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Child Centred Learning in Praxis: Issues and Challenges in Context of Rural Schools of Rishi Valley

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Child-centred learning in Praxis: Issues and challenges in context of rural schools of Rishi Valley

Rohini Ram Mohan

Preface

Walking for about 45 minutes from the Rishi Valley School campus, early on a June morning, I reached one of the satellite schools called Aswavanam located under a huge banyan tree on top of a hill. One of the 12 schools run by the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources and the Rural Education Centre, (an outreach programme of the Rishi Valley Education Centre) in a village called Guralvaripalli , this satellite school has just about 12 students .The light summer breeze ventilated the small room with two huge windows overlooking the compound outside. Children from grade 1 to 4 were seated on mats in groups of four. I entered the room to see two grade 1 students attempting to make the letter 'ka' in Telugu with the tamarind seeds on the table while on the other table, another child was using thin broom sticks to add two single digit numbers. It was then time for breakfast; children took their plates and went to the play space outside to eat while I spoke to their teacher.

A majority of the population in this village is illiterate, mostly agricultural labourers or those engaged in cattle rearing .The village is very remote and it is difficult for the villagers to send the children to any other school down the valley. The teacher informs that it was a small class and was easier for him to 'handle' compared to the other satellite schools where he had previously taught. He also adds that apart from his usual duties he often goes to check on students absent from class for a long time, talks to parents, even drops off children to their homes occasionally. Sometimes, parents leave their young ones with the elder ones in the school while going off to work in the fields.

As the children come back after breakfast they settle in to start the day's lesson, The teacher gets back to instructing Telugu 'matras' to two grade 2 students.

What started as an experiment in primary education almost 25 years back has become a significant alternative to traditional methodologies of teaching and learning. This 'School in a Box' model developed by the Rishi Valley Institute of Educational Resources (RIVER) has travelled wide and far from the hamlets around Rishi Valley School (RVS). Based on the idea of a kind of learning free of fear, of subjects broken down into interactive cards and activities, of learning material sourced from local culture; the model has immense potential in making education truly inclusive. Moreover, the Multi Grade Multi Level methodology (MGML) of bringing students of four grades together in the same classroom and yet devising a teaching plan that provides for individualized self learning in the integrated classroom, is ground breaking in many ways. What is even more important is the manner in which the methodology integrates renowned philosopher J.Krishnamurti's ideas on 'right' education with the pedagogy, which among other things entails a democratic, child centred learning paradigm.

With over two decades behind the project, today it has to face several new challenges in the light of its recent government recognition which has had an impact right down to the level of the content of classroom processes. Moreover, with the project becoming a model for several other experiments in other parts of the country, it is pertinent to perform a critical evaluation of the practices on ground. This entails the identification of the constraining factors within the methodology itself and looking at the ways in which the methodology can adapt itself to changing scenarios.

This study has been made possible with the Shivlal Sawhney Scholarship awarded to me by the University of Delhi[1]. The findings in this study are a result of a five week long fieldwork conducted at the Rishi Valley Education Centre (RVEC) situated in the campus of the

Acronyms	
KFI	Krishnamurti Foundation of India
MGML	Multi Grade Multi Level
RVEC	Rishi Valley Education Centre
RIVER	Rishi Valley Institute of Educational Resources
REC	Rural Education Centre
RVS	Rishi Valley School
TLM	Teaching Learning Material
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

[1]The Shivlal Sawhney Scholarship is given to the students of the Department of Sociology to undertake short term internships in the schools run by the Krishnamurti Foundation of India.

RVS, and the Rural Education Centres (REC) in the Chittor District in Andhra Pradesh. The larger goal of the fieldwork was to document the school's involvement with the community within the valley and outside. The idea was to understand how J. Krishnamurti's philosophy and values inform and even structure the school's involvement with the community.

The three research questions undertaken as a part of the larger study, focused on the school's experiments and innovations in rural education, and their endeavour to enhance the livelihood of the villagers in the valley. The first among the three research questions was to map out how Krishnamurti's ideas on 'right' education translated into everyday practice in the rural schools run by the RVEC. The second research question explored the role of the school in facilitating sustainable development in the valley[2].

My primary concern, however, was to understand the pedagogical practices developed by the RIVER and the REC in the rural schools they have set up in and around the valley. These schools were visited at a particular time of the day and classroom observations were made to evaluate the form and efficacy of child centred learning, which is the essence of the MGML methodology. The 'field' for this study extended beyond the schools selected for observation. Besides interacting with teachers and students, various functionaries within the RIVER programme including curriculum developers, teacher trainers, the Headmistress, and the Directors were interviewed. Some of the parameters used for the evaluation were, broadly a) the teacher's understanding of the logic of the methodology b) child's stake in the learning process expressed through his/her involvement in the class and with the teacher c) the overall environment of the classroom in terms of the nature of tasks given to the student, use of classroom space and Teaching Learning Material (TLM). Observations were supplemented with interviews for a comprehensive understanding of the teacher's psyche.

