

# Promoting equality with life-changing learning for disadvantaged groups

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## Introduction

In countries with extreme inequalities of money and power, the disadvantaged have few opportunities and little chance of living a full life. Many millions are born into poverty – and are likely to remain poor – without realising their full capabilities.

For individuals to develop their capabilities and carry out their plan for life, they need to have the knowledge, ability, attitude and belief to succeed. If more people were able to access the opportunity to develop complex thought and expression, society would be more effective in creating new ideas and making progress in important areas.

The aim of promoting equality is for every human to stand shoulder to shoulder with meaningful work, intelligence and dignity. If the basis for equality is the respect and value given to the capabilities of humans, then it is the role of education to develop the capabilities of individuals. The capabilities could range from construction work to managing a company to creating art. The equality lies in the choice the individuals make in selecting the work, in the intelligence they use to perform it and succeed, and in the dignity they gain from knowing they are able to carry out their own plans in life.

Working to enhance every child's capabilities will encourage a shift from lives focused on material consumption to full lives that involve exploring and extending human capability and creativity.

## How education should promote equality

Where students realise that education will not prepare them for employment, or predict that they will not pass the examinations, they will consider dropping out of the formal education system. In India, the outlook for a child's schooling is daunting. An estimated 50 per cent of children drop out between the 1st and 10th standard; of those who enrol in secondary education, it is estimated that over 60 per cent do not complete the 12th standard (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009). Children of disadvantaged and lower-income groups are more likely to fail to obtain certificates of formal education. This raises questions about how effectively the education system is preparing the children of the country for work and for life.

Government and non-government initiatives have made significant progress towards equality in access to education in India. The numbers of schools and teachers have multiplied, and enrolment in primary school is nearing 100 per cent in many areas. However, this provision of free access across the country has been achieved

at a very low cost per child, and many schools are without working toilets, benches and sufficient teachers. Providing the country's low-income groups with low-quality education will keep them on the same bottom rung in society. There is a need for an approach that can effectively remove the pressures for subservience as well as discrimination based on people's origins and the lack of dignity suffered by people in poverty.

Equality, then, takes on a richer and more complete meaning where it refers not only to economic or educational equality but also to the equality of gaining intellectual freedom and positive emotional development. The balance of equality in society can be changed by providing children of disadvantaged families with a deep learning experience that is truly transformational, with:

- Knowledge — linked to their context and future employment.
- Abilities – in communication, analysis, exploration and creativity.
- Attitude – to positively work for life goals with persistence, intelligence and self-improvement.
- Belief – of equality in human existence with dignity and without subservience.

## Stimulating a jump in educational achievement and erasing 'disadvantage'

In low-income families, children often have limited time with adults for developmental interaction. Parents work long hours and household tasks require more time in the absence of facilities such as a 24-hour water supply, electrical appliances and personal vehicles. Children's learning suffers under conditions of low-quality shelter, household debts and frequent illnesses. The limitations of the home environment mean that there is a need for a learning experience additional to school hours to give such children the requirements to succeed in learning alongside their wealthier peers.

An example of such a programme is the Home Learning Initiative, pioneered by the Sajeevta Foundation, which promotes equality through providing contextual learning experiences for children from disadvantaged groups (see Box 1). The initiative focuses on an individualised approach, inspiring positive behaviour, making the process of learning visible and strengthening social skills.

## An approach to learning that includes every individual

An approach where learning is designed for the individual needs of learners recognises that each child has unique strengths and challenges and therefore deserves a learning experience to

understand and succeed in. It is possible to strengthen the capabilities of each individual child by inspiring a love for and excitement about the exploration and challenge of learning. This is a shift from an approach that controls children in a one-size-fits-all system.

Children like to learn in different ways, and they need teachers who see them as individuals with unique personalities, skills and approaches to learning. Teaching should be adapted to make the most of each child's individuality. Differentiated teaching means that the teacher uncovers each child's learning style, interests and needs in order to tailor teaching methodologies at an individual level. Identifying how each child learns best makes it possible to ensure that every student has the right amount of challenge for continued progress.

Children must be clear that the aim of differentiated teaching is not for some children to be learning more or less than others. Instead, it is to respond to children's individual needs with different ways of learning so that they all reach their full potential. The goal is to strengthen opportunities for every child to build on their own learning through experiences that are individualised for them.

### Inspiring positive behaviour for learning

Learning involves joy, challenges, failures, perseverance and courage. There is a complex mix of learning habits that every child will need in order to succeed in a variety of subject and skill areas. Learning 'how to learn' is all the more important when the children are from families without experience of learning habits and routines essential for school and higher education. The underlying principle is a shift of ownership of the learning to the child, with a concrete way of building both the attitude and belief required for equality.



