

Observations from Visit to Field Sites of ASPIRE in Odisha

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ASPIRE has been involved in implementing a medium scale project under the banner of 1000 Schools project as a collaborative programme of TSRDS and ASPIRE. The Project has been designed and implemented by ASPIRE has the main objective of improving the quality of learning in schools in six blocks of Jajpur, Keonjhar and Sundargarh districts of Odisha. These blocks are inhabited predominantly tribal population and have remained underdeveloped. The three specific goals of the project are: (a) to improve access to Government schools; (b) to reduce the learning deficit in schools; and (c) to strengthen the governance by empowering parents and community groups in School Management committees (SMCs).

During the Field Visit we had the opportunity to observe the special initiatives taken under the Project such as Learning Enhancement Programme (LEP), Residential Bridge Course Centres (RBC), Community Educational Resource Centres and also a school where the Project is implementing various innovative approaches for quality improvement. We also had the opportunity to interact with teachers and field functionaries of ASPIRE on various aspects of the programme.

We observed that in a relatively short period of time ASPIRE has been able to go on scale. This was possible due to the focused leadership and high level of commitment and dedication among the functionaries of ASPIRE at all levels. Project also has attempted to produce/adapt learning material keeping in view the relevance and suitability of contents and presentation for children from the underprivileged groups belonging to multi-ethnic and multilingual contexts. The approach is quite personalized and takes into account the varying needs of each child. We could observe active involvement of the community in various activities of ASPIRE. We found that the Project views the work of educating all children as consisting of activities that go beyond the confines of schooling and classroom teaching-learning. The effort to engage with the issue of Child Labour is one such instance. During our interaction we could observe that the Project activities receive full support and cooperation from parents and community, local panchayati raj institutions, government administrators and school authorities including teachers. Considering the difficult context and conditions in which the Project is operating it is really commendable that the Project team has succeeded in securing the involvement of all stakeholders in implementing various activities. This is an important step in ensuring the long term sustainability of the Project initiatives.

Learning Enhancement Programme (LEP)

The initiative is formulated based on empirical observation of inadequate mastery over skills of reading, writing and arithmetic among many children in grade 3 upwards leading eventually to their dropout without completing even the elementary cycle of eight years of schooling. The objective of the LEP is to bridge this learning deficit and help them fully benefit from the teaching-learning in the school according to their age and grade. For this children with serious learning deficits are identified from those in grades 3 to 5 in the respective government school and they are given special support before the beginning of the school day. Their learning requirements are individually assessed through specially designed measuring tools. Based on this, personalized learning inputs are designed for each learner. For each child a separate register is maintained to track cumulative progress made through the special support programme and their preparedness to fully integrate with the regular school teaching without additional support.



Learning deficits do not emerge because of the inability of the learners to learn but due to the fact that they do not receive the attention needed and the personal support required. Indeed the LEP demonstrates that if proper support is given all children could move up the ladder of schooling without any difficulty and learn the prescribed curriculum. In our short interactions we found that the children actively engage with the learning material and peer group interaction. We also found that the children were able to read and write and carry out arithmetical operations. As the children belong to different Grades (3 to 5) it is difficult to gauge whether the learning help provided in the LEP is adequate to become independent learners in their respective grades. The tracking of children beyond the LEP should help in ensuring that

they do not relapse into deficit state and are fully capable of learning all subjects. Another factor to be noted in organizing the programme of the LEP is that cognitive deficits could also emerge due to poor nutritional care and inadequate attention to socio-emotional needs of the children which adversely affect their attention to learning tasks.



It is worthwhile to have joint meeting of the school teachers, project teachers and parents in order to bring home to all concerned that such additional support may not always be available and the school programmes themselves have to be reshaped to ensure that children do not remain with such serious deficit in basic learning skills. The Project may also give more attention to teacher reorientation – not just on pedagogy but also for dealing with social aspects such as equality and non-discrimination and accepting that all children in the school are interested in and are capable of learning irrespective of ethnic origin.

Residential Bridge Centres and Child Labour Free Zones

In spite of the efforts to enroll all children in schools, a substantial number of children remain unenrolled or drop out in the early grades depriving them of their fundamental right to education guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. In general such children belong to poorer sections of the predominantly tribal population and are found to be invariably engaged in labour at home or outside. In order to provide access to schooling for such children, ASPIRE conducts periodic field survey to identify such children engaged in labour and not attending schools. These identified children are admitted to residential hostels, separate for boys and girls, which provide a secure place for the children to stay and learn basic learning skills through

specially designed bridge courses. In this effort, community members are actively involved as the local village panchayat maintains a tracking register after identifying all children upto 18 years of age. It was mentioned that child labour has been fully eliminated in the six blocks where ASPIRE is working which indeed is a very impressive achievement.