The impact of MGML methodology has been far reaching, so much so that the UNICEF has introduced certain aspects of the methodology like card or activity

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[2]The third question entailed an examination of the influence of alternate schooling and the role of the school's values in the subject choice decisions made by senior students in the residential school. This is the subject of another paper that I' am in the course of writing.

based learning material (instead of book based learning) into the curriculum in government schools. The team at the REC and the RIVER programme has also been involved in setting up model schools in other states throughout India like Uttarakhand and has undertaken and provided consultation for projects in Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand etc. The RIVER has several partnerships with organizations such as Sri Ratan Tata Trust, Chennai Corporation Schools, Government of India, UNICEF, District Primary Education Programme to name a few.

The RVEC was founded by philosopher and educationist J. Krishnamurti, and the 240 acre campus is home to RVS, a residential school with over 360 students from all over the country and abroad, the REC, the RIVER, a rural health programme, the Rishi Valley Dairy, and Estate. This centre along with the education centres in Rajghat, Bangalore and Chennai, are under the Krishnamurti Foundation of India (KFI). Other schools of the KFI include Rajghat Besant School, Rajghat Fort, Varanasi; Sahyadri School, Pune; The Valley School, Bangalore; The School KFI - Damodar Gardens Chennai; Bal- Anand, Mumbai, among others. Together, these centres aim to enable learning that provides freedom from all forms of conditioning and education that 'awakens' the intelligence of the pupils.

Introduction

Child centered learning has been considered an integral part of the reforms in the field of education in India particularly with respect to the stipulations of quality education under the 'Education for all' scheme. It is radical in its stance as it situates the child as the author of pedagogical practice and the authority of interaction (Sriprakash 2012). Sriprakash points out that this form of learning has taken several meanings in democratic learning environments, such as loosened authority relations over the child and flexible curriculum (Sriprakash 2012).Through several institutions like Rishi Valley these practices have been finding their way into rural schools often staffed by barefoot teachers, selected from the community for several years now. Not only do they figure as an important approach to quality education, they also integrate the local needs into the learning process and take into account the lack of abundant resources that are encountered in the context of rural education.

The objective of this paper is to provide a glimpse of the classroom practices and the ground realities of a child centered learning paradigm that dictates the pedagogy of schools run by the REC. The MGML system is a form of child centered learning model which emphasises individual learning in a scenario where students from all five grades (grade 5 students use textbooks while others use cards) are combined in one class. In principle the methodology puts the onus of learning on the child by making him an active agent in choosing his/her own technique of learning and understanding. A different set of expectations and learning outcomes guide the classroom processes with an emphasis on different cognitive functions like those of 'thinking independently', 'problem solving' and so on (Sriprakash 2012: 65). This paradigm is charecterised by the emphasis on quality learning in opposition to traditional barometers of performance. The system is premised on the fact that each individual has a different pace of learning and individualized attention must be given to address the child's specific needs.

Furthermore, the MGML –'School in a Box' methodology fits well in the context of universalisation of elementary education and the policy mandate of the recently enacted Right to Education Act. Being a 'satellite' school of the RVEC, the design of the curriculum draws on the philosophical ideas of the J. Krishnamurti into a rural context relevant model of child centered learning. He articulates his vision of

ideal schooling in his work *On education* (2001) which is a collection of his talks with teachers and students. This paper explores the various ways in which teachers interpret the mandate, strategise and plan the class. We mainly assess aspects like teacher- student interaction, use of TLM, teacher training, learning contexts and skill development among children.

The study has also been conducted at a particular historical juncture where the school's newly acquired government recognition has placed fresh requirements in terms of the recruitment of formally trained B. Ed teachers. These teachers, who have minimal exposure to the philosophy and rationale of the MGML methodology, share their space with older teachers who have developed a different style of teaching over the years.

The size of each school varies according to the demographics of the village in which it is located; most of the schools have a strength ranging between 30 – 40 students. The ratio of girls to boys is nearly 6:7 (18 girls to 21 boys), and also varies every year. The idea of free schooling is the most important feature that encourages parents to send their children to school. '*Vanam'* which means garden/ grove, is suffixed to the name of each school. The idea of naming them a '*vanam'* is to point to the school as a space close to nature, which is also reflected in its environment friendly structure.

Table No. 1 shows the locations of the various schools in and around villages in the Kurbalakota Mandal.

S. No.	Name of Village	Name of School
1.	Eguvaboyapalli,	Valmikivanam
2.	Thettu	Chandanavanam
3.	Gurralavaripalli	Aswavanam
4.	Poojarivaripalli,	Ashokavanam
5.	Chintaiahgarikota	Sundaravanam
6.	Thummachetlapalli	Arimedhavanam
7.	Kanasanavaripalli	Harithavanam
8.	Gollapalli	Brindavanam
9.	Nayanavaripalli	Mithravanam
10.	Jallavaripalli,	Vijayavanam
11.	Pagadalavaripalli	Girivanam
12	REC	Vidyavanam

Research Design and Methodology

The study required a significant amount of travelling as most of the schools were very remote. Unbiased work required travelling independently sometimes by bus and local share autos; in fact one of the schools was only accessible through foot. In order to gauge the involvement of the students in the lessons, the local language and script was learnt. Moreover, some of training sessions for teachers from West Bengal were attended to understand the nuances of the methodology and teacher training.

