
Development of a life skills program for educationalists using experiential methodologies

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Our Committee was concerned with one major flaw of our system of education. This flaw can be identified briefly by saying that 'a lot is taught but little is learnt or understood.' It would be correct to say that this neglect of understanding has gone so far and deep in our education system that a child can pass almost any examination without any understanding of the phenomena she has been told about in books or in the classroom. – Prof Yashpal, chairperson for the Report of the National Advisory Committee on Learning Without Burden, India (1992-93)

History shows us that education cannot be its own vehicle. It has to depend on the hinterland formed by its users – students, teachers and parents. But critical evaluation throughout history has shown that it is these very users who are least consulted in the structuring of education.

In India and indeed across the world, the steering of education seems to have shifted from academicians to corporate industrialists. This seriously impinges on the autonomy of education as an enterprise. This, along with the decline in standards of education and the promotion of higher education at the expense of primary education, has raised concern. Educational curricula are encouraging 'cut-throat competition'; newly-emergent information based societies are designed for the elite. Inequities have always existed in education. However, the concern lies in the extent of organisational capacities these elements seemed to have built up. In such an atmosphere, education seems inadequate preparation for developing students' capabilities to face, understand and negotiate the complexities of real life situations¹.

Several years ago the Indian government set up a committee² to examine the national policy on education and the status of educational practice in the country's schools. The committee's report, entitled 'Learning without Burden,' linked school dropouts with the burden of non-comprehension. The report also highlighted the failure of the syllabus and classroom practice to address and reflect social realities. The report led educationalist circles to the fundamental question: education for what?

The question reflects the growing realisation that schools are not geared to providing an education for life: they do not seem to attend to the world of feelings, ideas and moral dilemmas that occupies children's conscious and unconscious energies and which affect their capacity to learn.

There are additional features in contemporary reality which highlight the importance of education in determining children's and young people's choices. Among them is the exponential increase in exposure to media and a rising inadequacy of discourse at homes and schools: the result is that children lack the skills necessary to transact day-to-day realities in an effective way. Where education does not provide the basis for understanding complex issues of gender, sexuality or interpersonal conflicts, children take behavioral options which may result in risks for themselves or others, thereby giving rise to health morbidity.³

These lacunae in education seemed to be getting more marked, as were their consequences: substance abuse, social violence, stereotyping, violation of minority rights etc. It was in light of these realisations that the larger concept of life skills arose: generic skills largely rooted in constructs of social, emotional and psychological development. They could be defined as competencies in adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

Life skills programmes have been piloted, used, consolidated in different parts of the world by the WHO and crystallized into pragmatic and workable rubrics.⁴ Among the life skills found in many programs:

1. Decision-making (assessing options and what effects different decisions may have)
2. Problem solving
3. Creative thinking (consequences of both action and non action, looking beyond direct experience)
4. Critical thinking (factors that influence attitudes and behaviour)
5. Effective communication (to express not only opinions and desires but also needs and fears)
6. Interpersonal skills (to develop and nurture supportive networks, to be able to end relationships constructively)

7. Self-awareness (recognition of our self, both the positives and negatives)
8. Empathy (understanding unfamiliar situations and diversity, being nurturing and tolerant)
9. Coping with emotions
10. Coping with stress

Despite its appearance in some contexts, life skills instruction has remained largely in the realm of theory.

Several issues come up at this stage. The process of awareness building for young people requires an understanding of the conceptual category (sexuality, gender, class, race etc.,) of both the young people themselves and their teachers. This means that one must understand relations within society, their construction, the construction of knowledge, domains of public discourse and practices. To be stable and empowering, this widening of perspectives requires that young people develop an awareness of the divisions that create inequalities and obstacles to healthy change.

