

INTRODUCTION

In our attempt to universalize elementary education, we have been trying since independence to provide adequate schooling facilities for all children. We have also been trying to improve the school curriculum so that children feel benefitted and do not leave before completing at least the elementary stage (Mitra, 1979, p.1).

Yet the goal of universalization of elementary education has not been even approximated. During the post-independence period considerable progress has been achieved in school education, particularly primary education. The first educational survey of India had greatly helped in the planning of primary schools in the remotest parts of the country. A remarkable progress in the enrolment ratio of boys and girls was achieved during the period from 1955 to 1965-66. By 1970-71, about 75% of the boys in the 6-10 age group were enrolled in primary classes, while the corresponding percentage for girls was 56.5. It appears from this trend that it would be possible to achieve 100% enrolment (Rao, 1979). Is this any indication of the success of our goals? It could be but for the problems that eclipse these efforts.

Today, the Indian educational scene is plagued by the twin problems of wastage and stagnation (Usharee, 1980). Non-enrolment, wastage and stagnation loom large on the educational horizon in every major city (Swaminathan, 1977). The alarmingly high rate of dropout, 60% between classes I and V and 75% between classes I and VIII has remained unchanged during the last thirty three years (Murlidharan, 1980).

A deep rooted concern among educationists, educational planners and programmers has been the significantly high failure and dropout rate in early school years. This colossal wastage of human talent, its implication in terms of national wastage and that too during the primary years is indeed alarming. The situation is truly dichotomous. On the one hand we have as our national goal free and compulsory education for all, on the other hand there is sheer wastage and neglect of potential.

It would be erroneous to assume that rate of failure is due to lack of cognitive competence. Various factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, influence this failure phenomenon. Broadly speaking, two kinds of factors, biogenic and sociogenic obstruct, distort or prevent the development and learning of the child. The biogenic factors are within the child, the sociogenic factors are outside the child in the socio-economic condition.

The most important of these factors can be summarized in two themes: poverty and prejudice (Singh, 1980, p.1).

Poverty has a direct and visible impact on the child whether in urban or in rural areas. Singh (1980, p.1) aptly sums up the conditions of children in poverty settings. He states,

Poverty strikes with many hands. The poor child is malnourished and diseased. The parents do not provide a model which he can imitate to his advantage. He grows without any intellectual stimulation. He does not go to school and if he does, he drops out early or is doomed to failure. No one expects him to succeed therefore he does not expect either.

Disadvantaged Children and Academic Achievement

Education is the most important vehicle of social mobility which offers a possibility for the disadvantaged child. However, such a child's conditioning to failure is very apparent in his lack of academic achievement which is widely evidenced (Jaiswal and Singh, 1978; Singh, 1979).

While several researches have pointed out that poor children when compared with middle class children are not less intelligent in early years of their childhood, they fail to compete and score as well as their middle class counterparts. These differences widen with each passing year as the cumulative deficiencies build up (Singh and Jaiswal, 1980). Various studies conducted in India on comparative performance of lower and middle class children on various school related learning tasks reiterate this fact (Murlidharan, 1978; Rao, 1979; Bevli, 1978; Kumar and Murlidharan, 1978; Singh, 1978; Mohite, 1973). The evidence resulting from an extensive and intensive investigation reveals the intellectual depression, achievement lag and personality aberrations of the culturally and economically disadvantaged (Rath, 1982).

In response to these findings remedial measures for the total development of these children have been offered by educationists and the psychologists. A commitment to educating all such children to the fullest of their abilities has been found not only in India but in the entire world in the second half of this century. Various intervention programs at homes or in schools have been designed and implemented with signif-

icant gains (Murlidharan, 1978; Mohite, 1976; Murlidharan and Banerjee, 1974; Desai, 1978; Verma and Mistry, 1980). "In India, the need of the time is to put special emphasis on offering well structured teaching programs to the vast disadvantaged masses with a view to bringing them on par with the advantaged sections of the society" (Rath, 1982; p.245).

It is evident that increasing efforts are made at the National level to bring all children to the school. But our experience shows that putting all the children in the schools does not solve the problem of primary education. Systematic socio-economic and psychological studies are not available to pin point the causes of dropouts. There could be various reasons and factors responsible for the "failure and dropout phenomena". Children might dropout due to obligation to earn or due to inability to cope with classroom learning. For too long schools have done more or less what they were doing before, without questioning the worth of what was being done!

Special compensatory programs have been suggested to equip the disadvantaged children with an enriched cognitive background comparable to that of other advantaged children. Disadvantaged children need greater help, especially in subjects like language and arithmetic (Rath, 1982). They also need greater help in language since their verbal environment is restrictive (Bernstein, 1971).

