

1

Education Pre Primary

This year we started another pre-primary school taking their number to 15. When we began this programme for children between 3 and 5, there was much misgiving among parents, mostly because we used no books and often they sent their children hoping for nothing but just to keep them away from a busy mother maybe. All this changed soon enough. Even without any of the paraphernalia that we have come to associate with schools and learning, our children, taught in what is basically the Montessori method adapted to local conditions, go up to the primary level mentally and physically much better equipped than those we could not take in or who did not come. Their sensory co-ordination is much more well developed, they have learnt to exercise their various faculties with little prodding and no spoon-feeding, and are thus more self; confident and ready to solve problems, their limbs have responded to various rhythms in the j extra-'curricular' programmes we have devised, and even after all this they have learnt the alphabet, albeit phonetically, and can count also. Now we find more and more villages asking for a school and in villages where we already have one, more and more children seeking a place there. We have to disappoint people on either score, for one major reason of our success has been our intensive supervision of the teachers' work and their not being burdened with an unmanageable number of children. We sometimes wonder, though, if either condition is replicable on a wider scale and, if not, what should be done about it. We have 15 schools, with 34 teachers and 932 children. Of them 457 are boys, 475 girls and average attendance has been 73.5%. The schools sat for an average of 230 days in the year, the one at Kolsur having the most working days with 245, while that at Matia worked on 214 days. We have to remember that the latter has a number of children whose mothers are sex workers and there are social and economic problems involved that make it a special case. Our effort always has been to involve parents in the process of educating their children. The two hours the child spends at school must not be seen as a radical departure from what his home gives and wants.

Once the parents understood how they can contribute to and participate in this collaborative process their possible lack of any formal education has not really mattered, as we hoped it would not. Thus at the 65 parent-teachers' meetings the total attendance was 2064, with an average of 31.48%. These interactions are supplemented by home visits, where teachers and the supervisor visit parents at home, to maybe answer questions about what a child does or does not do at school, and to learn about some water, she said the water at home had been what he or she does or does not do at home, all used up but he should begin to eat and she end what all this together means. In the course of the year altogether 5758 such visits were

2

made. The supervisor visited the schools 236 times in the year, so each school was visited 16 times on an average. To have a sense of involvement, and maybe also to provide against a day when funding will cease, all local organizations continued to take a token amount of fees from every child. As in other years this money was either not spent or spent on the children themselves. This year the amount came to Rs 32,150 which means Rs 2.87 per child per month.

All our teachers are young and willing, and all like working with children. Still it helps to give them some fresh inputs regularly and this we try to do in a number of ways. A total of 10 workshops were organized for them, 5 of them at Swanirvar's main building at Andharmanik, and the agenda included the year's plan, making of educational material, review of methodology etc. Five other workshops were held in various villages and all were devoted to making diverse aids to teaching.

We do not wish our teachers to be involved with the schools only, as development to us is an integrated process where different facets of life are but parts of an all-inclusive whole and you ignore one at the cost of the others. Thus we expect them to contribute to all our activities and to prepare them for this, we sent 27 pre-primary teachers to visit the Rangabelia project of the Tagore Society of Rural Development.

The high point of our teachers' training schedule this year was a 3-day "sharing workshop" held at Swanirvar. Since our teachers have started work at various times, their experience and training are not the same and they have been feeling the need for an overall sharing of experience. CRY (Child Relief and You), which funds our pre-primary project, sent a group of four teachers and a supervisor from an NGO in the Sunderbans to attend the workshop. Apart from some general observations from resource persons, the workshop gave a chance to all the teachers to talk about their own experience with the children, how they can or cannot relate the contents of their training to specific situations and this exchange of information, experience and ideas made everybody, particularly those who had joined later than others, more confident and opened up new possibilities.

EDUCATION: Primary

We still run three primary schools under the Central Government's NFE-2000 scheme and applying quite a few of our own ideas to good use. But before we talk about what makes our schools different let us give a tabular representation of certain facts about them in this year.

3

Particulars	Fatullyapur	Chandalati	Andharmanik	Total
1. Total students	150	135	141	426
Boys	72	68	70	210
Girls	78	67	71	216
2. Average attendance %	91. 53	90. 55	82. 54	88. 21
3. Total working days	240	239	246	242
4. No. of parents' meetings	4	3	3	10
Average attendance	91	45	104	81
5. Total home visits	953	745	281	1979
Average per home	6. 5	5. 3	2	5
6. Central workshops				8
Average participants				13
7. Village workshops	4	3	5	12
Average participants	4	4	4	12
8. Teachers' monthly meetings				12
Average attendance				12
9. No. of group visits				12
Average participation				12
10. Edu. Organiser's visit	58	36	35	129
Average per centre				43
11. Fees collected (in Rs.)	17,196	16,379	4,600	38,175

At Fatullyapur one or the other teacher was absent on 43 days, and the corresponding figures for Chandalati and Andharmanik were 18 and 29 respectively.

