

Right to Education and Out-of-School Children: Development of an Exemplar Bridge Course

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Abstract

The Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009, guarantees free and compulsory education for children between 6–14 years of age in India. The RTE Act also makes a provision for providing special training to those children who may have either never enrolled in school, or may have dropped out of the school system. In order to bridge their learning gaps, a bridge course is being developed. This article discusses the process of development of an exemplar bridge course. To understand the issues and challenges of Out-of-School Children visits were made to the Special Training Centers (STC) of two Indian states, Gujarat and Delhi, which provided special training to out of school children for bridging their learning gaps so that they can be mainstreamed into age-appropriate classes. The study draws a comparison of the curriculum, teacher qualifications, salary, training and classroom arrangements in the STCs of these states. Drawing lessons from the visits, the article highlights the gaps and how they were taken into account while designing the bridge course. The bridge course has been divided into four levels, (barring level I, which is a readiness level), each having a diagnostic test, three competency stages and an assessment test. The author makes some recommendations for the STCs based on field experiences.

INTRODUCTION

School education helps in the all-round development of a child's personality, and inclusion of healthy attitudes and good values. School education is not only important for the holistic

development of the child, but it is also a right of the child to get an equitable and quality education. In India, children between 6–14 years have a right to free and compulsory education. But a large number of

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children in India are out-of-the school system. There is a wide variation in their estimated numbers, as there is no standard definition of 'Out-of-School Children.' According to the 2011 census, there are 38 million Out-of-School Children in the 6–13 years age group, which constitutes 18.3 per cent of this age group.

The Social and Rural Research Institute-India Market Research Bureau (SRI-IMRB) 2014 survey commissioned by MHRD estimated this figure to be 6 million (around 3 per cent), while for the same year, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) 2014 survey and the Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) 2014 database, showed the rates for Out-of-School Children between 8 and 10 per cent (UIS and UNICEF, 2016).

For bringing some uniformity, the following standard definition is suggested by the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD, 2013): "A child 6–14 years of age will be considered out-of-school if he/she has never been enrolled in an elementary school, or if after enrolment has been absent from school without prior intimation for reasons of absence for a period of 45 days or more."

PROVISIONS IN THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION ACT 2009

With a view to bringing all children who have not been admitted to, or who have

not completed elementary education within the ambit of schooling, a special provision has been introduced in Section 4 of the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009. It reads, "where a child above six years of age has not been admitted in any school or though admitted, could not complete his or her elementary education, then, he or she shall be admitted in a class appropriate to his or her age." In this endeavour, it further states, "provided that where a child is directly admitted in a class appropriate to his or her age, then, he or she shall, in order to be at par with others, have a right to receive 'Special Training' (ST), in such manner, and within such time limits, as may be prescribed." The plan would invariably include identification of learners, development of Special Learning Support materials, arrangement of special classes, mainstreaming of OoSC and their evaluation. The training of teachers and other concerned functionaries involved in this activity needs to be planned carefully to achieve the objectives of RTE.

The RTE Act further specifies that the duration of 'special training' shall be for a minimum period of three months extendable up to two years. There should be a periodic assessment of learning progress made by such children in 'special training'. The entry level assessment and benchmarking will determine the duration of 'special training' in each case and placement in age-appropriate class thereafter.

THE PRESENT STUDY

As mandated under RTE 2009, many states developed bridge course in their state languages. It was felt that the bridge courses developed by the states were not solving the purpose at the ground, therefore National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was given the task of developing an exemplar bridge course for out-of-school children by MHRD, which would be appropriate for never enrolled as well as dropped out children. In order to understand the issues and concerns of Special Training Centers (STC) for out of school children, visits were made to the STCs in the states of Gujarat and Delhi with the help of State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs). The SCERT faculty and

districts coordinators were involved in the field visits. Discussions with the principals, teachers, SCERT faculty and with the district coordinators provided an insight about the issues and concerns of Out-of-School Children. This article attempts to summarise the understanding from the field based on the visits in these two states and how this understanding was used to develop the Exemplar Bridge Course.

OBJECTIVES

- To visit STC in two states to understand the issues and concerns of Out-of-School Children.
- To develop an exemplar bridge course for both categories of Out-of-Schools Children, i.e., never enrolled and dropped out.