While research gives ample support to the conclusion that the child's impoverished environment leads to his academic failure, Jensen (1971) cautions against attributing this

failure solely to impoverished environment. He distinguishes the disadvantaged children from those with sensory deficiencies. The children who suffer from such sensory disability are called "the children with learning disabilities".

Learning Disability - A New Concept

The concept of learning disability has gained firm ground in the West. However, the field is still in its infancy in India so that there is a complete reliance on Western literature in understanding this concept. Kirk (1962) was one of the leading pioneers who accorded learning disability a unique place in special education.

The most uniformly^m used definition of specific Learning Disability was made by the National Advisory Committee of U.S.A. in 1968:

Children with learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia etc. They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, learning or motor handicaps to mental retardation or emotional disturbance (p.14).

As different from this broad based definition, Wepman, Deutsch, Morney and Strother (1978) furnished a more specific definition. Their definition refers to those children of any age who demonstrate a substantial deficiency in a particular aspect of academic achievement because of perceptual or perceptual-motor handicaps regardless of etiology or other contributing factors. The term "perceptual handicap" refers to inadequate

ability in such areas as; visual and auditory discrimination of focus and sounds used in speech, sequential order, figure ground discrimination, spatial and temporal orientation, and integration of inter-sensory information.

Even the most comprehensive definitions of learning disability are unable to provide a very definitively specific picture of a child suffering from this condition.

Based on several definitions, certain characteristics of a child with learning disability have been identified. These are; hyper-activity, clumsiness, short attention span, perceptual disorder, auditory-visual perceptual disorder and poor abstract reasoning. A host of questions arise in this context. On the basis of the definitions, can one say that all children exhibiting the traits described are learning disabled? How do we know that the child who faces difficulties in learning is a "learning disabled" child? Does an underachiever suffer from such disability? Why do disadvantaged children fail to learn? Is it due to the impoverished environment or due to learning disability? Is the time right to try and distinguish between general difficulties in learning and learning disability? Is the exercise worthwhile? Is it one of our priorities? Or should we first research in the prevalence of learning disability in our primary classes? When a child fails to read and write, what conclusions do we arrive at? The school system needs to recognize those children who fail to succeed. It must also be able to recognize the difference between these two major groups of children with problems.

It is at this juncture that we must face the grim reality that primary education has yet to reach all our school age children. When the school system is far from satisfactory in its functioning, what priority can be accorded for special assistance through individualisation? Would it not ultimately be determined on the basis of how many such children there are in a standard primary classroom? These questions are yet unanswered but they certainly require caution in our effort at identifying children with learning disabilities and subsequently providing remediation.

The present study attempts to define the very basic step in this direction by attempting to work with two groups of children i.e. the disadvantaged and the learning disabled.

Since education in terms of formal reading and writing, begins only in primary school years, the learning problems are also manifested then. Besides, both these groups would obviously demand a definitely differential program to enable each to overcome its handicap. While the disadvantaged children require no training in specific skills, the learning disabled children would need training in specific skills which are impaired.

However, while planning programs for both the groups, two questions can be meaningfully posed. First, how best can we provide in education for individuals, so that whatever his home circumstances, he can reach the highest mental and personal development of which he is capable? Second, how best can we do it "now" in the existing circumstances and facilities?

Further, any such program would have to be viewed along with other aspects, from the point of view of its application in the standard classroom as it exists today. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to attend to the problems and nature of treatment of an individual child in a large classroom. They neither have the time nor the expertise to do so. The task of a programmer is two fold; first to develop such a program that would prove effective when executed in a group of children and would deal with their general difficulties in learning to read, write and spell. Second, not to overlook the possibility that there may exist some children in a classroom who suffer from a "learning disability" and may not respond to a general program effectively. There is a need to develop for them a separate program catering to their specific deficit areas.

Since reading and writing are the crucial learning skills in primary education and since both groups of children encounter difficulties in these skills, the present study focuses on reading and writing. Before stating the problem and objectives of the study it would be appropriate to take stock of the status of primary school education at the local level and to understand the nature of the school environment, where the present study was conducted.

The location and setting: Baroda is a rapidly developing city with a population of 6.5 lakhs. The rapid increase in the urban population has affected living conditions and led to the growth of slums. The number of hutment dwellers in Baroda today is almost four times what it was 15 years ago. Sixty

percent of the huts are on Government or Municipal lands.