Methodology

- Within the classroom, specific aspects of the patterns of interaction amongst students and nature of the teacher-student interface were recorded.
- In each class, both teacher to student and student to teacher interactions were observed intensively for a span of 15 minutes during each visit.
- At a micro level, in each class, a couple of students were randomly selected from each table and observed closely to develop a sense of their involvement with the task and the possible factors that influenced their behavior in the classroom. Attention was also paid to the teacher's use of time, space and TLM.
- Learning contexts/participating situations were also recorded intensively. These learning contexts involved looking at the various situations in which the children and teachers participated in a lesson, whether through individual seat work, small groups initiated by the teacher or the class participating as a whole.
- To make sense of how teachers understood the essence of the MGML philosophy and pedagogy, short interviews or conversations were conducted with all of them during classroom breaks. However, 4 out of all 8 (experienced) teachers were interviewed in detail on the aspects they found most challenging in classroom practice. They were also asked to speak about the key take away points of their own training and their experiences in dealing with certain subjects.

The schools chosen for the study were selected to get a larger sense of all kinds of teaching practices. Each of these schools was visited at least twice over a span of four weeks (mostly between 9:30 to 11:00) to observe the consistency of teaching practices. The following schools were a part of the study.

1. Ashokavanam
2. Valmikivanam
3. Vidyavanam
4. Arimedhavanam
5. Chandanavanam
6. Mitravanam

Apart from these, two other schools, Haritavanam and Aswavanam were visited once.

School, Community and the 'School in a Box'

The REC and the RIVER programme were indeed born out of the RVS's interest in giving back to the community and sharing responsibility towards the future of the children of the school workers living in neighbouring villages. The concept was consistent with the ethic of stewardship that has and continues to guide the approach towards the land, resources and people in the valley.

MGML methodology has its basis in the idea of activity based learning that can be traced back to renowned educationist David Horsburgh who experimented with this model of learning, by setting up the 'Neel Bagh' school in Kolar, Karnataka[3]. Horsburgh's ideas influenced T.M Narsimhan, a graduate from IIT and his wife Usha who were instrumental in setting up the Sumavanam school in Chittoor district. Narsimhan also became the first head of the REC. They introduced vocational skills into the day to day learning among other major contributions.

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[3]Source : Article titled : ABL history and Evolution, in *Education World*, 8th August 2011 available online at http://www.educationworldonline.net/index.php/page-article-choice-more-id-2836

While initial experiments failed to contribute substantially to the goal at hand, it was only in the late 1980's with the setting of the satellite school in 1986 in Eguvaboyapalli (village of the *boya* community) that something concrete materialised. With the coming of Rama and Padhmanabha Rao, the current co-directors who took charge of REC in 1987, the programme came to be extended and the activity based learning project was launched with an accelerated pace[4]. After surveying the prevailing system of learning in the government run schools in various *mandals*, they worked out a new method, called 'School in a Box'. Born out of a need to address the problems of teacher absenteeism and high drop-out rates among the students in rural areas, this innovation brings together all the tools to aid teaching and learning in a large kit/box consisting of cards, ladder charts, and TLM (Teaching Learning Material). As the financial support from several government organizations and charitable trusts grew, the number of schools began to increase through the 1990s and so did the methodology spread to other states.

Conventional learning took place predominately through textbooks and the affective needs of the child were often not considered as a part of the pedagogical plan. What the 'School in a Box' purports to do is to compose the textbook material into picture and non picture cards, each card prescribing an activity at a corresponding level of the ladder. These activity cards intended to bring in local traditions, local terms, words, objects into the curriculum thus, making the study material useful and relevant for the child. Each subject (Mathematics, English, Telugu, EVS) has a learning ladder, and each child's progress within the levels of the

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[4]In my discussions with Rama and Padmanabha Rao, they revealed that they are from Warangal. Both of them have a master's degree in English and share a deep interest in literature and folk culture. They initiated and led a survey of textbooks, and classroom practices and after several trials developed the ladder of learning. The RVEC won the Jindal Prize for 2011 for the MGML methodology developed at RIVER (Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources). RIVER also won the Global Development Network (GDN) Award 2004 in 2005 for its work in rural schools and the Multi-Grade Multi-Level methodology. In 2009, Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship presented The Social Entrepreneurs of the Year Award, to the Co-Directors of RIVER.

ladder is monitored individually. The student needs to complete the activities corresponding to a given set of levels in the ladder. The additional activity material is supposed to be used to supplement the activities prescribed in the ladder. The teacher however can innovate and divide time amongst these activities in any form. **The success of the methodology depends on how intuitively the teacher understands the child's needs and responds by assigning him/her the right kind of activity.**

There are several contexts in which the child is involved in learning. The method facilitates individualized learning through self learning and teacher supported learning with some amount of learning in group context in the form of peer based learning, and partially teacher supported learning[5]. Children are allocated seating in these four contexts. Apart from this, outdoor activities are also undertaken as a part of the ladder activities. Learning therefore becomes decentralized, as the teacher does not occupy the central space (literally) and constantly moves between groups.

