

Organisation helps poor kids make sense of education

The Azim Premji Foundation's Learning Guarantee Programme now runs in five states



One of the schools in Karnataka where the foundation's Learning Guarantee Programme is being run. BS PHOTO

SUBIR ROY
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The Learning Guarantee Programme of the Azim Premji Foundation is into its fifth year and has the satisfaction of seeing it go mainstream in the launch state of Karnataka and adopted in four other states. This in itself is good news, but the most valuable gain may be the insights that the exercise has yielded on how to make elementary education to the poorest more meaningful. These will help evolve solutions and models for systemic changes that can be recommended.

The programme set out in 2002, in partnership with the government of Karnataka, to administer a new kind of tests to children attending elementary government schools in seven districts in north-east Karnataka, one of the most backward regions of the country.

The aim was to assess, not whether the children can repeat what they have learnt by heart, but whether they can understand what they are taught and use that understanding to solve problems.

Assessment was chosen as the entry point in the exercise to reform the education system because it was felt that the exam system creates the teaching system. Change in assessment will bring change in teaching and learning process. The proportion of schools which fail to meet all three criteria is still small at the end of the day but what is heartening is that the pedagogic skills which the system will then respond to and provide.

after two years of the pilot, expanded the programme to all the districts. Early last year, based on the principles of the Learning Guarantee Programme, it initiated the Karnataka School Quality Assessment Organisation (KSQA-O) to assess all 45,000 schools in the state.

This year the organisation has conducted its second round of assessments.

The programme has now spread to Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Gujarat. It is in its second year in Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh. Uttarakhand is expanding the programme to more districts from the current academic year. Madhya Pradesh has extended the programme question papers to all the schools for their annual examinations currently on. In Rajasthan and Gujarat, the programme has been newly launched.

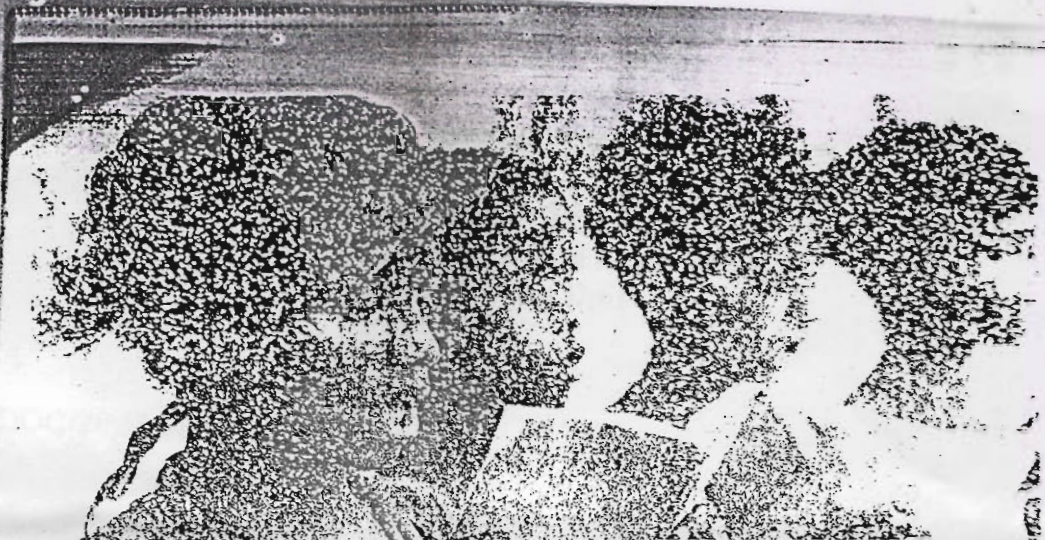


The aim of the programme is to assess whether the children can understand what they are taught and use that understanding to solve problems.