We held two self-evaluation workshops with our teachers and based on what came out of these and on observations by others we dare say our progress has been good but even if this claim is discounted as coming from ourselves there is no denying that we have succeeded in being different. This difference can be seen in three major spheres. 1. Community involvement, 2- Teachers' training and motivation, 3. Classroom management.

Relations with the community., Parents' involvement is essential for a child's development at the primary school stage and since we have introduced this concept in our area it is as well to now for certain what sort of families we are interacting with. The first table gives a picture of their economic condition and the second of their formal educational status.

Village	Annual income			
	Up to Rs 10,000	Rs 10,000 -Rs 15,000	Rs 15,000 -Rs 18,000	Above Rs 18,000
Fatullyapur	80	42	18	10
Chandalati	56	45	26	8
Andharmanik	78	36	24	3
Total-426 fam.	214	123	68	21
In percentage	50	29	16	5

Village	Families	Illiterate		I-IV		V-VIII		IX-X		XI >=	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Fatullyapur	150	27	28	40	52	58	56	16	12	9	2
Chandalati	131	20	35	44	40	42	46	19	9	6	1
Andharmanik	142	65	73	28	38	24	18	14	13	11	
Total	423	112	136	112	130	124	120	49	34	26	3
In percentage		26	32	26	31	29	28	12	8	6	1

Traditional wisdom will despair of utilising this to get much help in educating children but as what follows will show, a different faith and approach can turn this on the head. For various reasons we have not yet been able to form any village education committee or any guardians' association - both have turned out to be quite difficult - but every three months every school holds a meeting between its teachers and parents/guardians. Both sides ask and answer questions and an overall picture emerges of the children's habits, hygiene, attendance, interests, shortcomings, special needs, and special qualities. A bond of partnership, of shared responsibility, grows up between the teachers and the parents. Once the parents are emboldened to wonder if their apparent inadequacy does really make them unfit to bring up a good human being, the rest is easy. The success of parenting is not pre-determined by one's level of education and the table below shows that parents agree and take their responsibility seriously.

	1997-98	1996-97	1998-99
No. of parents' meetings	12	18	10
Average attendance	48	29	81
Average students per centre	90	50	142

We do not intend to give the impression that these parent-teachers' meetings are veritable examples of participatory workshops. Many parents are still shy in public, even before neighbours, and some may even now feel it hard to find their bearings, but most do contribute and/or learn. In any case, a meeting like these is not the place where individual children's problems can be discussed. For that, our teachers, and sometimes the organiser, too, visit students' homes. This is particularly useful in the case of someone who is falling behind. The teachers, who watch him at school, now seek information about what happens at home and try to decide on what requires to be done. On them-part, the parents might have questions about what their child does at school. There is nothing in being illiterate to stop a mother from seeing that her child obeys the simple laws of health and hygiene or from following injunctions of nutrition a she certainly can assert her affectionate authority to get him to study regularly. Parents who have been to school may help more actively with the studies, that is a lack all first generation learners face, but all parents, once they understand their child will spend more time at home than at school, can see to it that this time is properly spent. These problems can be discussed at these one-to-one meetings at home. The child is welcome to be present, and since detailed notes are kept of every child's performance in various fields there is little chance to get away with vague formulations. Finding they are so efficacious we have increased the number of home visits. In 1996-97 there were 559 such visits, in 1997-98 this rose to 1433 and this year the figure was 1979 or, expressed differently, the teachers met every family about 5 times a year.

As politeness demands, these visits are returned. We encourage parents to come to school to see for themselves what their children are up to, to learn more about them and their progress, and also about our methods which are not exactly what many of them were used to when they went to school. This year we kept a record of how many parents were in touch with us on their own and the figures are not discouraging at all.

Village	Parents in touch			Parents showing little interest		
	Father	Mother	Both	Father	Mother	Both
Fatullyapur	92	118	50	58	32	6
Chandalati	82	88	43	49	43	5
Andharmanik	91	110	68	51	32	4
Total	265	316	161	158	107	15
In %	62	74	-	37	25	-

Mothers still seem more interested but our teachers say the number of fathers visiting or talking

6

to them is increasing. We do not know if this has anything to do with the first batch of children getting older and getting into higher classes.

