

Learning Journey Through Alternative And Innovative Schools In India

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ABSTRACT

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has been operational in India since 2000-2001 to provide for a variety of interventions for universal access and retention, bridging of gender and social category gaps in elementary education and improving the quality of learning. It has been designated as the scheme for meeting the objectives of the Right of Free and Compulsory Education which provides a legal entitlement to every child in the age group of six to fourteen years for free and compulsory elementary education in a neighbourhood school. SSA interventions include opening of new schools, provision of alternate and innovative schooling facilities, construction of additional classrooms, provision of drinking water and sanitation facilities, ensuring availability of qualified teachers, in service training for regular teachers, providing academic resource support, distribution of free textbooks and uniforms, extending support for improving learning achievement levels/outcome, etc. (MHRD, n.d., p.1). With the passage of the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009, several changes have been incorporated into the strategies and approaches adopted by the SSA.

Launching of Alternative and Innovative School (AIS) was a unique initiative made as part of SSA to intervene effectively among the children of marginalised sections of the society. During the period of implementation of District Primary Education Programme in the State, it was known as the Multi-Grade Learning Centre (MGLC). Drawing lessons from the experiences of *Rishi Valley* (Madanappalle, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh), *Sarang* (Attappadi, Palakkad District, Kerala), *Kanavu* (Nadvayal, Wayanad District, Kerala) and other similar innovative experiments in the field of education in the country, the initiatives for MGLC / AIS was made.

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern Russia, Alternative form of education ‘strengthens new meanings and values of pedagogical culture: mutual understanding, dialogue, partnership, creative collaboration, pedagogical support, self-development, self-organization and self-determination of the growing up person’ (Valeeva, et.al., 2015, p.274). This is a paradigm shift in the perspectives and practices followed by the conventional forms of education, which is either ‘teacher-centred’ or ‘curriculum-centred’ rather than ‘student-centred’ in letter and spirits.

Even though it is noted that ‘enrollment and retention of children in schools have not been a grave problem in Kerala as compared to many other States in the country, some of the micro studies revealed that there are children who have not seen the doors of schools in the tribal and coastal regions’ (Gireesan, 2008, p.53). Extensive field visits undertaken through the State

revealed that ‘there are children who have not seen the doors of the schools in life in certain remote areas, especially in tribal and coastal regions’ (Gireesan, 2011, p.324).

There were several stumbling blocks in the remote tribal habitations towards realizing Universalisation of Elementary Education like geographical remoteness, social factors, poverty, linguistic factors, lack of sufficient educational facilities, sibling care, gender discrimination, etc. There are communities who are still not aware of the need of education in the State also and some of them even felt that ‘formal school curriculum would result in alienation of their children from their own customs, traditions, language and culture’ (Gireesan, 2011, p, 324). Children of these communities, experienced adjustment problems and many of them dropped out of the schools.

Another important reason is that the medium of instruction provided to these tribal children in the formal schools was at variance with their spoken dialect. ‘Most of the teachers do not belong to the community and hail from the mainland, and many are not sensitive enough for the very specific issues of the children’ (Gireesan, 2017, p.195). It is noted that that no single strategy could address the problem in these areas. In line with the promulgation of the Right to Education Act, 2009, operationalization of MGLC / AIS has assumed significance in realizing the targets of the historic initiative for empowerment of tribal children and others living in geographically distant places.

In a study covering access and innovation practised by two NGOs of North India, it was reported that at the government schools, the girls faced discrimination based on their gender, caste, and economic background. This discrimination was too much to bear, and they decided to discontinue their education. This raises questions concerning the usefulness of their innovation in primary education (Ivie, 2009, pp.37-38). This has been cited here primarily to indicate that discrimination among the children has been a significant negative aspect in the educational scenario of our country, which could not be totally uprooted.

In this context, this study was taken up in line with the appraisal of different interventions under SSA, with the financial support extended by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India through the State Resource Centre-Kerala.

2. OBJECTIVES

Major objective of this paper is to analyse the specific strategies and approaches used by the Education Volunteers (EV) during the operationalisation of AIS in the State of Kerala. Different dimensions like the processes and practices of teaching-learning in the classroom, and strategies of evaluation are examined from a micro-level perspective. The paper makes an attempt towards realising a ‘Just, Equitable and Participatory System of Education’ and discusses how far these strategies and approaches of SSA could be factored into the Higher Education Institutions and Teacher Training Colleges / Centres.

3. METHODOLOGY

Operationalisation of AIS in three districts of Kerala with significant tribal population (Ernakulam, Idukki and Palakkad) has been made here. Extensive field work was carried out during the period, to cover as many institutions functioning even in the remote locations of Kuttampuzha Gram Panchayat inside deep forest areas where the travel was only possible

through multiple modes, including trekking for hours through dense forests. Collection of primary data was done by administering the following tools.

- Interview schedule for Education Volunteer (EV).
- Schedule for observing the functioning of AIS.
- Interview schedule for community members.
- Interview schedule for teachers (Class V) of formal schools.
- Interview schedule for functionaries of teachers' organisations.

