

## Peer feedback and evaluation in Sanctuary Schools *Dr. Sudha Premnath and Sriranjani Ranganathan*

### **About the authors**

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### **Introduction**

Often we are asked about evaluation of learning in a setting that does not involve testing, examinations. For many of us who have seen only traditional systems, it seems inconceivable to think of an evaluation where there are no quantified measures. This question becomes important as we look at the learning processes of children, development of curriculum and equally importantly in the context of teacher learning and development.

This article is an attempt to examine the child and teacher review process, the peer feedback, teacher enrichment and, curriculum and material development used in the Sanctuary Schools.

### **Sanctuary Schools**

The Sanctuary Schools are run by the Kaigal Education and Environment Programme, Krishnamurti Foundation India. As of 2009, there are five schools, in five tribal villages, around the Kaundinya Wildlife Sanctuary, Chittoor District. These schools have around 110 children.

The objective of the schools here is to provide the children a meaningful and integrated learning programme with literary and life skills within the context of their community. The attempt is to make the learning process non-threatening, with importance to indigenous culture, traditional knowledge, lives of the people and local ecology.

The schools offer English, Math, Telugu, Forest Study (curriculum developed by KEEP), Science, Social Science, Gardening, Art and Craft and Games as the subjects for children. The curriculum, particularly, for the first three years in school, has been specifically developed for tribal children who live close to forests and are first generation learners. After the first three years, government textbooks are used in addition to materials developed or sourced by the teachers.

During the first two years at school, the only language they learn is Telugu. This is introduced with activities, oral exercises and games. Writing comes after the children become comfortable with the school and the learning process. The math teaching also progresses on similar lines.

There is a formal process of planning a curriculum, developing teaching materials and lesson plans, review of the child's learning, teacher feedback and teacher enrichment.

### **Review processes**

At the schools, we have had reviews of two different kinds. One is an expert review by experts from other organizations and the other is an in-house review by the teachers and staff of KEEP. In addition to student and teacher appraisal, materials are also reviewed. There are periodic reviews, around five to six times in a year. This involves close interaction, dialogue and observation in a non-threatening atmosphere. The reviews are not tests; they are a tool to understand the learning process in the school and to incorporate appropriate modifications in approaches or curriculum.

#### *Review by experts from other organization*

Students have a two or three day review in different subjects. Both the teachers and students are part of the review process. The teacher observes the approaches of the expert as they interact with the children. This is followed by feedback, suggestion and discussion with individual teachers. This is done with small groups of children from all the sanctuary schools.

#### *In-house review of students*

An in-house review also is on similar lines. The teachers conduct the review and then share their ideas and suggestions with each other.

For example, in February of 2009, about 15 children were at the Kaigal centre for an in-house review of the English programme. During the review, the children worked independently on the topics that they had been taught. A teacher reviews children from other schools. The work of each child was reviewed in terms of their progress with respect to the lesson plans. Reading, comprehension, writing and expression were assessed. The feedback was compiled and discussed with the teacher at the end of the day. This was used in lesson planning for the next six months. For the child it was a regular working day except that they worked with adults other than their teacher.

In August 2009, there was an art workshop for all teachers and a group of students, conducted by an expert as part of the teacher enrichment process. This was followed by a teacher assessment and feedback session on all subjects in October 2009.

#### **Teacher feedback sessions**

A key component of these reviews is teacher feedback.

The teachers of the schools meet along with the coordinator and other resource persons to review the lessons. The feedback session is conducted individually for each teacher and includes comments on the lesson plans and help with classroom planning. During this session, the teachers also conduct mock classes to help them improve their classroom teaching skills. They are also helped with making lesson plans for each individual child. This feedback is not in isolation; it is after observation of the classroom interactions as well.

During this feedback, each teacher also works with other sanctuary school teachers who evaluate their work. There are some teachers who are more skilled in one area than others and this session facilitates learning from each other. This peer feedback has several components – reviewing each other's materials, observing the classrooms and learning from each others' lesson plans and approaches.

One other component of the feedback sessions is in the area of teacher development. The teachers are encouraged and gently pushed into doing more work beyond what is needed for the classroom. This provides opportunities for the teachers to grow as individuals.

During these feedback sessions, plans are also made together by the group of teachers for common activities.

#### **Learning outcomes of the review process**

The two-fold review process of the teacher and the child helps improve the learning process. The lessons and preparation are not in isolation and is constantly being validated. The peer review of the children and teachers is a very powerful tool. When one teacher works with another teacher's class, it allows both to critically examine their teaching styles and attitudes. Getting together also helps in planning for common activities.

Challenges faced by the teachers are different in the various schools and these interactions give an opportunity for teachers to learn from different approaches to classroom management. Not

only does it help the teachers functionally in improving their subject areas, listening to one another and learning together has enormous lessons in growing as a teaching team. This has allowed for honest and open communication among peers. The teachers understand that each person has different strengths. More importantly, they learn to take feedback and suggestions from peers/others. They also learn to observe peer work critically and give positive suggestions.

*The key areas of growth in the last five years*

- Untrained youth with basic academic skills have grown to become teachers. Their responsibilities go beyond just academics. They manage the maintenance of the schools including the lunch programme, the cleanliness and the upkeep of the school premises. They interact with the community and encourage students to attend school. These teachers are able to see the value of a classroom atmosphere without any punishment and reward.
- Teacher and classroom-specific feedback on materials allows for continuous improvement in the quality of materials made.
- Teachers have learned to see and accept every child as an individual with different capacities and to address each student at their learning levels.
- They have the confidence to conduct classes without text books and use learning materials prepared by them. This has boosted their confidence levels and their self esteem.
- The parents see a positive learning happening in their children and have slowly understood that examinations may not be an essential component in the school. Children are happy and more confident.

This process has not been without its difficulties.

- Conducting individual reviews for the students and teachers is time consuming and needs adults who are willing to listen and learn.
- The comments and suggestions need to be non-judgmental and non-threatening to the teachers as well as the students.
- Teachers need support and resource persons to sustain this review process.

While this has been a lot of hard work, the teachers and the staff are committed to this process because of the benefits they have observed. The teachers have a tremendous sense of ownership of the schools, children and the community. This opens up the possibility for a sustainable education programme, where the local people will take the leadership and responsibility.