



Enabling environment in schools for children of migrant labour

H K Shubha

Millions of unskilled and semiskilled labourers have left their native villages to escape extreme rural poverty and to find a job in big cities. These migrant workers travel from one area of work to another along with their families. They live in small sheds, sometimes provided by the construction company for the duration of the construction project and then move to another site. Most of the time the construction companies do not provide electricity or sanitation facilities.

A majority of children from these families do not go to school, given the migratory nature of their families and the lack of suitable access to proximate quality schools. Along with this, these children have to shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of their younger siblings and their house while their parents go out to work. As a result, these children are little adults in terms of their knowledge of taking care of their siblings and carrying out household responsibilities. Among this population, naturally, education for these children is the last priority as earning their daily bread is an everyday struggle; also the children are mostly first generation learners.

To understand what it takes in terms of curriculum and other enablers, to provide quality education to these children, Azim Premji Foundation decided to start schools for these children. In partnership with two builders we started two schools in Bangalore for children of migrant construction labour in 2007. The journey so far, from setting up the schools to running them

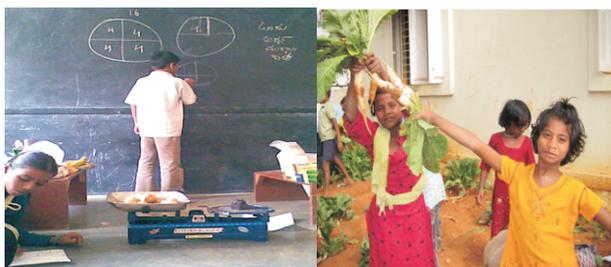
smoothly, providing facilities, training teachers, overhauling the curriculum etc. has helped us understand the needs of these children and it continues to help us learn about them.

One of the first things we realised was that, if we take only children between the age group of 6 to 12 years we are going to have no children in the classroom because the majority of them have the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings or other babies in the neighbourhood for a minimum amount of Rs. 400/- to Rs.500/- per month. So we decided to provide a creche and preschool facility for infants and toddlers in the schools. We also decided to have a school either in the camp or close to the camp to ensure that the children feel safe and are able to keep an eye on their small tents and their belongings. These were the main reasons for these children to discontinue their studies. This arrangement frees children to continue their studies and the parents also feel that their children and their belongings are safe.

After enrolling children in the school, we realised that most of the children were malnourished. Hence we decided to provide three meals to all children. The menu for the three meals was decided based on the suggestion of nutritionists. Children now get breakfast, lunch and an evening snack everyday. Regular health (teeth, overall body and eye) check-ups and follow-up treatments as required are provided to every child's. Apart from this, all children's height and weight are checked and recorded every month



and reviewed often to know the impact of our intervention. This initiative has definitely helped us to improve their health status. Apart from medical attention, we have tried to create an awareness about hygiene and healthy habits. Besides this, children learn many other skills such as sharing, taking responsibilities, serving food, eating together, washing one's plates, cleaning the place, team work.



It is so much fun to share

We were sure that the regular state curriculum would not work with these children for the following two reasons; first, the duration of children's stay in school is uncertain and very short, therefore, we do not have the luxury of taking years to teach the requisite academic skills; second, the children come from different parts of India with different languages, cultures and learning levels.

Azim Premji Foundation has decided to develop a curriculum, and a relevant pedagogy most suitable to children that constitute this heterogeneous group. This has further

necessitated the development of a package that meets multilingual, multicultural and multisocial requirements of children of the above profile. We adopted a module based approach. Each module covers basic competencies and skills that facilitate children to join other mainstream schools if they move out from this school in between. There are two to three modules transacted at a time to cater to different learning levels of children. Here the effort throughout the



transaction of the module is to make them independent learners.

Child friendly classrooms

To understand the level of their learning in different subjects and their health status when they enter the school, we design and use entry assessment forms. Based on this, they are put in different modules. Children and parents who would like to move out of the camp are provided with an "Exit Certificate" which contains the child's details such as his/her stay in the school, topics dealt with and current learning level. Based on this certificate the child would be able to get admission in another schools.

When children enter the school, they spend their first few days wandering around the school, often with babies dangling on the hips of older siblings. They walk in and out as they please. Sufficient time is given for a smooth transition and separation of sibling to separate groups.

Our little adults

Since the children's stay in schools is uncertain and very short, these two schools are kept open throughout the year. Teachers of these schools



along with children do not get any formal vacation time. But, children go to their villages during harvesting season for a month or two with their parents. Initially we struggled to convince parents and children not to miss school, and now, children fight with teachers not to close the school even for teacher development workshops and weekends.

For the children, small things make a big difference. Children are provided with a full size mirror, comb, hair oil, talcum powder and petroleum jelly. Every day it is a very enjoyable ritual for children to stand in front of the mirror, dress themselves and their siblings -this helps to build their confidence level. Apart from this, safe drinking water, running water, electricity, separate toilet for girls and boys are some of the basic facilities we provide to children, and it is now a habit for them to use it.

The space in the classrooms is made flexible by using movable furniture. Both the school team and children respect and care for the physical environment by keeping it clean, uncluttered and well-maintained.

In the classroom children make rules and they keep reminding each other about the rules. Safety in the school is one of the most important components in the school. We have tried to make the physical environment safe, friendly and simple. This way the school feels like an extension of the child's home. To add to this we have the school helper from the same community as well as teachers mostly from their native places.

Those children who complete five modules as well as the transition module (to facilitate the adaptation of the child into a mainstream regular school), are provided every opportunity and their parents are given all the encouragement and support to move them to a mainstream school. The team also follows up their progress by regularly visiting the schools and checking their progress with teaching staff in those schools.

The parents get complete support and motivation from the team to mainstream their children who completes all five modules and a transition module (which is to train children to get used to the regular schooling system) in our school. What is interesting is that, children who are going to regular schools make sure that they come to school (Migrant School) everyday, share the day's happenings, have evening snacks, finish their homework at school and only then go home. The children who move out of our school are tracked quarterly to check on their progress.

Parents' participation in school events

Early in our journey we realised that parents' support and conviction is necessary for the child to continue in school. So we work at building a rapport and an ongoing relationship of trust with the parents. We make sure that one teacher visits the camp, gets to know the child's family, listens to what the parents have to say about their child, shares their child's progress in learning and dialogues with them to convince them to continue their child's education. They are regularly invited to visit the schools and share their talents (storytelling, painting, carpentry and masonry) with children.

It took us a long while to identify the right people and build a team to run these schools. We were looking for people with a combination of high energy, the ability to gel with children and the desire and ability to innovate as well as possessing a professional teaching degree. We now have a team of dedicated young energetic teachers who grudge no effort to the school or the children. It is the relationship between adults in



the school and children based on mutual care and respect that is making a lot of difference. Both adults and children here learn to appreciate differences between religion, cultural and sexual orientation in the school. The team in the school not only empowers children academically, but also helps them develop emotionally, physically and morally to their full potential.



Happy teachers and happy children

It is a joint effort of parents, motivated and dedicated teachers, and the builder's willingness which is keeping the schools vibrant.

Shubha has been working with Azim Premji Foundation since 2007. She is associated with 'Education for the Children of Migrant Labour' since its very inception of setting up schools. Currently, she is mentoring the Principal of the Azim Premji School at Yadgir, along with anchoring two Migrant labour schools in Bangalore. She can be contacted at shubha@azimpremjifoundation.org

