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# An educative experience

The World Bank-funded District Primary Education Programme, which is being implemented in six districts of Kerala, is widely supported by teachers and parents and holds the promise of improving the performance level of children.

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A VISIT to the schools of Malappuram district, which is perhaps Kerala's poorest district and has a predominantly slim population, offers a heartening experience. Despite the lack of sufficient number of teachers, classroom space and in many cases the minimum conditions for learning, the district has developed as a model for how qualitative changes can indeed be brought about in the system of primary education. Kerala, though much ahead of other States in terms of providing basic facilities such as schools and teachers for its children, has not been qualitatively different from others as regards what actually happens inside the schools. Several studies have shown that the performance of children in Kerala in terms of the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic is very poor, almost comparable to that in the educationally backward States. Educationists have pointed to the outdated methods of teaching and teacher training and an irrelevant system of examinations as factors that do not allow meaningful learning to take place within the traditional curriculum.

What then is new about the schools of Malappuram as also those in some other districts of the State?

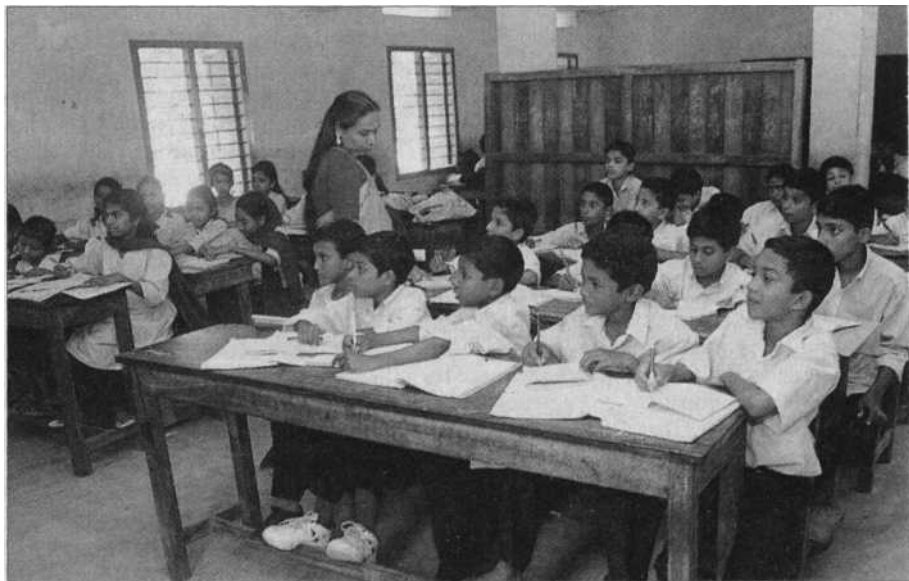
A systematic effort has been made to redefine the process of school education under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in six districts of Kerala (*Frontline*, July 30, 1999). Despite initial reservations regarding the World Bank-funded programme, many in the academic community took the opportunity to evolve a new vision for primary education. The effort in Kerala was more participatory than in other states. Discussions between parents and teachers about the curriculum and textbooks and the way these need to be changed in order to ensure better learning were conducted at the panchayat level. Thousands of resource teachers worked tirelessly in each

district to orient their colleagues towards changing their teaching practices for the better.

The new curriculum is based on sound principles of child development and cognition. It is also sensitive to the cultural and social realities of the State. In sharp contrast to the experience when the traditional pattern was in force, most children now enjoy learning even mathematics. Despite some initial resistance - as it often happens when a traditional method of teaching is changed to an activity-based process - the programme has gained support from parents, especially the poor, who see their children performing visibly better.

IN the districts where the DPEP has been implemented successfully, there is a high sense of involvement of parents in matters relating to the schools. Most parents say that the children now learn to express well - they write articles, compose poems, and develop the reading habit. Students who were earlier disinterested in school now

take a keen interest, according to them. One parent who works in a head post office and who would not have found it difficult to secure admission for his daughter in the Kendriya Vidyalaya in his locality, instead chose a government-aided school because "this programme (DPEP) helps develop the all-round personality of children." Another parent in Malappuram told a team of visiting experts, which included this writer, that he had shifted his son from an English medium school to a DPEP school because the child "did not communicate well with his friends and family members". Now he is happy because the child is more communicative and is also relaxed about his homework and examinations. The response of many parents in Idukki district were similar to this. "They conduct experiments at home and often know more than we do about medicinal plants," said one parent. "This programme should be extended to the higher classes so that they continue to have more practical knowledge. Now, high school students cannot



At a government school in Thiruvananthapuram district. Outdated methods of teaching and teacher training and an irrelevant system of examinations have made meaningful learning impossible in the traditional curriculum.

even write an application."

However concern is expressed about the continuation of the programme. Parents want some form of an assurance that a similar pattern will be followed in the higher classes and that any change in government will not subvert the current gains. There are already signs that the present United Democratic Front (UDF) government will choose to ignore the strengths of the programme, apparently on partisan considerations.