This idea led us to reflect on the ways and means by which all sectors that deal with youth (including schools and colleges) can challenge certain kinds of social conditioning in learning. Even though most teachers feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues, pedagogic methods are required to facilitate the process of awareness building in youth as well as to calibrate comfort levels. Discussing experiences in general provides a window to life skills; discussing life skills provides a window to conflicts and problems; discussing conflicts in general provides a window to specific issues of gender construction/practices/ stereotyping; discussing gender provides a window to sexuality and so on. Most programs are now aiming to use this 'windows' framework, as it has a flow and application that is adaptable and flexible. Allied with this, other innovative and creative methods such as group learning and theatre-in-education are being used as teaching methods to facilitate these discussions.

It is necessary, in this work, for teachers to examine their own ideas and experiences of the issues that are dealt with in this kind of work. For example, what is a teacher's understanding of a phenomenon like child sexual abuse? Some teachers may not even be convinced that this exists. Some know that it does but find it too complex and distressing to deal with.

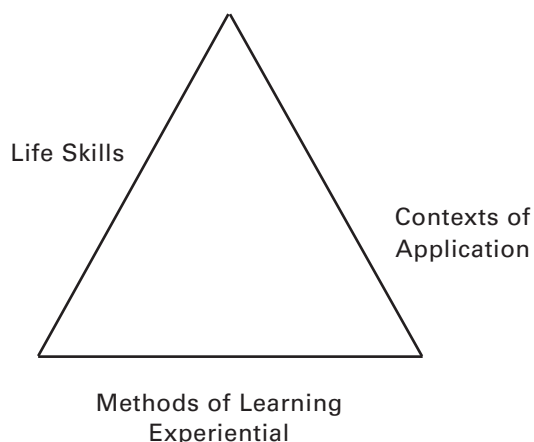
If training is to be effective it has to equip teachers with clarity on the conceptual categories as well as a focus on specific or problem areas. Then there is the teacher's personal position. How can a teacher be expected, for instance, to open up discussion on gender sensitisation in class if she is a victim of domestic violence herself or, indeed, if he is a perpetrator?

If a teacher transcends these positions, there are still issues of whether such programs have space and legitimacy within the school system. Such programs need to have a position of significance for them to be effective. They cannot be relegated to an extra-curricular position. In the face of so many different initiatives, a life skills program in schools needs to have a focused content.

- The syllabus requires careful development and the delivery must be carefully paced.
- Built into the programme should be an evaluation of its efficacy.
- Teachers should be prepared to handle any fall-out, inside the classroom or outside it.

Examining the initiatives taken so far, it is clear that some programs exclusively focus on giving teachers knowledge about conceptual categories in specific areas (such as HIV/AIDS). More importantly none of the initiatives have been more widely developed in schools.

It was on such a complex matrix that the course was conceived and developed. It was conceptualised and designed as a project that triangulated the life skills, the contexts in which they operated and the experiential methodologies incorporated into the training.



The Design of the Course

The course was organised and conducted at the Center for Education Beyond Curriculum (CEDBEC) at Christ College, one of the largest colleges in Bangalore. CEDBEC was created with the objective of enhancing the quality of education by bringing creativity into educational methods, thus contributing towards change and development in education.

The course itself was designed as six workshops spread between September 2002 to January 2003. The first and final workshops were two-day sessions while the others were single day sessions held at intervals of one month. Each of the workshops were designed to optimise the use of experiential methodologies such as theatre, narratives, games etc to aid the learning of life skills, without losing focus on the life skills themselves and the contexts in which they operate. The structure and sequencing of the workshops were designed in this manner so as to provide adequate time for participants to undertake assignments or projects which could then be discussed in subsequent workshops.

Among the objectives of the course:

- To seek to engage education professionals in a program of life skills with experiential methodologies as the main medium of learning.
- To enhance the participatory discourse and the experiential resonance in the workshops themselves. As Dewey⁵ wrote, 'experience' means an individual's first-hand engagement in activity, whether undertaken solo or in collaboration with others.
- To minimize the didactic process of teaching through experiential methodologies of theatre and storytelling.