Table 1: Comparison of STC s of Gujarat and Delhi

S.No	Details	Gujarat	Delhi
1.	Places visited	Banaskatha, Gandhinagar, Ahmedabad	Central, south, east, west, and north districts of Delhi
2.	No. of STC visited	6	5
3.	Identification of Out-of-School Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• '<i>Shala Praveshotsav</i>', or an enrolment drive for new admissions to school is made.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Head of the schools undertakes identification exercise of Out-of-School Children in the catchment area of their schools.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education volunteers known as the “<i>Bal Mitra</i>” identify the Out-of-School Children under the overall supervision of the Principal of the concerned school. • All such children are identified with the help of <i>anganwadi</i> workers, local panchayat and registered in the neighbourhood school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This exercise is conducted only in those schools where possibility of availability of Out-of-School Children is assessed by Cluster Resource Centres (CRC)/Block Urban Resource Centre (BURC). • The information on Out-of-School Children is collected in a prescribed format
4.	The Bridge Material (Curriculum, Text books, teacher Guides)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gujarat Council of Educational Research and Training (GCERT), District Institute of Educational Training (DIET), Experts, NGOs and United nations Children’s Education Fund (UNICEF) have developed teaching-learning material. • It comprises 515 lesson cards and 460 activity cards consisting of Hindi, English, Gujarati alphabets numbers, colours, shape, vehicle, animals, fruits, vegetables and simple sentences, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delhi SCERT has developed a curriculum for Out-of-School Children for five subjects namely English, Hindi, Math, Science and Social Studies at four levels i.e., Level I — Classes II and III, Level II— Classes IV and V , Level III — Classes VI and VII and Level IV— Class VIII. But there is no study material or books developed.
5.	Teacher Pupil-Ratio	1:17–20	1:30–40

6.	Teacher Qualifications and Salary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational Volunteers are appointed to teach. • The minimum qualification is XIIth pass • They are paid ₹5000/- per month. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Volunteers are appointed. • The minimum qualification is under-graduation with a B.Ed. • They are paid a salary of ₹12,000/per month
7.	Teacher Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers are provided an initial training for a week and later 4 days refresher training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCERT conducts trainings for STC teachers.
8.	Classroom Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are divided into four groups according to their learning levels. • The youngest group is called the 'Star' which caters to the children of 6–8 years, i.e., Classes I and II and mainly focuses on the readiness programme. • The second group is called the 'Moon' and caters to children of Classes III and IV. • The third group is called the 'Sun' and caters to the children of 10+ to 12 years for Classes V and VI. • The last group is called the 'Rainbow' for children of 12+ years catering to children of Classes VII and VIII. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never enrolled and drop out children were sitting in the same class and were being taught the same content. An exception was Shaheed Hemu Kalani Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya, where children were made to sit according to their age groups in the STC.

9.	Classroom Atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children sang many poems, told stories and generally had a positive self-concept and liked coming to school. • The Principal and the teachers also showed acceptance towards the STC children. • Children who were mainstreamed into regular classes were continuing their studies successfully. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The atmosphere was mixed while in some schools there was a positive attitude for STC children, but in others, teachers reported that other staff members and the principal were not co-operative with the STC teachers.
10.	Mainstreaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children were mainstreamed into regular classes and they were doing well in the regular classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teachers reported that all children who came to STC were mainstreamed into regular classes after one year without any consideration of whether they have bridged the learning gap or not. As a result they are not able to perform in the regular classes and get teased by other children.
11.	Children Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children could read from their copies and also explain the meaning of the text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children were not able to read what they had copied from the blackboard, although the writing was without any grammatical errors. Some children had written sentences in English which they were able to read, but were not able to comprehend.

These qualitative dimensions gave an insight about the issues, which needed to be addressed during the development of the bridge course.

The Lessons Learnt

- In both the States, there was no provision made for those children who had not attended any kind of preschool. The framework of global initiative acknowledges that children who are of an appropriate age for pre-primary, but who are out-of-school as being in dimension 1, and considered out-of-school (UNICEF and UIS; 2016).
- All the STCs are a multi-age group having children of different learning levels. They take admission at any time of the year. The teachers, therefore, need to be trained in handling multi-level classes, which is presently not being done.
- The teaching-learning material and course content developed by States for STC is largely a condensed version of the school textbooks in which the content of two years is merged. What children in regular classes learn in two years' time, the STC children are supposed to learn in a shorter time. Therefore, the content and concepts should be provided in a more interesting ways through activities which facilitate peer learning, working in teams/small groups.
- Mainstreaming in age-appropriate classes will be successful only after the student's learning level is bridged according to age appropriate classes. Therefore, it should be ensured by assessing children that the learning gaps of children should be bridged so that they feel accepted and confident in the school, and do not face the risk of dropping out again.
- In Delhi, STC teachers reported that all the children who come to STC are mainstreamed in the regular classes, without any consideration of their learning levels. When these children find it difficult to cope in the regular classes, the children get teased and stigmatised and teachers are also blamed for not doing their part in bridging the learning gap.
- In Delhi, where there were 50–60 children, the same class was designated to both the STCs and two different teachers were teaching two groups—Classes I–V and VI–VIII simultaneously. The blackboard was shared by drawing a line in the center.
- Assessment for finding the learning level of each child becomes imperative. The children should be grouped as per their learning levels. Never enrolled and dropout students have to be taught as per their levels. Some instructions cannot be imparted to both the groups.