One parent, however, vehemently opposed the programme and also criticised the then government, which implemented it in 1994. His refrain was: "Children cannot write and they make many mistakes." Needless to say, none of our observations substantiated his allegations, which were typical of people who seemed to have their own axes to grind. A District Education Officer complained that the media presented a distorted picture of the programme, underpressure from the powerful lobby of the publishers of guide books, whose business had suffered owing to the adoption of the activity-based curriculum.

In fact, most parents see in the DPEP an opportunity for all children to perform creatively in one area or the other, unlike earlier when only a few did well. Children were no longer afraid of examinations. In the alarming environment of "examination anxiety", depression and suicides, this is a major achievement of the system. Examination reform is a crucial challenge. An archaic system can subvert the best of teaching methods by promoting only rote memory. Kerala had, in the last two years, also changed the pattern of public examinations for the government scholarships awarded after Class IV. Since more creative questions and practical problems were included, children felt less intimidated, and many more children appeared for and passed in examination last year than in the previous year. Any meaningful evaluation pattern must ensure that it supports creativity, observation, analytical and critical thinking, practical and manual skills, and other abilities that are important for the total development of every child. This is what the DPEP in Kerala has attempted to do. Unfortunately recent newspaper reports suggest that the State might soon revert to the old system (*Frontline*, August 3).

**W**E visited the districts as part of an extensive study undertaken last year, when an external team of two experts was invited to see how the new curriculum was being implemented. Although the same

curriculum was applicable in all the districts, the process of implementation was different in the DPEP districts, owing to the work of the project staff through block and cluster resource centres and so on. We made intensive classroom observations in Thiruvananthapuram, Idukki, Kasaragod and Malappuram among the DPEP districts and in Thrissur, Kannur and Kozhikode among the non-DPEP districts. Children in the schools of DPEP districts invariably knew the names of their teacher, which shows a sense of belonging, unlike the indifference seen among children in the other districts. Indeed, children are extremely sensitive sensors, and observing them gave us many insights into the way the programme was implemented. In the DPEP districts, irrespective of the constraints of inadequate infrastructure and the excessively large number of children in each class, many teachers had understood the essence of the new pedagogy and were trying to put in their best. One could see confidence and conviction in them.

We noted that there was not enough out-of-classroom activity in most schools, even though Kerala offers its children a naturally rich environment for learning - fresh air, plenty of water, clean sand and soil, amazingly rich foliage and a host of insects. Normally children sat on benches, with no free space to work on the floor, severely constraining the possibilities of movement and group activities. Moreover, only some classrooms in the DPEP districts were democratically configured, where children and the teacher could sit in a round-table format, making better interaction possible.

Schools in the DPEP districts were distinctly different from those in the non-DPEP ones. In non-DPEP districts, teachers may have changed the form but not the content of their teaching practices. Activities are conducted often mechanically, without understanding their purpose and relation to children's learning process. This is owing to inadequate on-site guidance to teachers.

Among the districts we visited, Malappuram seemed to have achieved the highest degree of success in implementing the new curriculum, while in Kozhikode, a non-DPEP district, the achievement of children in terms of performance was the least satisfactory. Our notes help compare children of a typical average school of each of these two districts. In Class III of a Malappuram school, a lesson on plants is on. Each child has drawn a picture of a plant he or she likes, with four or five lines written about it. Some have even written a page. The teacher asks one child at a time to read



**The DPEP curriculum offers an opportunity for all children to perform creatively in one area or the other, unlike earlier when only a few pupils did well.**

out the passage, and this constantly elicits responses from the others. The lesson proceeds through plants chosen by the children themselves, not dictated by the textbook or the teacher.

However, in Class III of a Kozhikode school, 51 children are sitting, cramped on benches arranged parallel to one another, with no space in between to walk. As soon as we enter the classroom they are asked to stand up and start singing ritualistically, as a performance for an "external team". The teacher has a few unconnected lines in her Teachers' Manual but does not follow it. She puts down on the board names of a festivals and asks the children to write any one of them. Most children can write hardly a word or two, these too often unrelated to the topic. Some cannot write even a word. The girl next to me is struggling with one word, shielding her notebook with one hand. She then copies the word *aana* (elephant) from the notebook of the child who sits next to her. The boy near us writes only *aa* - that is all he can manage. Only 11 children in the class have written full sentences, often truncated ones with words repeated, such as *aanaye kandu*, balloon *kandu* (I saw an elephant, I saw a balloon) and so on, without forming a connected paragraph. In Class IV we find that the situation is similar. We bring back the samples with us, quite disheartened. Although this is the general state of thousands of primary schools across the country, we somehow expected things to be



different in Kerala.

We conducted an evaluation of the basic competencies achieved by children and found a correlation between their performance and the degree of curriculum change in the district. Where the training of teachers, the involvement of resource persons, the efficiency of the support mechanisms, including the mobilisation of the community, and so on were in a relatively robust state, the classrooms and the learner evaluation genuinely mirrored the good health of the programme. On the other hand, ineffective teaching practices, dull classrooms, and lack of preparation of teachers, indicating the overall weakness of the programme, showed up in the unsatisfactory performance of the children of that district.