Theatre was the main medium of learning, based on the hypothesis that dialogue is the common and healthy dynamic between all humans; that all humans desire and are capable of dialogue; and that when a dialogue becomes a monologue, learning suffers. Theatre is a tool for transforming monologue into dialogue: performances meet the needs of all people for interaction, dialogue, critical thinking, action and fun – all of which are components of life-skills.

A strong attempt was made to base the philosophy of the course on the principles of developmental psychology as articulated by Vygotsky⁶. These

principles, collectively called 'social constructivism,' essentially look at the classroom as a collaborative community of learners, where reality and knowledge are constructed through purposeful human activity and where meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

A major problem in the construction of such courses has been the skills versus context dilemma. The training protocols most commonly used in these programs are likely to become either too skills focused and thus rigid, with little space for spontaneity or creativity, or they could be context-based models, which have the tendency to become too theoretical. It was our determined attempt to find a balance between the two, to construct a protocol that seeks to contain this dilemma based on experiential methodologies which consider both skills and the contexts in which they operate.

The focus of each workshop was equally distributed between activities and the context for them: feedback, facilitation skills, micro-skills acquisition, process evaluation of logistical problems encountered. Attention was also given to the participation and involvement within the group during the workshops and the engagement with individual assignments/ projects. Facilitation skills, too, featured in the training. An additional input into the program itself was given by a professional theatre group.

About 26 people took part in the program: secondary school and college teachers, student counsellors, a religious figure, professionals whose work concentrates on the development of interpersonal skills. The common factor between them was that all were engaged in pedagogy in some form or other. The participants had three assignments to complete in between the workshops: process reports, session outlines and program development. Each workshop activity was deconstructed and attempts were made to link them with existing theories of educational psychology and classroom practice.

The focus of the workshops on the first two days was brainstorming sessions on facilitation skills along with deconstructing participants' expectations and motives for joining the course. One of the most exciting activities centered on the group giving itself a name, which led to an analysis of issues around identity and self awareness. At the end of these two days the group wrote a project report to be presented at the next session. The format for this report was:

1. The group
2. The gathering of the group and the arranging of physical space
3. Intention of the sessions
4. Introductory remarks/lines
5. Flow of the session and the exercises used
6. Children's responses – generic and specific
7. Own experiences
8. What worked and what did not (outcome and feedback)
9. Limitations encountered
10. Powerful moments during the session

The third and fourth workshops were held about two months later. The group made individual presentations of pilot projects they had undertaken in their reports. Subsequently there were themed activities based on artwork – painting, drawing and collages – which reflected expressions of abstract themes of daily life. Themes chosen by the group included marginalisation, belonging or affiliation, aggression and violence, stereotyping and discrimination, sexuality and empathy. The artwork was then transformed into a real life situation by way of dramatization. This laid the groundwork for brainstorming about session structure and the next assignment. The guidelines for writing up these reports were:

Title

Aim of Session

Materials used

Methods:

sequencing and description

introduction to participants

introduction to facilitators

Points to note

Progression and discussion points

Closure/conclusions

The life skills addressed

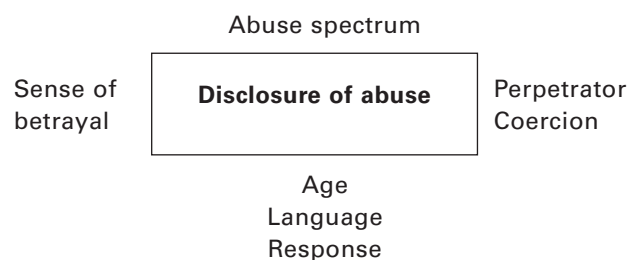
Process reports of the themes

There were exercises similarly designed to examine the use of narratives in learning. One consequence of this was an animated discussion about the role of dialect in learning and the lack of an appropriate vocabulary and dialect in this respect in Indian languages.