The study brings out the responses covering 55 institutions spread over 16 Gram Panchayats (GP) from three Districts of Kerala, catering to 1392 out of school children. Secondary data was collected from the documents and reports of the State and District Project Offices of SSA, Education Department of Government of Kerala, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at different spheres and other available sources.

EDUCATION VOLUNTEERS – A BRIEF PROFILE

Four-fifths of the EVs (80 %) were female and more than three-fourth (78.2 %) were between the age group of 21 – 35 years. More than half of them (52.7 %) had the qualification of Pre-Degree/Higher Secondary or above. This indicates that the programme was able to attract educated young women to function as EVs, which is a unique feature.

STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES ADOPTED DURING THE OPERATIONALISATION – AN OVERVIEW

Specific strategies and approaches during the operationalisation of AIS, with special focus on the interactive and participatory teaching-learning process, have been analysed here. As many of those enrolled were the first generation learners, understanding and analyzing the strategies and approaches incorporated by the EVs play is vital. The dimensions like classroom processes and practices, and, evaluation strategies have been analysed, as they are very crucial in 'reaching the unreached'. Discussion and analysis of each dimension has been indicated separately.

CLASSROOM PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

Various classroom processes and practices like pattern of seating, method of grouping, approach of introducing a topic in the class, type of questions asked by the teacher, questions raised by the learners, use of chalkboard, etc. have been analysed here.

The pattern of seating in the classrooms is an important element in the teaching-learning environment. It is noted that even those who are generally shy or introvert in regular classroom sessions, actively take part in the group discussions. Hence, it is noted that such group-wise seating of the learners play a positive influence among them by developing team work, mutual understanding, spirit of tolerance, leadership qualities, etc. This is expected to enable the learners from the marginalised sections to get along with the students from diverse background,

when they join formal schools. It was noted that 'group wise' seating pattern was adopted in majority (56.4 %) of the centres.

Regarding the method of grouping the learners in the classrooms, different patterns have been adopted in the centres - Grade-wise, Learning level wise or Subject-wise. Learning level wise grouping has an advantage over other methods as the slow learners get an additional care and attention over others. However, it was observed that 'Grade wise' pattern was preferred by more than half (53 %) of the EVs.

During the teaching-learning process, it is noted that how a topic is introduced is equally important like the topic itself, depending on its acceptability and difficulty levels. The approach of introducing a topic is even more important, as it is expected to generate interest among the learners as most of them being 'first time learners' from their family. It was observed that Direct, Indirect and Mixed patterns have been adopted by the EVs in introducing a topic in the class. Among these approaches, Mixed' pattern of combining direct and interactive ways of introducing the topic was adopted by the single largest segment (38.18 %). Regarding the nature of activities adopted to introduce a topic, a large section of EVs (47.3 %) preferred 'Group' activities followed by 'Small group' activities (40 %) and only a small segment used 'Individual oriented' activities.

It is significant to mention that in the Sudbury Valley Schools practised in America, the learning content is determined by the student himself, includes the assimilation of experience and achievements

of humanity and is based on the personal experience of the child in the free choice of occupation students (Valeeva, et.al., 2015, p.277).

The EVs used to put forward different types of questions to the learners, a large segment of them (40 %) generated by themselves, rather than just picked up from the study materials. It is significant to note that questions based on life experiences and those generating innovativeness/ creativity was also found their place. And, 'Mixed' type of questions, a combination of all these types, has been noted among a significant section of EVs (32.7 %). With regard to raising questions by the learners, no gender difference was generally cited in majority of the classes (80 %) observed. However, it was noted that in some centres (7.3 %), only boys raised the questions. It is noted that unless the teacher encourages the learners to raise questions and interact, many of them may not be inclined to do so. It was observed that the questions prepared by the EVs on their own could play an important role in enhancing the understanding, analytical skills, critical thinking and creative thinking of the learners. It is an important strategy in equipping the learners from educationally backward and geographically remote areas to develop their self-confidence. In addition, by putting forward questions based on their life situations, they are able to make a self-assessment of their realities in a realistic manner. .

Use of chalkboard during the teaching-learning process was carefully examined. It is noted that by making the learners to use the chalk board could enable them to shed any possible inhibitions and helps them to enhance their confidence. As most of the learners are exposed to such methods for the first time, involving them to use the chalkboard is an effective strategy for enhancing their understanding, confidence and self-esteem during the process. It was interesting to note that in majority of the classes (54.6 %) observed, both EV and the learners used the chalkboard.

In line with the unique classroom practices, in a study carried out in two NGO Schools in Northern India, it was reported that the teachers always sit on the floor with the children, and encourage open communication as part of the teaching/learning process. The teachers try to make learning an interactive experience which is enjoyable for the children (Ivie, 2009, p.31).

In the Sudbury Valley Schools of America, it was noted that educational process of the organization had the following features.

