

Why Do Children Go to School?

A child's innate interest in learning is often hampered by the absence of infrastructure and good teachers. These impressions recorded following a 'demonstration' in a hamlet school reveal the progress made in child's learning abilities after new more sensitive approaches were adopted. But to sustain a child's interest requires a more conjoined effort – on the part of parents, teachers and even the government.

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The initial disposition of children towards schooling is usually positive, when a school functions their motivation is easily sustained. Even in schools where classes are far from exciting children, often look forward to going to school: Its a chance to interact with other children a welcome change of atmosphere and a liberation from the chores of family labour (PROBE report).

The PROBE data confirm a basic pattern observed in a number of other studies: that work hours of young out of school children in rural India are relatively short. When children work rather than go to school, the direction of causation need not run from child labour to non-attendance. In many cases it's the other way round: children work because they are not in school. Unless family labour involves rigid work hours that consistently clash with school timing it is unlikely to prevent children from attending school with reasonable regularity.

In the last few months I have spent some time in a rural education project in Gauriganj block of Sultanpur district in Uttar Pradesh. My observations and experiences there have made me think even harder about why children go to school. In this block more than 90 per cent of children in the primary school age in the villages are enrolled and a majority of them show up in school daily.

My belief in the above hypothesis has become even firmer. While observing the 28 demo classes being run by Pratham trainers in 28 different maujas in Gauriganj, it was clear that the children needed much more than drab basic 'education'. Even though the average attendance is more

than 90 per cent in most of the schools in the district, we need to think on the reason behind such high attendance, is it because of education? Meeting their friends? Going out of their houses? Escaping from work? Or out of sheer boredom?

In Prathmic Vidhyalaya in Darpipur, it was exactly 9.30 am when I entered the school, I saw a huge number of children walking towards the school from the nearby mustard fields, some were on cycles, some walked from the main road towards the school. Guruji came at exactly 9.55 am. The children were already in proper lines for their morning assembly and prayer. There was a huge crowd, but no chaos, everybody knew exactly where they had to stand, after the prayer finished, they sat on their 'bories' and neatly took out their slates to write on with the 'kalam'. The school was a two-room structure, with a green line on the wall, denoting the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan symbol. Most of the children sat outside under a tree. Guruji took attendance and started taking one class at a time with classes 1-5 sitting in front of him. He was not the headmaster but the 'shiksha mitra' in the vidyalaya. The 'shiksha mitra' is a 'para teacher hired at about half the salary of a regular teacher and posted in a regular school in under-staffed schools, with the prospect of getting a regular post after 10 years of service'.

The children were amused and curious to see the two outsiders and observed our every move. They wanted to speak to us, hold our hands and tell us a lot about their school. A few of them came and told us that they walked for miles and came to school from the nearby 'poorvas' (or hamlets). The 'shiksha karmi' was very

cooperative and allowed us to take a simple language test of all the children present in the vidhyalaya. Between my colleague and I, in few hours we had spent a few minutes with each child and had a good idea about the reading ability of all children who were present in school that day.

Table 1 shows what we found: First of all, most of the enrolled children were present that day. Second, there were many more children in std 1-4 than in std 5. Of the 125 children present in std 2-5 on that day only 30 per cent could read simple paragraphs. 70 per cent of children in std 2 to 5 could barely read alphabets. Reading is the first and most essential step for further learning. But close to 70 per cent of children std 2 and above could not read anything other than letters.

The numbers made me think even more: why do these children come to school regularly, walking for miles and yet not learn anything? What makes them come to school? There was no instant answer. With the shiksha mitra trying to manage nearly 180 children by himself alone, it was not surprising the children's reading capabilities were so low.

Pratham's Intervention

As part of the education project in the block, Pratham started classes as 'demonstrations'. Each person worked with 25 children who could not read. Simultaneously he/she also started mobilising

Table 1: Reading Ability of Vidyalaya Children

	Std 1	Std 2	Std 3	Std 4	Std 5
Enrolment	42	34	41	43	17
Could read simple material (easy paragraphs or stories)					
Did not test		0	8	17	5
Could read only letters or could not read anything					
Did not test		32	33	23	7

Note: Figures refer to number of children.

Table 2: Progress of Children in Demo Class

Reading Level	February 23, 2004	March 1, 2004
Story and easy paragraph	0	7
Word	0	7
Letter and nothing	25	11
Total	25	25

local volunteers in the nearby villages to join in the effort to get every child to read. There were finally 11 local volunteers who agreed to start classes in the village. These classes would meet in the school and in the community. The volunteers were mostly 10th class pass married women from Darpipur area and got to know of Pratham classes from the pradhan. They took interest in the reading programme and liked the way the children improved their reading skill so quickly. They carefully watched the progress of children in the demonstration class. After around eight days the progress of the demo class is detailed in Table 2.

The volunteers watched the demo, observed the reading technique for about a week and finally started with their classes from March 1. I visited four of the local volunteers' community classes in Darpipur itself. Amongst the children I found a girl who had been in the demo class in the school. I asked this girl why she was attending the class again. She said she found it interesting and liked to come for the class. I visited other classes in the area during the day and found three children who were there attending all three classes at different times all through the day.

This was the first day so the volunteers were told to keep track of children and ensure there was no duplication so that there would be room for more children who needed help. On asking these children why they attended all three classes, one girl said that she got bored at home and there was nothing to do at home especially on holidays. Her mother did all the household work.

Imagine the situation when the child learns nothing till class five and is probably a dropout after that. She comes to school because she does not have enough to do at home. Now with an interesting learning opportunity in village, she is willing to go and sit in three classes. Is it because she wants to read? Is it because she likes her new reading teacher? Is it because she likes stories like 'Rumki' in the books that the teacher has? Children's demands are so small; they need little effort to remain interested in learning. This is very different from an urban set-up; in the cities, the child has many distractions. They have a TV at home, a cinema theatre to go to, they can run out of school to sit at their father's shop in the community. The

rural needs are very small as compared to the large distractions in the city.

A Pratham type intervention is what children in Gauriganj were thirsting for. One Pratham person says, it was very difficult for her at the beginning to ask children to play word games, to ask them to write anything they wanted to on the board. The children were not in the habit of thinking on their own. They have become so accustomed to the rote method of learning. But it is remarkable that without any active learning in the schools, so many children still come to school each day, and day after day.

Some children carried books: the Hindi books looked pretty tough. One child was carrying a mathematics book in English. "Who bought the books for you?" we asked. "Father" was the reply. These were not age-specific books nor were the books for first generation learners. Even if the parents are interested in the child's education, relevant education material is not available to them.

I wondered if they come to school for the three kg of grain that they receive every month. I asked a mother in the nearby 'poorva' about the grain the child gets in the school. She said that the grain does not come every month. The grain is distributed every third month and is given in bulk. She said, "we do not require the grain and do not depend on the grain the child gets."

The shiksha mitra finds himself unable to manage 180 children at the same time. How much can he do alone? The head master was sitting on a chair under the tree and doing paper work all the day. The shiksha mitra had not received his pay for three months now but he still was very devoted and helped us to take our classes with his children.

What needs to be done to improve the situation? How can people collectively take more responsibility? The guruji needs to be more serious towards his responsibility? The government is more strict on monitoring? Are we waiting for an external intervention like Pratham? These are questions that still need to be answered. Do parents care if the children are learning anything at all in the schools, or does their responsibility end if the child merely attends the school?

In the meanwhile, girls and boys are still going to school in Gauriganj. They are still sitting on their bories, waiting to be wooed by the world of books. **END**