

International Conference on School Education, Pluralism and Marginality

A three day International Conference on School Education, Pluralism and Marginality was organised by Deshkal Society in collaboration of DFID India, UNICEF India, NUEPA, New Delhi and ADRI, Patna at the India International Center, New Delhi, on 14th-16th December, 2007. The purpose behind the conference was to build space for dialogue and create new meanings for greater representation and dignity of diversity and plurality in the school education process in order to render possible inter-cultural understanding, tolerance and democratisation.



Beyond the Boundaries

Representatives from regional, cross-national and cross-continental groups participated in the conference, and facilitated a dialogue on school education, pluralism and marginality through a process of sharing and learning from different experiences and perspectives. There were participants from different continents of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and North America, and from various countries like U.K., U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, Croatia, Ghana and South Africa. Among the Indian states, there were speakers from Orissa, Bihar, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, U.P. and M.P. who presented their share of innovative experiences and perspectives in the realm of education. The diverse participants reflected a conglomeration of organisations, educationists, researchers, pedagogic practitioners, social scientists, policy makers, developmental practitioners, social activists, representatives of international agencies and representatives of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan including representatives of Government of India. Organisations like Agha Khan Foundation, UNICEF, Room To Read, Institute of Dalit Studies, Delhi University, NCAER, Dalit and Minority Centre, ICSSR, FAO, Planning Commission of India actively participated in the conference. Prominent media houses like The Hindu, Jansatta, India Today also shared the space. The conference, thus, successfully captured the multiple voices and opinions, and facilitated the generation of a dialogue on acceptance of diversity to foster social cohesion and empowerment of minority and marginalised communities.

Key Issues

The key issues that were raised and discussed by various presentations can be summarized as follows:

- Accessibility and equity in schooling of children of marginalized communities. Sharing and discussing innovative experiments and experiences in this field, both Indian and international, formed a dominant part in the conference.
- Education of minorities.
- Critical pedagogic issues. Class, gender and education in neo-liberal/ neo-conservative societies, and the need for critical pedagogy.
- Marks race and segmentation in school education.
- Education of working children.
- Experiences of South African youth in relation to their school.
- Self-empowerment through the Rights Based Approach to Education.
- Educating against extremism.
- Education of marginalized tribal children.
- Language and marginalization.
- Navigating cross currents of Standards, Textbooks and Marginality.
- Everyday matters in home and school mathematics.
- Theoretical and pedagogic issues affecting indigenous education.



Experiments for Solutions

The presentation of the experiments occupied an important place in the conference as it facilitated a process of creative dialogue and mutual learning in the field of alternative pedagogic practices. Deshkal Society (Bihar Centre), ASM- Plan Andhra Pradesh, Loreto Day School, Kolkata, SSA, Tamil Nadu at the national level, and Christine Sleeter from California State University, Raymond Nichol from Australia, and Russell Bishop from New Zealand at the international level, presented the various experiments focusing on various aspects and dimensions of inclusive education.

The teaching learning materials developed with Musahar community in Bihar provided a living experience and facilitated the conceptual and theoretical debates on pedagogic practices. Hari Subramaniam focussed on the Lambada tribe and the teaching learning materials it had developed for the multilingual education of tribal children. Sister Cyril's experience in the educative processes of inclusive education displayed another paradigm in the field of innovative pedagogic practices. The film on the Tamil Nadu experiment of child centered innovative practices in municipal corporation schools showed by M.P Vijay Kumar was also an exemplary alternative in the field of school education.

At the international level, Russell Bishop's field experience with the Maori tribal schools, and Raymond Nichol's presentation on the educational experience of the indigenous children of Australia added further ideas to follow up in this field. The case studies of teachers working in multicultural pedagogic practices presented by Christine Sleeter from USA provided a rich learning experience for the participants in the conference. These practice based papers brought about a harmony between theory and practice in the conference. This could be said to be the uniqueness that the conference aimed to achieve.

The way ahead

The conference was not an end in itself, and paved the way for future dialogue and discourse on school education, pluralism and marginality. The conference concluded that there was a need to deepen and strengthen the debates and dialogue on the issues at the regional and grassroots levels. In the larger international context, there was a vital need to further expand and consolidate a meaningful network of researchers, academicians, and practitioners for wider dissemination, sharing and mutual learning of innovative practices and experiences at national and international levels, and for strengthening the dialogue on issues of school education and marginality. In this regard, the conference papers have been planned to be published as a book in order to facilitate and strengthen further debates on the themes of school education, plurality and marginality among researchers, educationists, academicians, practitioners and policy makers.