Teachers must devote some time to each student but not necessarily equal attention to all. The methodology is also designed to reduce the burden on the teacher by ensuring that certain activities are done in peer supported groups, or by the child himself, so that the teacher's attention is towards other students performing activities that require teacher support. For instance, the introduction of new words using rubber letters and some practice activities including word games (the methodology follows the logic of learning words first and the individual letters through these words) require the teacher's assistance. One of the other important results of the implementation of this methodology is that the child is motivated to use the learning material in an engaging way and is completely involved in the tasks he performs. We shall see in the coming sections that this is a hard state to achieve especially with the use of workbooks, the coming of non trained teachers and the over emphasis on the ladder activities.

The methodology purports to turn the classroom into a space where students feel at ease. The satellite schools are one roomed, often constructed in a space made available by the people of the community. The school is constructed with the help of

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[5]As per the 'Description of the MGML methodology, Annexe 2' of the background documents given as a part of the training kit

the community which also supports it on a day to day basis, by providing certain food items like chutney and *sambhar* for the breakfast served to the children every morning or firewood to the school kitchen. Some involved parents participate in the school rituals by telling stories in the assembly. The *Metric Mela*, a fair organized by the REC to facilitate the learning of Mathematics in a joyous way, sees the participation of parents, supplying the children with the material, helping them set up, and run their small stalls, etc. Apart from the *Metric Mela* there are other events like, the 'Mother's story' day wherein students are allowed to bring their mothers, grandmothers, aunts or other village members to narrate stories while their wards write them down. These stories are then read out during the classes, assemblies etc. The school includes a classroom, a tiny store room, a kitchen outside and in some schools a small room, called *sishuvanam* for small children (between 1-2 years) who may come along with their older siblings.

The class environment is in itself very interesting and lively. Students are encouraged to make the classroom space their own by displaying their art work, often seen hanging from the roof; blackboards cover the periphery of the walls inside with each student's name over a small area on the board. What adds colour and vibrancy to the room is the corner space where all the TLM is arranged according to the ladder activity. Four low wooden tables are placed at each corner of the room. Children are seated around the same in mats grouped on the basis of the instruction they require (Peer supported learning/ teacher supported learning and so on). While the mode of instruction is Telugu, elementary English is also taught to students. The cards included in the curriculum are modeled on the lines of the syllabus designed by the state government.

Figure 1. The students sit in four groups according to the type of instruction they require for the particular ladder activity assigned for the day.

Figure 2. Students access the TLM placed at the end of the class. Classroom space is personalised with art and craft work by students

Philosophical leanings

Having outlined the methodology, we can now attempt to draw its basis in the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti and specially his ideas on 'right' education. In his numerous talks to students and teachers he has often given his seemingly simple ideals on what he calls 'right' education. However these ideals are quite challenging to implement and require diligence and planning on behalf of the teacher. The essence of his idea of learning and education is contained in his concept of 'awakening intelligence', a mode of learning that relies on a certain partnership between the teacher and the student , which entails not the transfer of knowledge by the teacher but the stimulation of a spirit of discovery that enlivens the student's mind (Krishnamurti 2001 :83). This spirit of discovery then becomes an end in itself and not a means to an end. He encapsulates this challenge with an apt example:

> "You see, if the student loves geometry, loves it as an end in itself, he is so completely absorbed in it that he has no ambition. He really loves geometry and that is an enormous delight. Therefore he flowers in it. How will you help the student to love, in this way, a thing which the student has not yet discovered for himself ?" (Krishnamurti, 2001: 65).

The motivation to learn is a product of the student's desire to discover and the teacher's ability to enable an environment for such learning. The joy of learning is the basis of motivation. For Krishnamurti, the mind must not be static but a reflexive mind in a constant state of learning and not acquiring knowledge. While he encourages and gives autonomy to the teachers to experiment and find their methods of making this state of learning possible, he delineates certain guidelines that are very crucial for our understanding of MGML methodology. Most importantly, he envisages the creation of a learner friendly environment by fostering a competition free atmosphere, an environment free of any system of punishment and rewards. He also expounds that there must be a fine balance between freedom and discipline, so that on the one hand the student does not fall into the trap of conformity, while on the other hand, has a sense of order in his everyday life. However, in praxis, the methodology requires teachers to be completely convinced about the ideology which becomes crucial for its implementation.