What has the foundation so far? It has analysed the performance of schools in Karnataka over the last three years and it has found that enrolment has doubled over the years and there has been fair improvement in both attendance and learning. The proportion of schools which fail to meet all three criteria is still small at the end of the day but what is heartening is that the performance of the lowest quartile children has shown an improvement, say the programme leaders.

The Karnataka government

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It is time we take a long, hard look at our basic school-level education system and then seek to change it altogether

For any reason if she wants to do something else, be it conversing with her neighbour, or leaving the class, it involves seeking permission. Depending on the kind of school, any transgression of norm is dealt with by the teacher, usually with punishment. In short, for a child, school is an engagement with strongly imposed discipline, regimen and deference to authority. This is one of the first lessons she imbibes about the world — there is a set of rules that control the world and she is expected to unquestioningly abide by them at risk of punishment if she violates any of them. You are successful if you play by all the rules.

During class, children are expected to focus and learn the particular subject meant to be studied in that class. The teacher is always in charge and she uses a certain set of textbooks mandated by school management. Textbooks are considered a repository of facts and data. The teaching-learning process doesn't necessarily engage questions beyond clarification of facts shared, and restricted to the scope of the subject being discussed.

The definition of what a child has learnt is restricted to the mastery of tools and techniques, memorisation of facts and figures, and the teacher and the timetable determine what a child can learn at a given point in time. And being a good student means acquiring the ability to deal with as many facts and pieces of information as possible. This is the second learning a child gets from school — the teacher and the textbook are always right. Being a successful student means being able to remember and reproduce a lot of information.

Lastly, where and how is all the learning used? What a child learns in school is mainly used only within the school, either to demonstrate it in class by replying to quizzes, or in exams. The real world and her experi-



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ences there are largely independent of textbook-learning. She only knows that she needs to pass exams and get a good job. This is the third learning: education is meant to get us a degree. Beyond this, the purpose it serves in real life is limited.

Education is primary

So it seems the education system we have designed will create individuals who grow up with a fear of authority, largely unquestioning followers of the norms of the world, and unsure in real situations.

Needless to say this does read like a dismal picture. We need to rearticulate what we mean by good education. I think education has two primary aims: first, to enable us to learn and understand the larger world we reside in and give us the ability to engage with it; second, to empower the individual, make her capable of questioning and challenging the world she lives in, and contribute to changing it.

As a society, we need our citizens to be independent thinkers with the capability to lead, to be sensitive to larger social realities, and feel responsible towards the larger community. Every individual needs to feel empowered to participate and question norms. This strength and confidence in an individual needs to be discovered, nurtured and strengthened.

A school needs to be a location where the right experiences for

learning are created. We need to provide a non-intimidating and liberating space for children. We need to proactively identify and remove any element of physical, mental, emotional threat that stifles learning and growth. Rather than enforce rules that are not fully understood by children with threats of punishment, it is easier to ensure discipline through the participation of children in formulating the rules of engagement.

The classroom should be a democratic space where the interaction with children is dialogic and non-didactic. Focus should be on the learning of concepts and every child needs to be allowed the space to construct her own knowledge and the flexibility to do so at her own pace. This is imperative that we situate education in the larger social context. We need to understand that learning comes from real experiences unless the classroom transaction is connected to reality in some form education will remain merely words and text.

Today we as a society are in a better position to take significant steps towards change than ever before. Many schools and institutions across the country are demonstrating that it is indeed possible to break the norm. The Bandhyali school in Jaipur by Digantar, the Centre For Learning in Bangalore, or Vikramshila's B School in Burdwan exemplify these special organisations such as Eklaksha Digantar and Vidya Bhawan, which run businesses with a social purpose such as iDiscoveri and EZ Vidya as all part of this movement.

As citizens we need to not only come through this change but participate and catalyse it. We need to break ourselves from the status quo and influence the building of a system that will create better human beings.

Azim Premji is Chairman and CEO, Wipro Technologies. Copyright (2007), Wipro Limited.

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