We charge our students some fees. The amount is minimal - Rs 10 a month per child at Fatullyapur and Chandalati, and Rs 5 at Andharmanik - and no pressure is put on any parents, even habitual non-payers. We have found this payment invests the parents with a sense of right that they value. This money is not spent and remains with the school for possible later use. How much was collected this year has been given earlier, now we give another set of figures.

Village	Families	Regular payers	Irregular payers	Non-payers	Unable to pay
Fatullyapur	150	76	49	25	13
Chandalati	136	84	50	2	1
Andharmanik	140	32	59	49	29
Total	426	192	158	76	43
In percentage		45	37	18	10

About 70% of the fees are collected within the year, and since half of those who do not pay really cannot pay, we are happy with what we get. Many donate books also. There is another way in which parents get involved in what the children do at school. Homework often entails seeking parental help, and particularly with the local/family history project the family's involvement has to be sustained and deep. Then there is interaction with others in the village, members of the panchayat, teachers in other schools, the general public. If we think we are offering a better alternative, we must try for its replication. We do not do anything that is impossible to follow in other schools which, in any case, will always have a substantially larger number of students. The local government is our government, too, and we would like to involve them in our experiments as also to be involved in theirs. This year there were a few significant cases of cooperation. At Fatullyapur our workers met teachers of the four government primary schools in the village and with their permission some senior students from these schools joined our children in making rakhis, about 1000 of which were finally ready after three days' work. On the day of the celebration, first these Government school children came to our school to tie rakhis, when they were offered something to eat, then our children divided themselves into four teams and each went to a Government school to reciprocate the gesture. They also presented a short cultural show. Independence Day this year was celebrated jointly by children of our schools at Fatullyapur and Bajitpur and by children of five Government primary schools in the

area and their teachers in the presence of the Upa-Pradhan, of the panchayat. On Teachers' Day, at both Andharmanik and Fatullyapur the function at our school was attended by some local teachers, including a few from high schools, and members of the general public whose wards did not attend our schools. Quite a few teachers from primary and high schools came to our exhibition on education at both Kolsur and Fatullyapur and exchanged ideas. In Bajitpur particularly, the Pradhan and the Upa-Pradhan have always given us a patient hearing. One evening during Ramzan arrangements for Iftar for local people were made at the Andharmanik school. And children from all three of our schools were invited to put up cultural shows at other local schools, both primary and high, whenever there was some function there. Teachers' training and motivation: Every month our 12 teachers and the Education Organiser meet for a reporting, reviewing and planning session. Apart from these there are regular workshops to discuss what to make in teaching-learning materials and then to make them. Vikramshila Educational Resource Society in Calcutta, which has been training our teachers for the past few years, continued to hold refresher courses and advanced trainings. Supervisory people from there and from CRY visited our schools regularly and closely studied the quarterly reports we send to both organizations. All our teachers from the three schools some times visit one school, teachers from NGOs elsewhere come to see our schools. For two years running we have had a visit by a five-member international team of young people studying at a teachers' training school in Denmark. This year we had two resource persons spending a day each with our teachers. One of them spoke about the proper ways of teaching environmental studies from a holistic viewpoint. He was shown the various charts our children had made on various facets of a tree's life, on flowers etc. There are often heated debates on the accuracy of the data to be put in the chart. At Fatullyapur there was no agreement between groups on how long it takes for a patal flower to turn into fruit. The teacher asked for new observations and it was found both groups were right, it could take anything from 13 to 15 days. The other came to help with the teaching of history. He had two main concerns; first, how to make sure that new information does not create confusion in a child's mind because it conflicts with accepted belief, not necessarily always but often taught by religion, and, second, on how to route their curiosity into the local past. From this has grown our wide-ranging project on the region's forgotten and neglected history. Classroom management: We follow, or at least generally try to follow, certain methods and principles which are different from what is done in most schools. Maybe the following chart will better illustrate the comparison.

Alternative/non -formal/Swanirvar	General/formal
1. Fun	
Enjoyable and interesting	Solemn and boring
2. Activity-based	
Doing	Hearing and reading
Active participation	Passive reception
Use of all senses	Use of only a few senses
3. Discovery-based	
Collect information/evidence	Receive these
Draw own conclusions	Be told these
Encourage independent learning	Always teacher-dependent
Produce knowledge	Only consume knowledge
Open ended	Closed ended
Emphasis on why and how	Emphasis on what
Encourage creativity, imagination, individuality, diversity	Demand standard/routine response from everyone
4. Group work	
Team work, mutual learning, and cooperation	Only individual learning, and competition
Everyone participates	"Star" performers
5. Relevant	
Move from known to unknown, from own experience to wider world	Start with wider, unknown picture
Can be used	No obvious use

In practical terms this means we use a lot of teaching-learning material and do not restrict ourselves to text books. There are any number of work cards, made by our teachers themselves. After each chapter is finished special cards are given to see how far and how much the children have assimilated. Only when the teacher is satisfied is a new chapter begun. The progress is reviewed at the monthly meetings. If only a few are found to be trailing, they are asked to work with these cards for some time along with the new work.