The theme of the opening discussions were centred on the space of these operations. They were discussed in terms of:

- 1 the geographical location and restrictions in training
- 2 the scope, coverage and content of the training
- 3 level of training vis-à-vis age, skills to be learnt and contexts.
- 4 micro-skills and their relevance to facilitation, activities and session structures

An example of this in relation to abusive situations was discussed.



The complexities of this situation were deconstructed using a windows approach. This was arguably the situation where the triangulation process was used to optimum effect. Using this approach, it was possible to explore the process of internalising and expressing experiences both in the generic and personal realms. The framework was 'general experiences contribute to problem experiences'. This was approached by looking at:

- contexts of experience such as school, family etc
- institutions in which they occur – family, friendships, etc
- feelings evoked

Another perspective on the windows approach was to look at:

social issues vis-a-vis inter-personal issues vis-a-vis personal issues

The final workshops were held about two months later. At that time, the participants were taken through the life-skills, contexts and processing of content.

The general impressions of the submitted assignments on projects were:

- 1 Lack of carry-over experiences from past sessions, having to work with different groups
- 2 Lack of link-up activities
- 3 Focus largely activity-based and not so much on experiential processing
- 4 An inclination to treat logistic problems as not very serious
- 5 Abundance of enthusiasm and energy
- 6 Demonstration of ability to handle things as they occurred.

Subsequently the group was revisited by a professional theatre group who had interacted with them at the beginning of the course, when they went through various activities that looked at issues such as leadership, communal violence, victimisation, responsibilities, self-awareness, decision-making, bereavement and disaster management. Other activities that were suggested but could not be carried out revolved around themes like suicide, academic failure, response to intimacy, stereotyping etc.

On the final day the group made individual presentations of the projects they had conceptualized, based on their learning in the workshops. The various issues covered included: the overall aim, the likely duration, frequency of sessions, target group and the size of the group, session contents, structure, location, expected obstacles, progress and expectations of final outcomes. There was attention drawn to the need for link activities that would give clarity and continuity to the sessions. The group went through a completion ceremony and received a certificate.

Our understanding of the process was:

- The whole program itself was not formatted to collect data which could be subjected to standard quantitative or qualitative analysis. It did however throw up certain important views.
- There was unanimous opinion in the group that life skills should be an integral part of the core curriculum in education. There was a new

understanding that experiential methodologies were extremely powerful agents of learning and were indeed applicable in classroom environments.

- The whole program was based on principles of developmental and educational psychology and were acceptable as sufficiently scientific for further work and dissemination.
- The teachers spoke of how the program had enhanced their classroom skills and sensitised them to the needs of their students.

The methodology is useful generically with all children or with specific populations like street-children, traumatised children, etc. It can be used as a vehicle for discussing a range of difficult themes, including violence or stereotyping as well as specific themes like paediatric HIV/AIDS, domestic violence etc.

The practicalities of the course

The deep inadequacies in education underline the need for new methodologies of learning. The concept of life skills with an emphasis on experiential methodologies provides a platform for this, giving the teacher an effective method to understand and facilitate educational processes. It also provides a means of understanding content and context as separate and interlinked dimensions in learning.

For example, gender and violence are contexts while gender related violence is the content. This could provide a stable construct in education within which to understand a gamut of issues in content – stereotypes, role preservation, power and oppression, impact of marginalisation – which could become contextualised in a range of social, historical and political environments. The impact of the learning is enhanced by using methodologies such as narratives, the windows approach and potential outcomes of the interplay between content and context. This is likely to make learning a more interesting and thoughtful process.

Further Directions

This was a small and heterogeneous group and no data was collected with the intent of consequent analysis. It could become the focus of further studies with larger and possibly more homogenous groups. One has to exercise caution in the planning of such a project since the nature of experiential methodologies may not lend itself to 'accurate' tools of measurement. However, it remains that children are entitled to experience a variety of pedagogies, and therefore these powerful tools of learning deserve to be tested and used.

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