

Social Learning Package

Education for empowerment

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What need is there for a package on social learning?

What is empowerment? Kabeer (2004) defines empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make *strategic* life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them'. It is important to differentiate *strategic* life choices from other choices, as 'strategic life choices help to frame other, second order and less consequential choices which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters'. Also important to note is the fact that 'empowerment entails a process of change'. People who exercise a great deal of power may be very powerful but not necessarily 'empowered', as they were not disempowered before.

And what is education? On the surface it might seem easy to define but in reality it is probably much more difficult. Generally speaking, acquisition of knowledge and skills is what is referred to as education. Wikipedia² provides a detailed and somewhat comprehensive definition: 'Education encompasses teaching and learning specific skills, and also something less tangible but more profound: the imparting of knowledge, positive judgment and well-developed wisdom. Education has as one of its fundamental aspects the imparting of culture from generation to generation. Education means "to draw out", facilitating realisation of self-potential and latent talents of an individual.' But if you do a Google search for 'definition of education' you would come across interesting results. Here are some examples of the definitions of education on the web:

- The activities of educating or instructing; activities that impart knowledge or skill; 'he received no formal education'.
- Knowledge acquired by learning and instruction; 'it was clear that he had a very broad education'.
- The gradual process of acquiring knowledge; 'education is a preparation for life'; 'a girl's education was less important than a boy's'.
- The profession of teaching (especially at a school or college or university).
- The result of good upbringing (especially knowledge of correct social behaviour); 'a woman of breeding and refinement'.
- The propagation of a set of beliefs, or propaganda. We call it 'education' if we already believe in it, and 'propaganda' if we don't.

It is obvious that education is a broad term and the process of education is understood and perceived differently in different contexts and by different groups of people. The examples that elaborate the definitions clearly show the biases that shape the understanding and direction of education in varying contexts. For instance, 'a woman of breeding and refinement' as an example of 'good upbringing' reflects a class bias in favour of a particular kind of socialisation. This indicates that education – formal or informal – is not necessarily a form of empowerment. The notion of equality and transformation is inherent to the notion of empowerment, which may not be the case for education per se. It is therefore important to ensure that the process of education is an empowering one.

Education for empowerment would entail an education that provides knowledge, skills, and socialisation of the kind that could prepare and promote people to make strategic life choices previously denied to them. This is especially significant in the context of equality and diversity issues in general, and gender in particular. The process of education is also a process of social learning, but in order to make it a 'desired' process of social learning for empowerment, it needs a structured approach. The Social Learning Package (SLP) discussed in this paper is one such approach.

How SLP came into being

This Social Learning Package (SLP) was first developed in the context of a residential programme, known as Udaan (the flight), for accelerated learning for girls in rural India. The girls were in the age group of 9–13, had either never been to school or had dropped out after attending for only a few months or a year, and came from deprived social and economic backgrounds where there was no guarantee of continuing their education beyond primary level. It was felt that these girls needed a structured curriculum not only in language, mathematics and science but also in something extra that was clearly directed at developing them 'into self-confident individuals, who could think critically, visualise their own potentials and be conscious of their social responsibilities'. The rationale behind taking social learning as a concurrent stream of education was to provide them with the necessary means and exposure for developing a critical faculty of their own. Social learning taking place in the family or community is limited in its scope by the experience, tradition, knowledge and social interactions of that community. There is often an uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of certain worldviews. Many a time,



these worldviews are narrow and parochial. The SLP was conceived to provide a counter to this form of social education.

The SLP had the delicate task of encouraging a critical and democratic outlook in children, without alienating them from their own milieu. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and especially girls, need a curriculum that will provide them with the necessary skills, information and, above all, the confidence to negotiate with a society that gives them a subordinate status. Girls are taught to confine themselves to the socially defined gender roles. Any learning that goes beyond such boundaries is considered superfluous. Girls suppress their desires and aspirations in order to fulfil assigned roles. The experiences from various programmes showed that wherever girls have been given an opportunity to educate themselves, they benefited from it. But mere proficiency in standard curriculum subjects does not equip them with the necessary aptitude to understand and find a way out of the gender straitjackets, which is what this package endeavoured to do. The programme also included a 'community seminar', where some of the themes were discussed with parents. The objective was to orient and prepare parents for some of the changes that they might see in their children.