The Municipal Corporation allocated Rs.42.25 lakhs to the primary education committee for the year 1970-71. This sum was increased to one crore and eight lakhs for the year 1979-80. The Primary School Committee had 126 primary schools under its control with an enrolment of 70,751 students in the year 1980. The teachers numbered 1697 for the same year giving a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:41. There is atleast one dropout in every 4th household. Attempts to enlist parent co-operation have not borne fruits and attendance at parent-teacher meetings has been disappointing. High failure rate results in wastage of educational years in the range of 20% to 40%. There are a total of 85 school buildings housing 126 schools (source: Annual Report of the Nagar Prathamik Shikshan Samiti, 1979-80).

A specific note on the area in which the present study was conducted: This area - Padra Police Line - falls within the depressed areas of the city. There are mainly seven communities which may be described as "underprivileged and poor". They include the police lines, Subedar chawl, Municipal Corporation chawl, Patel chawl, Patrawali chawl, Gujarat Housing Board and the slum area beyond the railway lines. The children from these communities attended the Sayajigunj Mishrashala No.5 where the study was conducted.

Approximately 65.45% of the total families are originally from Baroda while the remaining 34.55% are migrants. They live in houses made of bricks and mud. The family income ranges from Rs.200 to Rs.2000 per month. However, the per capita

income does not exceed Rs.80 for all the families.

The cultural background of these communities is characterized by conservative and suspicious outlook, though there is a fair amount of social interaction within each community. In response to a question regarding education of children, parents were unanimous in their opinion of the value of education for their child. However they opined that the school had not been able to perform its function efficiently.

The Problem

The problem to be investigated in the present study may be stated in following terms: "Developing a classroom instruction program of reading and writing for the disadvantaged primary school children who face learning difficulties/disabilities".

This investigation was designed to identify those children from standards II and III who had difficulties in learning to read and write. The major concern of the study was to work with "disadvantaged" or "poor" children. The school selected was therefore from the "depressed" area of the city.

The emphasis was laid on developing a classroom instruction program of reading and writing which is viable as well as effective.

The major focus was on developing a program that would serve a two fold purpose: first, it would help the children overcome their difficulties in reading and writing by teaching them the underlying skills. Second, it would focus on covering the content of their prescribed syllabus. In short the program

was meant to be both skill and content oriented simultaneously. Besides, the program was planned to be administered in a standard classroom setting without the use of any specialized instructional materials. It had to fit into the classroom schedule, operate within the limitations of a standard classroom and yet be effective in covering content and teaching necessary skills.

In addition, another program was developed for those children who had "learning disabilities". This program was designed to help those children of standards II-III whose difficulties in learning were mainly due to their learning disabilities.

The program designed to help children with learning difficulties was developed, implemented and evaluated. Individualized program modules were developed for children with "learning disabilities" based on detailed assessment of areas of deficit.

Objectives of the Study

1. To develop an easy-to-administer, quick screening device to identify children who face difficulties in reading and writing.
2. To identify children with: (a) learning difficulties and (b) learning disabilities from grades II and III of the Sayajigunj Mishra Shala No. 5, of the Municipal Corporation.
3. To develop a graded classroom program for (a) children with difficulties in learning to read and write, and (b) children with "learning disabilities".
4. To implement a program for children with learning difficulties.

5. To evaluate the program in terms of (a) gains in children's performance and (b) feasibility for classroom implementation.

Clarification of Terms

(1) Learning difficulties: In the present study the term "learning difficulties" refers to minor or major difficulties in various aspects of reading and writing as revealed by the class teachers and formal test measures.

(2) Learning disability: There are numerous definitions of "learning disability" available. The stand accepted for the present study has been the one offered by Kirk (1972), p.44). He has delineated common aspects of various definitions, such as: (a) the learning problem should be specific and not a correlate of other primary handicapping conditions as mental retardation, sensory handicaps, emotional disturbance, (b) the children must have discrepancies in their own growth (intra individual differences) with abilities as well as disabilities, (c) the deficits found in a child must be of a behavioral nature such as thinking, conceptualizing, memory, speech, language, perception, reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic and related abilities, (d) the primary focus of identification should be psycho-educational.

(3) Disadvantaged children: The term "disadvantaged children" is taken in its broad connotation in the present study. It refers to children of the community characterized by economic deprivation. The common picture is one of poverty in its usual forms- low income, poor housing, large families, percapita income of the families of these children did not exceed Rs.80 per month (Report of the Seminar on Curriculum in Early Childhood Education, 1972).

(4) Barakhedi: A series of twelve letters made by adding vowels to consonants. For example- 