*Teachers at a Sajeevta Workshop: planning a lesson with differentiated teaching, at Chaitanya School, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, June 2012*

## Box 1 The Sajeevta Foundation's Home Learning Initiative

The Sajeevta Foundation started the Home Learning Initiative in 2010 to provide learning experiences in line with the philosophy of complete equality. Together with a group of 15 children and their families, and with advice and support from Indian and international experts, the Foundation developed a learning approach for the children's context and developed in them a love of learning.

School learning habits can include memorising information without understanding the meaning, with a focus on preparation to pass formal examinations. Initially the children did not have the concentration or motivation to read in Gujarati, their local language, or to write out their own story; they were practised in copying out of a book, even if they did not understand what they were writing. The initiative's approach, on the other hand, is to prepare children with abilities that are essential for their learning in preparation for a full life. Its core concepts modules are:

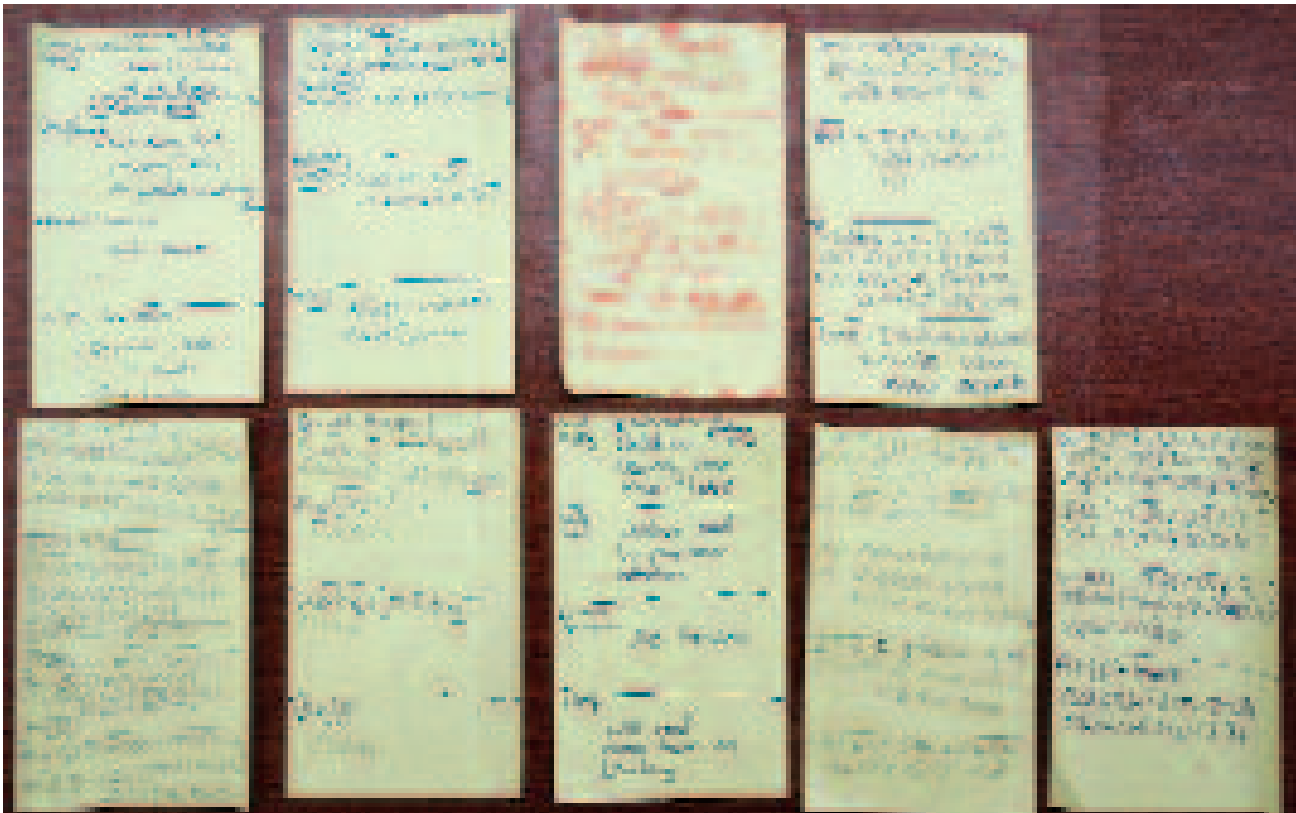
- Positive attitude: principles and values; co-operation.
- Ability to communicate: in English, Gujarati and Hindi, through letters and presentations.
- Ability to analyse and solve problems: mathematics and financial literacy.

- Ability to explore and understand: science, geography and history.
- Ability to observe and create: art and craft and story-telling.