There is some competence based free movement within classes. This is seen most in Arithmetic. A backward student may either be asked to sit with a lower class or given the old cards to practise with until he can join his peers in other subjects. There is a lot of group work.

A class is divided into groups which are asked to work with one another, mainly through debates, discussions, questions and answers. Since the group's honour will be at stake, the comparatively weaker ones in a group receive help from their fellow members before the other groups get around to targeting these weaker ones. In all classes there is much combined cooperative work when charts are made, experiments are conducted, and many work cards are prepared, particularly in the first two classes, so that five or six children have to work together.

All children have to sit for two examinations in a year, one in September-October, and the other in March-April and their progress to the next class depends on how they do in both. There are both written and oral tests and a mark sheet is included in the general progress report.

Generally we do not keep children back in a class, but in some cases this is unavoidable.

There is a growing demand within Swanirvar to add more classes to our schools as also for opening more primary schools. We have decided against both. Unless major changes have been effected in the aims, syllabus, and methods of our country's school education - the why, what, and how respectively of our plans for the future - there is not much point in expending the same work in one small geographical area. In the section on our Kishore Kishori Bahini we have talked about why these changes are necessary.

The time is more than ripe for educational planners in our State to learn from the success of educational interventions, curriculum initiatives and teacher-training programmes in other parts of the country and in some isolated parts of West Bengal too. The present offers an unprecedented opportunity for NGOs working with education to intervene in and affect the process. Last year we were among a few NGOs which organised a large workshop and certain follow-up actions were taken, but not much concrete has come out of them. We are now ready to offer all our resources towards setting up an Education Resource and Research Centre (ERRC) that will be dedicated to strengthening initiatives in education through various means. We called a meeting of various NGOs and individuals and shall be continuing our efforts towards reaching a consensus on strategy and implementation.

Apart from this we are part of a National Alliance for Education whose primary goal now is to fight for an amendment to the Constitution to make education compulsory for children between 6 and 14. We published a booklet on this, setting out the various misconceptions that are popular, demolishing cleverly propagated disinformation, and suggesting concrete steps for action. These included an awareness campaign in the villages which would include some detailed surveys about children in the villages and their education, holding general meetings in

the villages to make plans, etc. We visited 37 primary schools in 19 villages to see how many students and teachers each had, how many rooms, the state of the roof, the floor and the walls, total floor space, what furniture and educational equipment each had, if they had doors and windows, how the students are divided into classes, if the schools had toilets, drinking water, and play grounds. Our findings were not unexpected but predictability does not make something dismal less so. If anything, it makes the resolve stronger.

We also surveyed 22 villages in 3 blocks, mostly those where we work, to find out what children there did. We give the results in a table. We also have data on how many of the school going children are regular and how many not so, but that is not included in the table.

Age	Girls			Boys			TOTAL CHILDREN		
	In Sch	Out of sch	Total	In Sch	Out of Sch	Total	In Sch	Out Sch	Total
	A	B	C(A+B)	D	E	F(D+E)	G	H	I (G+H)
0-2	-	966	966	-	869	869	-	1835	1835
3-5	699	963	1662	701	972	1673	1400	1935	3335
%	42.1	57.9		41.9	58.1		42.0	58.0	
6-10	2521	332	2853	2461	417	2878	4982	749	5731
%	88.4	11.6		85.5	14.5		86.9	13.1	
11-14	1264	362	1626	1286	478	1764	2550	840	3390
%	77.7	22.3		72.9	27.1		75.2	24.8	

So not merely do such a large number and percentage not go to school, more than 50 years after independence, of those that do go an overwhelming majority will make no use of their years in school, or will in effect be rejected by society. What sort of a nation is this, then, where more than half of its people have nothing to gain from its first and most important 15 years of life?

Our adult literacy centres mainly for mothers run in the following eight villages and the figure in brackets gives the number of women who came there to learn : Rudrapur(18), Andharmanik(12), Chandalati(8), Beliyakhali(12;but here 25 older children,who had dropped out of school earlier,also come regularly), Fatullyapur(24), Punra (5), Bhojpara(11), Bajitpur(17). The centres are run by some of our pre-primary teachers.Progress is uneven,but some mothers can now read fluently if no joint word has been used.However, we would like to overhaul the entire programme to make it more meaningful and productive.