These ideas are implicit in the functioning of the MGML and the 'School in

a Box' technique which in all its intentions wishes to put these principles into action. Be it the creation of a learner friendly environment by minimizing any markers of competitive assessment and striking the right balance between instructing, monitoring and freedom, or giving the teachers the autonomy to decide their pedagogical plan, the philosophy guides the structure and the approach of the methodology. The idea is to get the student interested in going beyond merely reading and writing to *'loving the subject'*. Most importantly, the **aim of any such learning through this method is to make the child self motivated to perform. The success of the methodology is evident in the child's initiative in the process of learning.**

Ground realities

It must, however, be said that in practice irrespective of the teacher's experience, the potential of the MGML methodology has not been realized to its full extent and the classroom pedagogy has very little relation to Krishnamurti's ideas on education and learning. While the methodology in itself was founded on the idea of empowering the learner and shifting focus from the teaching to learning, the content of classroom processes were observed to be contradictory in some senses. Furthermore, the intent of the methodology was to empower teachers and give them autonomy to experiment; the classroom observations suggested on the other hand that very few teachers have the time and motivation to innovate. Their primary perceptions of their classroom responsibilities are to 'manage' the class and 'supervise the children'. Moreover, very few students in particular schools were seen to have high motivational levels. Most of the children wait for the teacher's instruction and do not feel the need to go beyond the instructions they are given. This is an important challenge in a classroom where there are no explicit incentives for 'good' student behaviour. The teacher's behaviour is informed by very limited goals of training students to read and write and do sums and even that is determined by their ability to transfer their understanding to the children in certain ways.

Teacher –student interface

Classroom situation 1:

> 9:30A.M. The senior teacher was sitting with two 5th grade students arranging cards and other materials to be distributed. The assistant teacher

was mostly moving from one table to another trying to monitor the activities of the student. While the teacher spent the first 12 minutes on the first table, some of the students on the next table sat idle, mostly talking or playing with the materials. New students were writing basic alphabets on their slates. Some of the students in the higher grades like 3rd and 4th, seated in the peer supported group were sitting with a poem card but were seen mostly talking amongst themselves. The assistant teacher came to check on this bunch of students.

Meanwhile two boys (of the second grade) were quarrelling amongst themselves over some other cards at the TLM corner. The assistant teacher first warned the two students but when they did not listen, finally got up after 10 minutes and changed their seating and instructed them to practice writing, in the process randomly assigning them a table, irrespective of the specific type of instruction they required. The assistant teacher's focus remained with students of grade 1 and grade 2. The senior teacher kept aside the work about 20 minutes into the observation and got down to correcting the workbooks of three 5th grade students who had been waiting at the teacher's corner for over 7 minutes. Meanwhile, most of the work the students were involved in, was confined to writing/copying the assignment or copying the words on the cards onto their worksheet (worksheet was used predominantly, apart from slates). Some other students of the 3rd grade were seen reading the poem aloud with the teacher seated at the table. Blackboard was not used but the senior teacher's use of space was confined to the teacher's corner .10.00 A.M.

The rationale for selecting this particular classroom description was that similar situations were observed in three other schools. The description outlines some of the major thematic concerns with the pedagogy and teaching practice. Some of the aspects have been examined in detail below:

- Most of the teacher centric activities were dominated by workbook corrections or instructing the students to read, or to do a set of sums in case of a Math class. The pedagogy was not just teacher intensive; it also created an environment of teacher dependency. This was particularly evident in the manner in which each student was dependent

on the teacher's evaluation to assess his/ her own performance and had an incentive to perform only when the teacher was around.

- More importantly, roughly 80 per cent (4 out of 5 times observed for a span of 15 minutes on an average for 4 schools) of the interactions were initiated by the teacher to the student. The student to teacher interactions were majorly confined to showing the workbook or clarifying certain doubts they had in the lessons.
- The tendency to ask doubts was prevalent mostly in the Math class and at a sum to sum level with almost no questions to have clarity in the concepts. A clear majority of student to teacher interactions were initiated by girls irrespective of the gender of the teacher.
- In 4 out of the 6 schools, there were a select few students who were seen demanding more attention from the teacher.
- Most of the group learning contexts were teacher directed and little initiative was observed on part of the students to do activities in a group by themselves.
- The student to teacher interactions did not involve any kind of active questioning and probing into what was being taught. They passively received the knowledge with little sense of why and what to use it for.

Let's take the case of one of the Math class on Roman numbers

On a particular visit, the headmistress asked a group of students what they were reading. When they replied saying Roman numbers, the headmistress asked if they knew what and why they were used. None of the students were able to reply the same as they were not aware of what 'Roman' actually meant. This event is particularly interesting because, it showed that they had no understanding of why they were studying the same and that asking the teacher had never occurred to them.

Another important factor that influenced the teacher- student interactions was the teacher's own attitude of categorizing students. Tags like 'fast learner', 'slow learner' 'average' served more as ways of categorizing students rather than indications of the levels of help they required. This trend was very clear in 2 schools out of 6

i) In one of the schools, the teacher's inattention to a slow learner with speech disabilities was very apparent. When I casually asked the teacher to tell me why this particular boy (2nd grade) did not have a workbook like his peers, she explained that it was because he couldn't speak, and he could not write much. The teacher did not pay attention to what he was doing/ where he went, for the whole class period in spite of his special needs.

ii) During two teacher interviews when I asked them, in confidence, how many students were 'slow learners' the teacher directly and loudly pointed out those students. In one particular class, the teacher even asked them to remain silent and one by one made each of the 'fast learners' and 'slow learners' of a grade stand up, announcing to whole class the learning status of the child.