We designed a paper-and-pencil test to educate some basic competencies of the children. We observed that the children had learnt more than what a test of this kind can reveal, for instance, to speak confidently, sing tunefully in chorus, work collaboratively, carry out investigations, and so on. The test for children entering Class IV looked at the following competencies - creative writing, listing, reading and comprehension, drawing, problem analysis, basic arithmetical operations, classification, map reading and awareness about the environment. We chose Kasaragod, Malappuram and Thiruvananthapuram from among the DPEP districts, and Kozhikode, Ernakulam and Kollam from among the non-DPEP ones. From each district a sample of four different school divisions was selected, with an average strength of about 30 children each. We chose a similar sample from Class IX. We had thought that the students of Class IX

would find the arithmetical sums trivial and finish them quickly, but that was not the case.

The results of the test show that children in Class IV of schools in the DPEP districts perform remarkably better than those in non-DPEP districts; in some cases they outperform the much older students of Class IX. We tested for the proportion of Class IV children who could get grade A in writing. In Malappuram, Kasaragod and Thiruvananthapuram districts it was 45, 31, and 65 per cent, while in Kozhikode, Ernakulam and Kollam it was 19, 16 and 16 per cent respectively. Similarly, for reading comprehension it was 71, 51 and 51 per cent respectively in the three DPEP districts as against 17, 30 and 11 per cent in the non-DPEP districts. In the case of arithmetical operations the figures were 65, 53 and 54 per cent respectively compared to 16, 42 and 31 per cent respectively in the latter districts. When it comes to identifying one's own district and the capital of Kerala on a map, the percentage of children who got grade A was 88, 60 and 71 in Malappuram, Kasaragod and Thiruvananthapuram, compared to 41, 56 and 59 respectively in Kozhikode, Ernakulam and Kollam districts.

The corresponding figures for Class IX (the DPEP is not followed in any district for high school classes) are in sharp contrast to the performance of Class IV children. In writing abilities the percentages were 12, 11 and 36 respectively in Malappuram, Kasaragod and Thiruvananthapuram districts and 19, 39 and 15 respectively in Kozhikode, Ernakulam and Kollam districts. Similarly, for arithmetical operations it was 33, 51 and 65 per cent and 57, 75, and 42 per cent in the six districts respectively. This shows that in simple sums in addition, multiplication and so on, 65 per cent of the Class IV children of Malappuram district got grade A as against 33 per cent of Class IX children. Similarly, the question on map reading should have been simple for Class IX pupils, but in the six districts only 19, 40, 36, 17, 16 and 11 per cent respectively won grade A. It is indeed shocking to find that most pupils of Class IX cannot identify their own district on the map of Kerala and cannot even show the State's capital.

We certainly expected much more from high school students in Kerala, a State that the entire country looks up to for inspiration in achieving universal education. Indeed "universal education" must mean much more than this poor level of achievement.

Detractors of the DPEP had insisted that children taught under the system made more mistakes in writing. Our study contradicted this claim. In a random sample, while children of Class IV in DPEP districts made only 49 spelling mistakes, Class IV children of schools in non-DPEP districts made 134 such mistakes and those in Class IX made 117. There is nothing to show that language abilities are better developed when schools resort to more "traditional" teaching techniques, such as the teaching of alphabets, dictation, copy-writing, rote memorisation and so on. Similarly, this analysis also revealed that traditional methods of teaching mathematics, through rote, drill, multiplication tables and so on, do not lead to better performance even in Class IX, by which stage all children should know how to compute  $56 \text{ plus } 78$  or  $436 \text{ minus } 248$  or, for that matter, even  $15$  multiplied by seven. In the random sample, whereas Class IV children of schools in DPEP districts made only 19 and 25 mistakes in simple addition and subtraction respectively, Class IX students made 42 and 45 mistakes respectively, while Class IV children of schools in non-DPEP districts made 66 and 59 mistakes respectively.

We had hoped that these results would serve one purpose - of at least convincing people, especially officials and other persons concerned, who may not understand the intricacies of curriculum design or child psychology, that they were on the right course. Much more orientation is required in the Education Department itself, so that its officers may understand and promote the process of curriculum renewal. Matters relating to curriculum require more sophisticated consideration than "personal opinions" and need to be discussed with primary teachers and other experienced practitioners. It can take years of painstaking efforts by thousands of people in the field to build a good programme, but just a stroke of the pen can undo all that. One can only hope that Kerala will not retract from this effort, as any such move would be at the cost of the future of its children.

*This article is based on a study by an external experts committee sponsored by the Primary Education Society of Kerala (PEDSK) - the agency implementing the District Primary Education Programme - on the impact of the programme in primary schools in Kerala. Dr. Anita Rampal, one of the members of the committee, is the Director, National Literacy Resource Centre, Lai Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration, Mussoorie.*

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