The early experiences and impact of the programme were encouraging. The documentations at that stage clearly revealed that girls not only enjoyed the sessions but also engaged in them fully, leading to the development of desired skills and attitudes. It was also obvious that such interventions are needed not only for girls but also for boys. The very gender advantage that makes boys relatively more powerful, almost universally and in whatever context, can also be disempowering. The gender straitjacket prevents them from exploring life fully and forces them to live up to the societal expectations of masculine behaviour and life choices. Also, it is important for boys, and men, to be 'empowered' in a way that enables them to appreciate women's rights and freedom to make their own strategic choices.

Early assessments also showed that the SLP was helping raise the quality of learning in other subjects as well, and hence was relevant to all children. This is obvious from the following excerpt.

Children's responses clearly demonstrate the development of a spirit of inquiry orientation among them and a desire to have



Muslim schoolchildren in Malaysia

personal conviction, based on different forms of reasoning, before they construct their own knowledge. Many of the teachers in their interview corroborated this and said that children were now seen to be taking more interest in what they were studying and also found to be asking many more questions.

Ranganathan, Namita; *Early Assessment of Social Learning Programme*, March 2005

Janashala, a UN-supported national programme for innovations in primary education in India, showed a keen interest in extending this to state-run rural primary schools. The government of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh collaborated with CARE India under



auspices of Janashala to adapt and introduce the package to nearly 200 co-educational state-run primary schools. An evaluation of the programme by the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, in its original form and in government schools, showed that the SLP contributed tremendously to the developments described below.

- A positive change was witnessed in the nature of the teacher–student relationships and the ethos of the school. These showed a shift from an authoritarian and ritualised pattern, to a more democratic, open, friendly and dialogue-oriented approach. Both the teachers and the children felt that they had become closer, and the element of formality and fear, which had previously existed, was now on the decline.
- The attitudes of the teachers towards the nature of their learners also changed; they were able to see the potential within their learners and realise their capacity for growth.
- The teachers felt that the activities within the SLP gave the children adequate scope to make linkages of the subject matter, which they had to teach using the real world experiences of the children.
- For the parents, the changes in their children’s personality, behaviour and attitudes, which were already visible, were matters of great pride. Their children’s enthusiasm and motivation with regards to attending school, their improvement in personal hygiene, acquisition of new skills such as self-expression, and their ability to engage in different activities were features that they greatly appreciated. In their notions of education with vocational development, a rethinking process had already begun to include aspects of social learning and personality development.
- The children were beginning to show a spirit of freedom as well as a curiosity about their environment and existing belief systems, examining them closely and showing an enthusiasm to know more.
- The increased confidence and self-esteem of the children were also apparent.

The experience was included as a good practice in the Asia regional workshop on Promising Practices on Girls Education organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the United Nations Girls’ Education initiative (UNGEI) held in Chandigarh, India. Following on from this, the Indian Government promoted the adoption in different Indian states. CARE India approached the Commonwealth Secretariat with a proposal to develop the package for grades 6, 7 and 8. These three years, roughly falling in the age group of 11–14, is a crucial stage for identity formation and therefore critical for such learning. The Secretariat has supported the development, trialling, finalisation and printing of the package for these three grades and has disseminated it to the member countries of the Commonwealth. The advantage of the package lies in the fact that it has universal appeal and potential for application in diverse contexts and locations. The issues of equality and diversity are relevant in different forms to most countries on the globe. This became obvious when the Government of Cyprus requested the Commonwealth Secretariat to provide assistance in adapting and translating the SLP package into Greek.

What is the approach and methodology?

The SLP package was conceived and developed around the concept and framework of ‘relationships’, with the learner placed at the centre of several concentric circles:

- Self
- Immediate family, friends, community, local environment
- Larger society/gender divides/hierarchy
- Institutions
- Ecology
- Economy

Themes in this package explore the relationship of self to itself, and the relationships of self to all the other entities represented by the concentric circles. It also deals with the inter-relationships between these entities. The themes for grades 6, 7 and 8 are listed below.