We visited two Girls hostels and a boys hostel. These were reasonably well equipped including a kitchen and were maintained well. Each hostel had adequate number of residential full time teachers who took care of the needs of the growing children besides equipping them with basic learning skills. As and when children learnt the basics and get adequately prepared, they are admitted to a Government school in the neighborhood. They are also imparted relevant life skills, creating awareness about health, hygiene and social issues including self protection. Children receive physical training and also attention is paid to their health needs through periodic health check up by qualified personnel. The routine and curricular programme adopted is holistic and teachers receive training to be inclusive, non-discriminatory and child-friendly.

In the tribal belt with relatively small and remotely located habitations, participation in schooling, particularly of girls, is often dependent on issues of safety and security in addition to the distance to the nearest school for daily commuting in the absence of proper infrastructure and transport facilities. Considering the poor health and nutritional status of the children, it is no surprise that many fail to attend school regularly. The Residential Centres established under the ASPIRE Project therefore fill a major gap in the system. Important contribution of these centres lies in the fact that even if all the children entering the RBC do not succeed in enrolling themselves in the formal school, they would return to their homes and enter the world of work with a sense of self esteem and independence besides possessing basic cognitive capabilities as they would have otherwise remained practically illiterate and unskilled.



During our discussion, we learnt that the demand for such Centres is enormous and the Project is not able to meet the total requirement. Yet, the positive feature is the willingness of the local administration to provide physical space and facilities which is an indication of the value attached to this initiative by the Administration. That there is unmet demand also shows that the community fully accepts this arrangement for providing basic education to their boys and girls. Significant contribution of this arrangement to making the villages fully child labour free has also to be recognized.

Community Education Resource Centres

We participated in the inauguration of two Community Education Resource Centres. The main focus of these Centres is to provide opportunity for learning outside the school for adolescent children. The Centres, to begin with, have been equipped with several computers and other

digital equipment with internet connectivity. This should help spread digital literacy among the youth in rural households. The physical infrastructure in each case has been provided by the local panchayat which ensures full support and cooperation from the neighborhood community. It is visualized that eventually this will become the rallying point for various educational activities for the people of all age groups in the neighborhood. ASPIRE also proposes to make use of the Resource Centres for giving academic and training support to teachers, SMCs, PRIs.



Opening of the Centres also gave us an opportunity to interact with local community, members of the local panchayat as well as members of the local school Management Committees. We found tremendous enthusiasm and support for the initiative. They also voiced issues with regard to existing arrangement for schooling particularly after primary (Grade 5) stage. Concern for safety of children was also expressed as they have to commute a distance of 3 km or more for reaching the nearest middle school. Health related issues and lack of local transport facilities were also raised. On the whole community members were very appreciative with the work being done for education development by the Project functionaries. Several of the educated women offered to give voluntary service for managing the Resource Centres. Local sarpanch and several members of the school board expressed their appreciation for the work being done for improving quality of school education.

Visit to Government school and Interaction with Teachers

One of the goals of the project is to work with Government schools and improve teaching there. Although there is no formal agreement, the project teachers work with government schools on the invitation of SMCs. Our visit to a school was very brief to observe and understand the work being done under the Project and its impact on school quality. However, our meeting with a group of government school teachers and other related officials was very illuminating. We found that the teachers were very appreciative of the work being done by the project teachers. One could also find that the Project has made systematic effort to help the government school teachers to adopt innovative and child friendly teaching learning practices in the classrooms.

Improving pedagogic practices in a school and transforming them into effective child friendly learning places requires long term engagement. Also there is no predetermined approach to achieve this goal. Effort also has to be school-specific and has to be a collaborative endeavour of the Project personnel and school teachers. While immediate concern is to improve the basic cognitive capabilities of the children, making school functioning effective demands intense efforts to meet socio-emotional needs of children by providing a variety of creative experiences like art, music, play acting, and storytelling besides outdoor physical activities. Considering the poor nutritional status of the children, attention also has to be paid to improving health and hygiene. It may also be worthwhile to prepare and disseminate simple documentation on progress profile of school in different contexts and conditions.

Towards the end of our visit we had a brief interactive session with Project functionaries. It helped us to further understand the difficult challenges faced in implementing various Project initiatives. We wish to thank ASPIRE and Tata Steel for giving us this exciting experience of witnessing and learning from the collaborative work of improving learning opportunities for the marginalized tribal groups in Odisha. We also record our appreciation of the hard work, dedication and enthusiasm of the entire Project team in addressing various challenges. We are thankful to all of them for the assistance and hospitality extended to us.