would be the third step and skillfully directing children's learning would be the last stage. These are not spelt out in RTE in the way that infrastructure has been spelt out. Also, experience shows that even the first step of regularity and punctuality is not happening today so the question of other steps being taken does not arise.

The RTE does list teachers' responsibility to complete the curriculum in time and to make assessments. It does talk about the need for teaching to be child centred and assumes that if the teacher is in school he/she would be engaged in teaching and if he/she is teaching it would be child centered. In reality this is not happening.

To take another example, availability of teaching learning material and a library (as prescribed by the RTE Act) is a very important first step. But it becomes completely irrelevant when teachers neither know how to use them nor have the experience of perceiving how they facilitate learning. Not experiencing success with TLM and not seeing the connection between a library and development of language skills, teachers are not convinced about the usefulness of teaching learning material. As a result, making teaching learning material or having a library remains a formal unproductive exercise. These are either not used at all or not used effectively and therefore do not contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Low academic achievement of our children in government schools is well documented now. In a scenario where 'Of all children enrolled in Std V, about half cannot read at Std II level' (ASER January 2015), an external evaluation of children in Bodh rural schools in 2009 (no external evaluation has been done after this) found that out of the randomly selected 25% of children from each class, 100% children of grade 2 were able to read at grade 2 level and 93% children scored above 50% marks in hindi language evaluation (which included reading, comprehension, writing and creative writing).

Making Education Effective

Using Bodh as an example, and there are many such examples in the country, let us try to extrapolate some obvious reasons why teachers who are similarly trained and who work with

children of families with near zero resources, are able to ensure effective teaching learning despite earning less than one third the salary of more privileged teachers in government or rich private schools.

The most important thing that comes to mind is the commitment and determination on the part of the management to work towards ensuring effective education. Given that elementary education is conducted through local administration, whenever there is a committed collector or an energetic sarpanch or a determined head-master/head- mistress , the results are magical. Once there is commitment, efforts are made to learn the ropes. Systems are organized to ensure success. A culture of working towards a goal is established. Teachers are trained, supported, inspired and enthused to work. Constant reflection and evaluation takes place to ensure that the work is moving on the right path and in the right direction.

Commitment comes from within and it may not be possible to ensure in every teacher (though it must be said that in my experience I have found teachers willing to walk the extra mile in the right environment). Teachers, like any other human being moving from one work culture to another, adapt and conform over time. They move both in the positive and negative direction depending on the more dominant work culture. So in a scenario where teachers are a part of a large bureaucracy with poor work culture, it is not surprising that they have low inherent commitment.

In the process of education today, when the legal, physical and curricular structures are in place, why does India rank 72nd in 73 countries included in the International Students Assessment (PISA 2012). Directly linked to this is India's ranking of 135 in 187 countries in the human development index (Human Development Report 2014).

Teachers are well accepted as the most crucial element in education . Today in India, in the public schools system, they are also the weakest link in this process.

It is the individual teacher who is responsible for understanding, interpreting and delivering the curricula. It is in the hands of the teacher to run a class truly free of fear. Equally, she/he can demotivate the children to a state of zero learning by complete apathy or active emotional abuse even while abstaining from physical punishment.

Schools and teachers are operating in every village and every hamlet of the country. Visits to and conversation with teachers in remote areas of Himachal, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and U.P. over the years has revealed that many do not see a supervisor in school for months. Teachers are isolated and are more or less their own masters in every day functioning. They neither get recognition for good work nor face any consequences for poor work. If teachers are effective, effective learning will happen, if they are not, we will continue to have low learning outcomes.

A large number of teachers are not effective today. To begin with, today's teachers themselves are the product of poor primary and secondary schooling. So their own academic skills and knowledge are often low. In addition, though most have some or the other certificate of being trained as a teacher, often the quality of teacher education is very poor (Siddique 2012). Add to

that the number of courses where no teaching takes place and also where certificates are issued without even appearing in the exams (the recent report of 12000 candidates appearing for B.ed exams in Agra and 20000 passing TOI 12.10.2015) Again, it is not teachers alone. Medical education is happening in colleges where doctors, students and patients are imported from neighbouring districts for the day of the inspection (narrated by a doctor who was part of the inspection team)! Beautiful infrastructure stands empty on all other days.

Being aware of the state of teacher education in the country, the Government set up the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) in 1992. Despite 20 years of efforts, the Council is yet to see vast improvement in teacher education.

Due to poor education, lack of supervision and corruption, we have a large number of dysfunctional and ineffective teachers. Even if we accept that 10-20% teachers are highly motivated (as suggested by Mr. Azim Premji, reported in Times of India December 22, 2015), that is just not enough to ensure that all children are getting what they are coming to schools for. Their **right to education is not being realized**.

Teachers do not seem to be aware of their legal/ethical obligation or their influence with or responsibility to young children.

In my interaction with hundreds of teachers in government schools over the years, I have not found one teacher who initially considered himself/herself as a possible contributor to the academic failure of children. It was either the situation of the family (parents who cannot read and write, no resources at home, need for the child to participate in household and earning activities, dysfunctional families, etc) or the administration (too much paper work, too many non academic activities like election or census duty, too little support, etc) that were held responsible for child's non achievement.

The positive note is that after discussions and analyzing all factors, teachers in a 'safe ' environment were willing to look at their teaching practices. With support, they were also willing to change some of them. Teachers, like all others, long to experience success. But in a situation where they are able to transfer the responsibility on other factors, they are not even trying. The pedagogically sound idea of no testing till class 8, has been interpreted by teachers as 'no need to worry about children learning' (In 2001 a teacher in a rural school in Vasai district of Maharashtra, on being asked about her problems at work, told me that all the problems have now been removed because now they promote all children to the next class. All they had to do was to inform the next teacher about weak students!).

In the absence of understanding and commitment, accountability becomes the most important tool for ensuring effectiveness. When there is understanding and commitment, accountability comes from within. However, in the absence of commitment, external accountability must be built in. The diversity of India requires diverse solutions and diverse consequences. So the solutions and consequences for each situation would need to be worked out by local authorities

but once commitment is made, every educational authority and every teacher must be held responsible for the outcomes.

Those 15-20% teachers who are functioning well, will not need to make any changes. All others need to be shaken into better functioning. Perhaps the time is now right, when the basic infrastructure is in place in most part of the country, to consider strong action including public interest litigation by the families of children whose rights are not being fulfilled-- who have not learnt the basics of reading, writing and maths after attending schools for 5 or 8 or 10 years. Civil society organizations need to support this movement. Perhaps the time is now right to ensure, through instruments like public interest litigation, that the budgetary allocation of crores of rupees (Rs. 42219.55 crores for literacy and school education in the budget of 2015-16) is justified and used to provide literacy and education to all children. The state and civil society need to fulfill their constitutional obligation. This may sound a bit drastic but a firm and bold step is now needed to ensure that the right to education is actually realized. We have waited for far longer than the ten years that our constitution foresaw.