In a sense in most of the schools, the content of teaching was dominated by top-down instruction. Feedback from students came back to the teacher only in terms of the performance on worksheet/ slate. All tables irrespective of the level of support required, demanded equal time and quality of attention contrary to the logic and design of the methodology. However, time or effort spent on explaining a concept or bringing any other form of innovation to the class was limited and was totally dependent of teacher's ability and enthusiasm. The teachers themselves were also concerned more with completing the task on hand such as supervising the class or telling them what to do rather than encouraging other activities.

A considerable part of the teacher's time was spent on managing functions like accessing the materials / arranging workbooks and they often enlisted the support of the older kids in this work. The emphasis on the role of the teacher as a manager was evident in some of the teacher's own accounts as well. One of the experienced teachers explains:

> "My primary work in the classroom is to move about from one part to another checking what each one is up to. I function like a post man; but I try to give balanced attention to all classes and spend 15 minutes on each table" – Teacher 1

Another teacher explained that he had to constantly try and keep the

children occupied with some work, so that they won't disturb the other students. Here is an example of another teacher admitting something similar.

> "Often after reading, say, a poem, the students are idle. That is when they are very restless. They can go and take other storybooks themselves and read it. But they will never do it on their own. We might have to go and tell them." - Teacher 3

Another teacher also pointed out that he had to be extra alert, mostly because some students would skip certain activities to reach some milestones.

> "Some children who find certain activities difficult, have found ways of skipping those activities. They will do a simpler activity, mostly the exercise after the difficult one on the ladder, and get it signed by the other teacher in class. So we have to constantly check what each student does."- Teacher 2

Teacher 3 had a similar experience and said that some children had done the same in his class. On one level, this anecdote captured another very significant feature of the classroom behaviour i.e. **the student's overriding concern to move up the ladder, and a weaker desire to actually face challenges and overcome each of these challenges by figuring out techniques, probing or questioning**.

The excessive emphasis on the mechanical aspects of the ladder activities and workbook exercises had clear implications on the teacher's own perception of his/her tasks. While the MGML philosophy envisages that the teacher functions as a facilitator, the teacher's multiple functions, specially correcting workbooks/ notebooks gave him little time to innovate or sometimes carry out certain activities with vigour.

Teacher's agency and different approaches to the MGML methodology

One of the important variables that moulded the various classroom situations was the teacher's personality type, his/ her approach to the subjects and the students and his/ her motivation and desire to innovate.

By and large, teachers were amiable with students, often indulgent in some cases. The methodology is known to enable a child friendly atmosphere. However,

a child friendly atmosphere may not just be a consequence of the methodology but something that has more to do with the teacher's way of teaching and conducting the class. Some teachers had to try hard to reach the level of comfort with students while taking lessons, and often a mistake or constant questioning on part of the student could be a cause of irritation for them. Two of the eight teachers in the schools visited displayed these traits. This could instill some form of resistance on part of the student to approach the teacher later. The other personality type is that of the teacher-administrator who sees his/her task in the class mostly in terms of executing his day to day plan, arranging the material or maintaining discipline and thus lays most of his/her emphasis on that. This could definitely mean less innovation on the part of the teacher. The senior teacher in classroom situation 1 could fit into this type.

The other teacher personality type was that of the innovator- independent, who attempts to evaluate the needs of the students and then assigns the task to them. He/ she is not restrained by the ladder activities. In this section we shall explore the impact that a teacher of this personality type has on the classroom and how a teacher thinking independently can transform the way the same lesson is taken.

While classroom situation 1 captured a larger trend, there were some exceptions that brought to light the methods used by these innovator-independent teacher personality types. Here is an example of a school where the classroom dynamics was considerably different from other classes.

Classroom situation 2

> 10 A.M .The teacher (Teacher 3) was busy explaining prime numbers on the blackboard to the 5th grade students. They sat in a semi circle in the front of the class. After every two lines the teacher wrote on the board; he asked the students if the concept was clear. While he was explaining, the other students were mostly reading cards, reciting poems, taking dictation, or practicing spellings. One of the first things that one noticed around the class was that none of the students were using workbooks at that point of time. Irrespective of the teacher's supervision, majority of the students were seen reading or doing their own work although a couple of students were looking at others around them. The assistant teacher was sitting with one of the slow learners and conducting a dictation. Some others were listening to their

peers recite poems and correcting them wherever they missed a word. 10:20 A.M

What made this class different from the other classes was that students were not completely dependent on the teacher for instructions and did not require constant supervision. When asked what his pedagogy and teaching style was, the teacher gave an interesting response.