These modules are created in partnership between the on-the-ground practitioners in Gujarat, national and international subject experts, and feedback from the learners. All partners have volunteered their time to give high-quality inputs, which has meant a significant cost saving without compromising the quality of the learning experience.

Co-operative games are played to emphasise the power of working together to achieve a goal, as opposed to fighting for only one's own interests. This focus on co-operation means children are not worried about being wrong, scared about making mistakes or stressed that they will be unable to perform. Instead, their minds can focus on learning.

The children's confidence in talking to others was limited at first by the fact that they speak a local dialect significantly different to the formal Gujarati used in the school curriculum. After practice and role play, however, they now have excellent communication skills and can confidently convey their learning to others. They also write daily updates in which they express and share what they are doing, thinking and feeling.



Here we created a format to describe our feelings about learning

## Box 2 Principles of inclusive learning

**Believe** that all children can learn what is important for them to learn.

**Be truthful and open** and let others share openly without fearing the truth. Discuss and debate with others to get the best answers for improvement.

**Have integrity** and say to others the same as we believe.

**Be very considerate and caring** for others, and work towards our goals. Be open and truthful, even when it initially causes pain when dealing with reality.

**Be transparent** and do not tolerate dishonesty; instead offer high levels of transparency by explaining decision-making and sharing this with others.

**Do not worry about how you look** (ego), but do think about how to achieve the shared goals. Don't talk about 'blame' or 'credit' as this focuses on 'punishment' and 'rewards' and not on how to improve. Instead, focus on 'accurate' and 'inaccurate' – and on understanding what really happened.

**Be open-minded** – try to find out what is true and don't try to 'win' the argument. Finding out we are wrong is more valuable than being right because then we are learning.

**Don't try to control people by giving orders**; instead, empower intelligence – by believing that adults and children must desire to do the right things, and the desire must come from them for their own well-being. Having very open discussions will lead to agreement on shared goals and rules.

**Learn from making mistakes** and experiment with what is new and untested. Making mistakes is good, as long as you look at your mistakes and reflect and learn from them.

**Be open about your weaknesses** because hiding weaknesses means you will never know how to deal with them. We all have weaknesses; what is important is that we know how to handle them. Identify your weaknesses, write them down, think about them and then do something about them.

**Endure the pain** that comes with learning that pushes at our limits, as then we gain strength and figure out solutions. Force yourself and others to do difficult things, as then we are having amazing learning. Painful problems will not be removed until we think about them deeply, not ignore, deny or forget them.

**Be a higher-level thinker**, not just a 'doer'. Regularly step back from the 'doing' and assess and improve the design of your actions by comparing the outcomes with the goals.

*Adapted from Dalio, 2011.*

Daily updates are a useful way for children to easily express and share what they are doing, thinking and feeling. These are very brief descriptions of what the child did that day, what they are planning to do the next day, their problems, their questions and their observations. Over time the children gain the ability to communicate the most important information, taking just two to five minutes to write down or speak the main points. Reflecting on these experiences can be the start of learning new ways of behaving and of approaching learning.

### Making the process of learning visible

The learning process is often made up of brief moments of change that occur daily. However, the typical end-of-unit and end-of-year tests measure learning outcomes and leave the learning process invisible, by which time it is too late to remedy flaws and gaps.

If children can easily see what they are learning and understand how they are learning best, then they will become active in managing their own individualised learning process. Effective learning happens when children are pushed outside (but only just outside) their comfort zone; to do this requires really detailed feedback on where each individual child is, allowing appropriate learning activities to be planned. If every child's learning is visible and regularly reviewed with the child, there will be active reflection to constantly improve the learning experience. This active feedback, involving the child, is the backbone of differentiated teaching as it helps shape and craft the right inputs for each child's learning experience.

### Strengthening social skills to engage positively with others

For children to become effective learners and develop into adults who can manage human relationships as well as social changes, they need to have the skills, interest and desire to engage positively across different social situations that include relations of conflict as well as collaboration.

Language should have a positive impact on student's self-esteem, motivation and behaviour. Children will model their speech and behaviour on adults: if adults shout at and try to control them, children will do the same to others. If instead there is open discussion and adults use a low and serious tone to reach shared agreement, then children will also copy this.

## Conclusion

Providing a learning experience that is truly transformational requires a voluntary partnership between those with wealth and expertise and those in poverty, where all are truly committed to a more equal society. To ensure people will make such a commitment, a proven model is needed of a learning experience that successfully jumps the poor up to a level of equality. Essential components are practitioners working directly in the local context



*Decisions on ways to improve behaviour and routines are made by reviewing together the group's learning experience*

with children and families and experts; commitment from children and families, gained by making life-changing learning constantly visible and with the love of learning as the real and constant reward; linkages to voluntary experts at the local, national and international level who provide professional inputs; and supporters who provide materials and resources.

### References

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