Grade 6

- Expression
- My identity
- Making one’s own judgement
- Family
- Diversity
- Organisation and rules
- Travel
- School as an institution
- Elections and democracy
- Our response to accident and disaster

Grade 7

- Health
- Religion
- Gender equity
- Knowing myself and others better (1)
- Social mapping
- Freedom struggle and the rule of law
- News and newspapers
- Public distribution system
- Crisis, credit and options before us

Grade 8

- Communication
- We as consumers
- Knowing myself and others better (2)
- Our society and caste system
- Livelihood and occupation
- Poverty, vulnerability and marginalisation
- Changing cultural forms and practices
- Globalisation
- Good governance
- Social justice
- Legal literacy

As can be seen, the SLP deals with a range of themes: from cleanliness and interdependence in nature, to marriage, health, inequality and banking. The idea is to deal with different life issues within a framework of gender and diversity, and not to confine these issues to abstract discussion. There was also a conscious



decision not to overload the students with information. Instead, the emphasis is on exploration of self and society through dialogue, role-play, games, stories and projects. Important skills such as verbal expression, information gathering and independent thinking are imparted in the process of this exploration.

An important feature of the approach is that though there are themes that directly address issues such as gender equality or diversity, the discussion on that issue is not limited there. For instance, while the issues of restrictions, lack of opportunities, violence, etc. have been raised in the theme of gender equality, the issue of gender figures highly and differently in many themes, including democracy, diversity, social mapping, travel, etc. The democracy theme raises the issue of a woman becoming the head of government, and the importance of women's participation in the democratic processes, whereas the theme of legal literacy deals with the issue of women's rights in the case of property, dowry, harassment, etc. This implies that the issues are not seen in isolation but are raised in different contexts in order to develop the desired level of understanding and attitude.

This package depends for its success on the dialogue that takes place between the teacher and the student, as well as between student and student. Dialogue takes place in conversations and discussions, and in questions and answers. The children have to begin to trust the teacher and must develop a close relationship with him/her in order for an open and honest dialogue to take place. A serious dialogue requires self-reflection on the part of the teacher as well as the children. In fact, these conversations provide an opportunity for teachers to examine their own beliefs and experiences. Also important is to avoid a mechanical performance of activities. This happens especially when the teacher is teaching the same course for the second or third consecutive year. It may also happen because of time pressures and the desire to cover the intended lesson within the requisite time. Teachers are being encouraged to change their activity to make it less boring, both for themselves and their students. The SLP package acts as a resource manual for teachers and addresses them directly.

Another important aspect of the SLP is that quite often it deals with values. The SLP emphasises the importance of avoiding giving a final statement when we are dealing with questions of value. There is an inner barrier we come across when deeply held assumptions are questioned. We quickly want to accede to what is being expected rather than get embroiled in a confrontational situation. In a learning situation (actually in any situation that develops around the knowledgeable and less knowledgeable), students perceive what is being expected of them. They often respond by giving their assent to whatever the teacher is trying to convey, or simply repeat what they think is expected. In other words, they say what they are supposed to say, as opposed to what they may actually feel about the issue being discussed. This acts as a barrier in really changing the attitude. Therefore, the package advises teachers not to always seek to reach a definite conclusion when discussing such issues, and to wait until it develops out of a natural progression of the discussion. It is better sometimes to leave the question open than to have children repeat what they think is expected.

What are we doing next?

CARE India is engaged in promoting the approach in different states in India. We in the Commonwealth Secretariat are interested in promoting the approach in different countries and are willing to support the process of adaptation and translation. We have started this process by responding to the request of the government of Cyprus. We also made a presentation in collaboration with CARE India in a regional workshop for South Asia on the issue of Equities in Education organised by UNICEF. This was followed by demand for copies, and answers to questions by a number of participants. We hope that different countries will go ahead and use this approach even without our assistance and support. The real objective is to promote an education that is really empowering for all boys and girls, and that will lead to the creation of a more just and caring society.

References

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- 'Social Learning for Upper Primary Schools: A Reference Manual for Teachers' (Set of three manuals for grades 6, 7 and 8), CARE-India and Commonwealth Secretariat.

Endnotes

- 1 I was involved in conceptualising and developing the package for the first phase in India and some parts here are based on my reflections. Some parts have been directly taken from the manual.
- 2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education>

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