> "60% of my teaching focuses on the ladder and the workbook, while 40% of my teaching is based on other learning materials and methods. If children are given workbooks in the beginning itself, they get bored. First you need to understand what they like to do, then slowly introduce the other tasks they need to do. If the Telugu class is for one and half an hour, I prefer spending 40 minutes with the teacher supported group, 20 minutes each with the peer supported and partially supported group and 10 minutes for the individual learners. Time does go in correcting books but I try and use other teaching methods as much as possible." – Teacher 3

The desire to experiment and confidence in one's own teaching style were aspects of the teacher's attitude that rendered a different quality to classroom dynamics. The teacher's own initiative and his ability to approach a topic differently stemmed from his understanding of the child's psychology. The teacher's awareness of each child's level of concentration and the reasons for distractions were pivotal in building the classroom strategy. It also indicated the problem at the level of designing workbooks and the nature of questions there in. The lack of challenging or thought provoking questions could also affect the child's attitude towards the exercise and the subject as well.

The teacher's main contact with the philosophy of the methodology was through the teacher training, he/she must have undergone. When asked two of the teachers one with less teaching experience (quote 2 below) and one with greater teaching experience (quote 1) about what were the main take- away points from their training they replied as follows :

- "The main focus during training was to learn how to behave with the children. I think we were told not to use sticks or hit children."

- "What I thought was most important in the training was the management of class, how to keep our class environments clean, how to keep all the reading cards intact."

Here, it is necessary to include the first hand observation of the teacher training that took place in the REC campus, for the visiting teachers from West Bengal. The training lasted for about two weeks, and significant modules of the training programme were attended to observe the content of processes through which these teachers were introduced to the methodology. The module's emphasis on the logistical and organizational aspects of classroom dynamics came through prominently here as well.

Let us take the case of the training resource pack that was distributed to the teachers who were a part of the training. A kit containing background documents and a model School observation Format and a *Metric Mela* observation Format was provided. The observation table had a list of 38 questions for the language class, and about 18 for Mathematics and 20 for EVS.

Questions 1- 14 in the language section contained questions concerning the physical environment of the class including: what crafts related to language are displayed? How many boxes are there to store language cards? How many stories prepared by parents are on display? Even general questions like: how was the environment? How was the classroom? How many students in a group?, and so on, were included. Questions 15 onwards were mostly concerned with the physical aspects of the classroom; are children neat and tidy? A few questions were also on the location of the teacher, but towards the end, the questionnaire goes back to the questions on the number of boxes for storage, what are the logos used in the language TLM, etc.

The purpose of pointing out this document is crucial because it tells what aspects a teacher is trained to observe and work upon in a classroom. In other words it does reveal the areas emphasized in the training module, in this case, the modalities of classroom arrangement. Although this example applies to the training material given to teachers from other programmes and states, it is nevertheless a significant reflection of the attitude towards training. Moreover, even during the training sessions, a significant amount of time was spent on training the teachers on

how to use cards, match the card activity with the ladder, designing card activities in Bengali etc. This is not to say that these are not important issues, but they should not remain the predominant focus of the training itself.

All this indicates that what the teachers took away from the training was not necessarily the philosophy/ spirit itself, but the process linked to the implementation of the philosophy. Moreover, within that, management functions were fore grounded, rather than focusing on the real essence of the processes involved.

Teacher's comfort level with the subject matter

The child's engagement with certain subjects was also dependent on the teacher's comfort level with the subject matter and his/ her skills in helping the child understand the concept.

> "Some concepts are very difficult to explain. Let's take the example of the even and odd numbers. When I gave them the task of writing even numbers after briefly explaining how to do it, they wrote down all the numbers in natural sequence, like 1,2,3,4,5 instead of writing 2,4,6,8. I told them twice but I don't think it registered. Perhaps I have to repeat it once more tomorrow."- Teacher 2

Three out of the four teachers interviewed in detail claimed that teaching ascending and descending order and division in Mathematics was very difficult. It was also seen that most of the TLM was used in 1st and 2nd grade, where the students were involved in basic counting or addition and subtraction. However, by the 4th grade neither students nor teachers were seen using any particular method to crack these particular concepts.

Classroom Situation 3

> The teacher (Teacher 5) was winding down her interactions with the students on one table, giving two 4th graders instructions to do an exercise on factorials. She moved on to the next table to supervise other students. Meanwhile, one of the students came back again to seek her help. She wrote the sum on the slate. It involved dividing 36 with 2 with the divisor dividend method. She explained it on the slate once, and asked the boy to then divide the same number with 3. He then went and sat with the other

student to do the sum, a few minutes later he came and submitted an incorrect answer (36 divided by 3 = 15). The teacher became a little impatient and explained how to do it again. The next time the student brought the slate with the correct answer, though this time without clarity on how he arrived at the answer. She found that he had not accurately changed the remainder after the first step of division, but had managed to somehow place a zero at the end of the division and the right dividend as well. However she remarked on that and asked him to go and continue the task on the workbook. (Teacher 5 is a B Ed. trained teacher)

The teacher did not try to understand the real obstacle the student faced and her concern was more with accuracy of the answer. As a teacher she faced a problem in transferring her understanding to the child in a more meaningful way. The teacher had expressed on a previous interaction that she was not very comfortable with teaching Math. Teaching Math in particular was seen as more difficult than teaching other subjects. This was so because there were very few TLM to teach division of 4 digit numbers and a few teachers claimed to resort to complicated methods to explain the same.