- 'Community atmosphere caused by children and adults cooperation, partnership and equality;
- The students own responsibility for the process of education; teacher acts as a personal advisor, consultant and assistant;
- Unified absolutely for all rules and boundaries of personal freedom, developed jointly by adults and children; holding meetings with the presence of all members of the community;
- The location of the educational institution in nature; subject cabinets are open with free access for everyone who wants to;
- Mobility of furniture for individual or group work, conditions for doing manual labor contributing to the pupils' aesthetic development' (Valeeva, et.al., 2015, p.277),

EVALUATION STRATEGIES

Mode of assessment of the learners is important in evaluating the level of understanding of learners. Continuous assessment is vital to track their progress in learning, based on which appropriate changes in the teaching strategies may be incorporated. Asking questions about the topics covered during the earlier sessions, asking them to reflect upon the issues discussed, initiating a quiz among the learners, etc. were some of the practices adopted for oral assessment of the learners. Carrying out planned and/or surprise written examinations were used to make an assessment of the progress of the learners.

During the field visits, it was noted that most of the EVs (95 %) used both oral and written methods for assessing learner's performance.

Provision of home assignment is another practice incorporated by the EV to develop the retentivity of the learners and enhance their understanding. The nature of home assignment plays an important role in making the learners to think logically, systematically and critically, in addition to improve their writing and presentation skills. The assignments prepared made by the EVs beyond those in the study materials tops the list (32.73 %), which itself highlights the seriousness of this practice. It is noted that such a practice manifests the autonomy and freedom enjoyed by the EV during the process of evaluation and was capable of enhancing the capacity of the learners as well as the teacher. A quick appraisal through the type of assignments has only consolidated this premise. It was noted that a combination of book-based and EV-made assignments (18.18 %) and mixed type assignments (14.55 %) were also found their place. It is interesting to observe that assignments relating to environment and family issues were also highlighted.

The mode of evaluation of home assignments also could be used for building the capacity of the learners. 'Peer evaluation' was adopted in some centres (9.09 %) of Palakkad and Idukki

Districts. 'Peer evaluation' by the learners has an element of empowerment of the learners themselves, as they are being exposed to the nuances of evaluation under the directions of the EV, in the formative stages of learning itself.

It is significant to mention that obtaining responses from the students is very important because they recognize that the design process has the potential to have an impact on students at-risk of high school failure, though further research would be necessary to determine the design process's impact on student achievement, for example. Student and parent voices need to be heard in all instances of designing alternative high schools, but student and parent voices may be particularly important in designing alternative schools specifically for at-risk youth' (Edwards, 2013, p.149).

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

The following policy suggestions are being made towards realising 'inclusive education'.

- In the teacher-training curriculum, concepts and practices of AIS is to be introduced, with thrust on innovative approaches and strategies in the teaching-learning process.
- The State Government may bring out a special provision for the PRIs to earmark a reasonable share from their plan funds towards the running of AIS, as there used to be limitations in making allocations for Production, Service and Infrastructure sectors.

4. CONCLUSION

The study enabled an opportunity to examine the four pillars of education (learning to know, learning to be, learning to do and learning to live together) as envisaged by the International Commission of Education for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 1996, pp.85-97) and to analyse how they were manifested in the teaching-learning process at the Alternative and Innovative Schools in the study areas of the State.. It is noted that critical thinking and problem solving (*Learning to know*); self-confidence and self-esteem (*Learning to be*); hands on experience (*Learning to do*); and, inter-personal relations, co-operation and empathy (*Learning to live together*) have been more evident in the operationalization of these centres in the State (Gireesan, 2017, pp.205-206). Incorporation of diverse strategies and approaches enlivens participatory learning in the classroom and outside between the teacher and the students, and among the students, and that result in a genuinely student-centric environment, aiming at their empowerment.

It is significant to mention here in view of an effort made to design an innovative and alternative school, the formation of teams to create alternative forms of schooling that are different from traditional high schools was made. The overall purpose of this study was to create process to assist school leaders to successfully design innovative alternatives to traditional high schools. At the same time, an underlying purpose was to reform or reshape the schooling experience of youth who are unsuccessful in traditional high schools. The process for designing innovative alternatives to traditional high schools was developed using an Research and Development process to evaluate and improve the process. High school leaders who have been shown the process have expressed a high interest in using it to create new alternatives to their traditional high schools or to design new alternatives to replace alternative programs that

have been discontinued. (Edwards, 2013, pp.158-160). The study highlighted that having alternatives to traditional schools will enable more youth to complete high school in unconventional ways.

Even though the learning journey through Alternative and Innovative Schools was an effort made at the micro-level among the tribal children in an Indian State, it has the inherent potentials to suggest for a policy initiative towards developing a roadmap of a 'Just, Equitable, and Participatory system of Education' for all sections in the country. The learnings from the study are very much significant with its edifice built on the genuine concerns, commitment, empathy and sincerity in addressing them in an open, transparent and non-prejudiced manner. It is suggested that some of the strategies and approaches discussed here could be appropriately factored into the activities of Higher Education Institutions in the country towards enhancing their magnitude, scale and speed, thereby making significant value-additions to the 'Learning Journey' in those institutions.

5. REFERENCES

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