- Continuous and comprehensive assessment is required to monitor each child's progress and provide instructions accordingly.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXEMPLAR BRIDGE COURSE

METHODOLOGY

Brainstorming Workshops

After the visit in the two states, brainstorming workshops were held with experts, NCERT faculty, people from NGOs having experience of running bridge course, state officials responsible for Out-of-School Children, school teachers of different subjects and STC teachers to decide the pattern of bridge course. It was decided that the material should be such which is engaging, activity based and relevant to the child's life. Since the teachers may not be trained, it was decided that guidance to the teachers will be provided throughout in all the chapters of the books for transacting the curriculum.

Content Development Workshops

Once the structure of the bridge course was decided, academic coordinators for each subject were identified specialising in English, Hindi, Mathematics, EVS and Science and Social Science. Subject experts who were school teachers, SCERT/DIET faculty, experts from NGOs, academicians from outside NCERT were invited. Three to four workshops

were held for development, review and finalisation of textbooks at each level.

Barring the readiness level, all the three levels have five components. Each level has a diagnostic test to identify the current learning level of the child, so that bridging can start from the current level. Each level has further been divided into three competency stages —

a. Basic stage b. Intermediate stage and c. Grade appropriate stage. At the end there is an assessment test to ensure that the child has acquired the requisite competencies for that grade level.

LEVEL I- READINESS MODULE

This module offers opportunities for hands-on activities for matching, sorting, classification, grouping, rhymes and songs, story-telling, educational games, dominos, flash cards, language and math activities, drawing and small project works. It has hands on activity cards as well as worksheets. The module contains age appropriate activities for 3–6 years old children. It is recommended that all the children be given this module for the first 15 days to get accustomed to school life. This module provides joyful learning activities and is intended to provide help to children to adjust to the school schedule. Teachers also get time to build rapport, know about the child's background and experiences, reduce the fear of school and create a desire to learn.

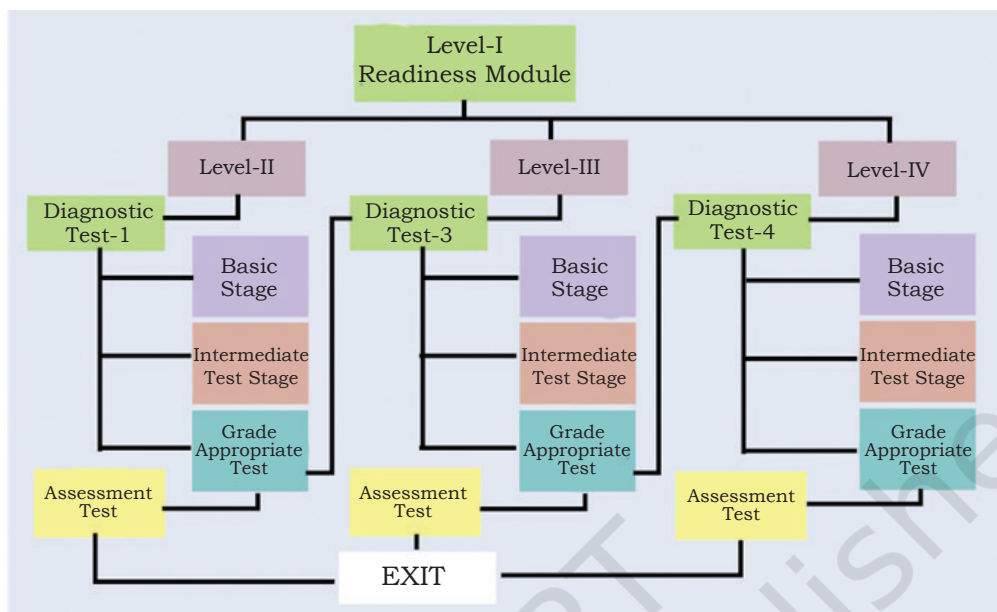


Figure 1: Structure of the Bridge Course

LEVEL II

The subjects covered in this level are English, Hindi and Mathematics. This level provides the foundations of language learning and early mathematics as it is the first step on which the subsequent learning is based. This level aligns with the learning outcomes of Classes I and II. The students after completion of this level can be mainstreamed to grade II.