Learning contexts and developing new skills

The patterns of interaction and the various participation contexts in class varied considerably from school to school, depending mostly on the number of students, the teacher's enthusiasm and the way he/ she managed time. Group activities were mostly performed in EVS classes. However, the study was restricted to the Telugu and Mathematics classes only and the observations pertain to the same.

While the MGML methodology emphasized the importance of individual learning, it also relies heavily on the teacher's ability to engender other learning contexts which involved the whole class or some smaller groups to participate.

It could be said that on an average the number of participating contexts within the classroom were very limited to individual seatwork in the classes for Maths and Telugu.

- The learning contexts primarily revolved around individual seatwork, mostly involving filling out workbooks using TLM like abacus or

reading cards.

- The second context is that of the group. A group of students from the same grade participated in the lesson when the teacher recited it out loudly. This was occasional in the classes observed, and even where it happened, it was the teacher who was the central figure mostly reading out or explaining something. **Children only responded when asked to.**

- The third learning / participation context was peer supported learning. There were mostly two types of activities in this context; one was where the older child was involved in taking dictations of the younger one. Sometimes, the older child also helped the younger ones pronounce certain words correctly. Older siblings were preferred in case they belonged to the same class.

- Outdoor activities which are in spirit an essential component of the methodology, were taken up in a different manner everywhere. Three teachers preferred taking it during lunch break or between Telugu and Math classes. One of the teachers also set aside some time on Thursday afternoon for all the group activities. One teacher claimed that he took the students out individually for 10 minutes to finish the outdoor exercise.

Analysis and Impressions

- The learning contexts were mostly based on the idea that each individual should engage with the topics. However, the **skills obtained in the process are limited to reading and writing** (the very limited goals of literacy and not of holistic education)

- A vast range of other skills **including verbal communication, decision making etc which are very crucial in a rural context, have not been integrated with the day to day activities**

- Even innovative learning contexts like that of the *Metric Mela* were not conducted very often, and mostly coincided with other teacher training programmes.

Conclusions and some suggestions

To make children better stakeholders in their own learning and to derive the full potential of the MGML methodology, there needs to be clarity in communicating the logic of the pedagogy on part of the teacher trainees especially to the new recruits. The teachers must perceive students as equal if not greater stakeholders in the process of learning. The joy of learning becomes a reality when students are enthusiastic and this enthusiasm is linked to their self confidence and the ability to overcome challenges. Thus, tasks and assignments must be made more interesting and challenging so that students are more involved in their work. Let us say for instance, a sum in the practice workbook would require multiplying 10 with 60, this could instead be framed in the form of a word problem that takes on characters from the local tea shop/ TV figure/ neighbourhood situations. It also requires the teacher to be confident in the child's own ability. Often teachers dismiss a task as difficult without reflecting much on possibility that the child might like the opportunity to explore. Moreover, when the methodology is purported to use local idioms widely in the curriculum it must be used at both introductory and practice level activities. The teachers must be given a greater share in designing the workbooks/ worksheets and the reading cards and their feedback must be given utmost importance. Subject refresher courses can also boost the confidence of a teacher. Teacher training must be extended to also include training in teaching certain specific topics like division and multiplication of large numbers in Mathematics.

The idea of child centred education also requires the systematic sensitization of teachers towards the various learning or cognitive disabilities. This must be made a part of the training programme itself. Although, as of now, the teachers deal with these ‘slow learners’ by giving them more time after class or during classroom breaks, this strategy of giving time alone is not enough. Teachers must identify their problem area and formulate different strategies to address them individually instead of merely repeating the same instructions over time. The attitude towards slow learners must be monitored regularly through frequent classroom visits and steps must be taken if teachers continue to brand students as slow learners.

The ladder activities which form the core content of the methodology are

fairly limited. In this scenario the chances of a student picking up new skills are also limited. Although, singing, mimicry and puppet show are some activities already explored by the methodology, they must be supplemented with activities that will enhance other skills like group communication, life situation-problem solving, mock *panchayats*, etc.

One of the other areas which teachers seemed to have problem with, was classroom management and the teacher's use of time. Although, the sources at RIVER often claim that the methodology implies that the teacher is merely a facilitator, in reality, the methodology is such that the classroom learning is not only dependent on the teacher's knowledge of subject matter but also his/her personality type. Also, the methodology must take into account to a larger extent, the role of the teacher in classroom management which must not be confused with disciplining. With the stipulation that the new para teachers must be placed along with the more experienced bare foot teachers in the classroom, the administration must also clearly streamline the responsibilities and functions of both these teachers. This should check any clashes in instructions and repetition, besides checking the possibility of insecurity on the part of the more experienced teachers. Having said that, the resource centre must provide an intensive training module to orient teachers and help them understand the rationale of the methodology better.

It is essential therefore to constantly review and renovate curriculum goals and classroom practices, in these changing times where students are exposed to multiple environments. Adhoc and piecemeal attempts at reform, however, can hamper the efficiency of the methodology. The stakeholders at all levels of the MGML system must therefore follow the principle of decentralization in its true spirit to set an example for other groups that see this methodology as the future of education in the developing world.

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