

SCHOOLS

The child-centric approach



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By using multiple intelligence as the basis for learning, 157 primary and upper primary schools in Bihar's Gaya district are treading an untrodden path

That enrolment of students at primary level and reasonable improvement in school infrastructure cannot always guarantee student retention is evident in government primary schools at Badka Bandh and Majauli located close to each other on the road connecting Gaya and Nawda in Bihar's Gaya district.

For a variety of reasons, dropout rate in some rural schools has been so consistent that by the fifth year enrolment plunges to below 10 per cent.

The assumption that getting infrastructure alone in place will enhance pupil enrolment has been found missing the target. "In no way should it mean that infrastructure is not important but that quality of education should be at par also," says Sanjay Kumar of Deshkal Society.

In Bihar, school drop-out at primary level is as high as 35 per cent while corresponding enrolment rate for the same level is 127 per cent. As per government statistics, while aggregate enrolment up to high school level has risen to 91 per cent, the drop-out rate of 62 per cent has been the cause for serious concern.

Increasing school drop-out rate manifests itself on many factors, notable being the performance of the schools in imparting quality education. An OECD-Program for International Student Assessment global survey ranked the quality of education in

quality education in rural Bihar.

The UK Department for International Development – the biggest contributor to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) – supported Deshkal Society for piloting an innovative action research to demonstrate how inclusive teaching and learning could enhance effectiveness in school education at the primary level. Over a period of 18 months, during 2010 - 2012, the project focused on socio-economic and cultural profile of children as the basis for improvising learning methods. The aim was to bring the child at the centre of learning, with the teacher acting as a facilitator.

“The multiple intelligence of children was used to target the belief system of teachers,” says Mr. Kumar. Why should those who excel in mathematics or science alone get teachers’ attention? Creating multiple groups of children with differential intelligence in diverse subjects encouraged mutual sharing and learning. In addition to creating an activity-based engaging atmosphere in the classroom, the process focused attention on learning methods and pedagogy in the classroom. A group of Learning Support Coordinators helped teachers break free of ‘classroom stereotypes’ by bringing hitherto average students to the fore in the classroom.

Though the pilot project was designed for a short-period, its findings led to interesting insights on making teaching and learning inclusive. “By appreciating the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of the children, not only could teachers transform their attitudes towards pupils of backward classes but facilitate inclusive classroom practices and processes,” says Mr. Kumar, who led a group of desk researchers and field coordinators to implement the pilot project. Conservative estimates indicate that classroom attendance increased by about 20 per cent during the project period. More than the results, it is the process-of-change that has caught government’s attention.

Subsequent to the pilot initiative, the Deshkal Society has bagged a three-year programme from the Union Ministry of Human Resources Development to mainstream its activity-based inclusive learning in 157 primary and upper primary schools in Gaya district.

In addition to recommending regular dialogue and engagement between the Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) and the Block Resource Centre (BRC) at the district level for improving school infrastructure, there is a dire need for adopting a school-based approach that aims at improving the learning environment of the schools. Explains Mr. Kumar: “The children must find the school engaging enough to learn and to share, for them to spend better part of their formative years in the classroom.”

(The writer is a member of the Ecological Foundation)

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