LEVEL III

This level is aligned to the learning outcomes of Classes III–V. The subjects covered are English, Hindi, Mathematics and Environmental Studies. The student can be mainstreamed to Class V at the end of this module.

LEVEL IV

This level is aligned to the learning outcomes of Classes VI–VIII. The subjects covered are English, Hindi, Mathematics, Science and Social Science. The student can be mainstreamed to grade VIII at the end of this module.

Teacher Handbook (*Udaan*)

The bridge course has a teacher handbook which informs the teacher about the RTE Act, the roles and responsibilities of the principal and teachers. It discusses in detail the diverse conditions of the children, their psycho social aspects and the role of the teacher as a motivator. It guides the teachers on how to group children as per their learning levels,

the pedagogy to be used for curriculum transaction and how to track the progress of the child using different assessment strategies. It provides examples for each subject to facilitate their understanding.

Field Testing

Once the books were finalised, all the books were field tested in at least two STCs in Delhi for a month. The teachers were given the books. Few lessons were taken up by the coordinator and the Junior Project Fellow to demonstrate how the lessons need to be transacted. The schools were visited twice in a week to get the feedback of the teachers and students. As per the feedback, modifications were made in the books. Qualitative changes in the content and illustrations were made after the field testing.

Highlights of the Exemplar Bridge Course

The exemplar bridge course has a readiness module which can be used for children of 3–6 years of age. It is recommended that it should be given to children of all the ages for 15 days when they come to the STC. The hands-on material and worksheets are joyful for children and they get time to get accustomed to school routines. The teacher can also utilise this time to develop rapport with the child.

Instead of merging the content of two classes into one level, the content has been divided into three competencies stages. It makes the content simpler and doable. As

children move from one stage to other it gives them confidence and encouragement to complete the stages faster.

The books have lot of activities, opportunity for discussions, sharing and talking in the classroom, allowing the child to be actively involved. The activities facilitate peer learning, and learning in small groups and large groups.

The teacher handbook provides guidance to the teachers for grouping children as per their levels, pedagogy to be used and tracking the performance of children in all the subjects in a continuous and comprehensive manner through different assessment strategies.

The content is aligned to the learning outcomes for each subject and class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present paper discusses the provisions under the RTE Act for Out-of-School Children. In order to develop an exemplar bridge course, visits were made to the STCs of Gujarat and Delhi. The provisions, teacher pupil ratio, bridge material, teacher salary and qualifications, classroom organisation, classroom atmosphere, mainstreaming and children competencies in both the places have been compared. The course is transacted by the educational volunteers in both the states. There are different types of children in the STC, never enrolled or those who have dropped out,

they take admission at any time of the year. Generally, they are first generation learners from poor economic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that the teacher should be qualified and trained in handling multi-level and multi age groups. A teacher having the qualifications as prescribed for elementary stage must be appointed to handle children of the STC. He or she should be paid at par to the regular elementary teacher. No matter how interesting the content is but if a trained and motivated teacher is not present, children will not be able to bridge their learning gaps. Training on handling multi-age, multi-level groups should be provided to STC teachers. Continuous handholding support and mentoring should also be provided to them.

The bridge course should also be designed in such a way that it provides this flexibility to the teacher therefore, the Exemplar Bridge

Course has been designed in three competency stages. Transacting the curriculum in groups which are matched as per their learning levels makes the transaction easy for the teacher. For effective transaction of the curriculum, it is important that the teacher pupil ratio should not exceed 1:30 as recommended in RTE Act. Identifying the initial learning level of the child and putting them in the matched group is required therefore a diagnostic test has been planned. To ensure that the child has acquired the grade appropriate competencies before mainstreaming into age appropriate classes an assessment test has been planned to minimise the chances of dropping out, once children are mainstreamed into regular classes. The bridge course has a teacher handbook to guide the teachers in grouping children, pedagogy and assessment techniques.

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