

Partnering with Indigenous Communities to Develop an Equitable Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Odisha, India

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Abstract

In India, an economically diverse, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country marked by exceptional heterogeneity, the ECE curricula experienced by children from minority groups are usually urban, middle class-oriented, often influenced by the West. The design of these curricula tends to further exclude those already marginalized, especially with learning taking place in a language other than their mother-tongue. It was in this background that a relevant, mother-tongue based curriculum for ECE was sought to be developed for underserved indigenous communities of Odisha (in eastern India). The process focused on privileging the knowledge epistemologies and eco-cultural heritage of the indigenous communities by collaborating with them as knowledge partners and drawing from close observations of community life and children in their context. Around 30 members from the four tribal communities representing a cross-section of members were involved in this process and deliberations on the nature of the curriculum needed. The paper captures the process and its complexities, and shares the insights that emerged, for those seeking to address the educational needs of marginalised communities.

Keywords: Culturally responsive ECE curriculum; collaborative methods; inclusion of indigenous knowledges

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Introduction

In an economically diverse, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country like India, the curricula and pedagogy experienced by children from minority groups participating in ECE tend to be overwhelmingly urban and middle class-oriented (Centre for Budget & Policy Studies (CBPS), 2019; CBPS-UNICEF 2017; Kaul & Sankar, 2009). Further, the framework derives much from knowledge and perspectives drawn from the West. Despite significant research, debates and advocacy at national level to this effect, ECE programmes in India do not reflect the contexts, values or aspirations of children or parents, and fail to hold relevance or be owned by the local community (Kaul & Sankar, 2009; Prabha et al., 2019; Viruru, 2001). Though various reforms, policies and programmes do express this intent (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020; Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013; National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2006), it has been a long-standing challenge to implement this for minority groups not only in ECE but in education sector in general in India (Bhatty & Dongre, 2017; Govinda, 2019). Indeed, inequities pose similar challenges globally across a range of contexts (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Delpit, 1993; Kagan, 2009; Woodhead et al., 2009).

Literature Review

Many social groups face discrimination in the Indian context but this is particularly so for indigenous communities or tribes (designated ‘Scheduled Tribes’ in the Constitution of India). Policy documents have largely remained uninformed by the children’s unique circumstances, their families’ and communities’ values and aspirations, and their remarkable ways of life that have been in synergy with their ecology for centuries. They form approximately 8% of the population of India, a sizeable number of over 104 million (Census of India, 2011). However, given the relentless spread of dominant, middle-class non-indigenous cultures, their rich heritage of language, culture and ways of life, is increasingly under threat.

Several studies have indicated that tribes are viewed to be ‘backward’ and as ‘recipients’

of educational programmes and the communities treated as those ‘who do not know’ how to educate their children (CBPS, 2018; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2014; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013; Rustagi, et al., 2011). With education being restricted to a limited number of ‘standard’ languages, a critical role in this is played by the fact that the language of learning at school is usually not the mother tongue of the tribal child. Moreover, the prevalence of rote learning and the lack of pedagogic engagement (Chandra et al., 2017; Gupta, 2006; Kaul et al., 2017) renders the ECE they attend developmentally inappropriate, unimaginative and irresponsive to their needs. Further, schools expect use of material resources such as books or toys that are simply not available or affordable for tribal families. And even if affordable, these would not be in the home languages. Thus, in many ways children from minority groups are excluded from education from their earliest years. This also creates an emotional stress and a deep sense of inequality and inadequacy (Mohanty, 2000; Pattnaik, 2005). The children and their families are compelled to adopt or adapt to the norms of the dominant culture, with its new – and to them alien – ways of being and interacting.

As a consequence of this, for a young child who is from a tribal or any other minority community, the transition from home to early childhood setting is likely to be a threatening experience (CBPS-UNICEF, 2017; Kaul et al 2017; Kaul & Sankar, 2009; (Sriprakash et al., 2020). In this new context, the child might be unable to communicate. She might also find she has little agency and sense a lack of respect for her family, community and heritage (Maithreyi & Sriprakash, 2018). This situation has exacted a heavy cost in terms of children’s alienation (Bialystok, 2001; Jayaram, 2010; Sharma et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2019) and poor learning levels (Kaul et al., 2017; Kakkoth, 2012; Nanjunda et al., 2008).

Much work has been done around the world in collaboration with marginalised indigenous communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008) to construct both curriculum and pedagogy drawing from their social and cultural lives (Gay, 2010; Levitan, 2020; Levitan & Johnson, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2014) including identities, values, traditions and goals. Collaborative methods acknowledge and value children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ as a resource. This refers to the skills and knowledge that children bring to the classroom from their cultures and everyday life, and have been accumulated in any culture over centuries. Teachers who value and integrate these funds of knowledge in their classroom processes

build on children's previous knowledge, create a classroom ethos that respects children's culture, thus generating greater participation and learning (Moll et al., 1992). Giving space to children's funds of knowledge is at the heart of a culturally responsive curriculum that respects students' cultures and prior experiences, and creates learning that is relevant and effective in particular for those from minority communities (Gay, 2010). Furthermore, this strengthens connections with children's home learning environment, enabling an integration between home and the ECE centre. Unfortunately, these funds of knowledge tend to be ignored during curriculum development or classroom processes (Joshi & Shukla, 2019).

A responsive education as discussed above is only possible through sensitive and respectful collaboration with community members, valuing their knowledge and traditions, and identifying exclusionary practices (Donald et al., 2011; Savage et al., 2011). Countering the dominant discourses on knowledge and identities, and questioning the power held by experts (Moss, 2017; Serpell, 2019; Yosso, 2005) had led to the development of co-created and culturally grounded education, which has improved educational attainment and wellbeing among minority students (Kosonen, 2005; Perez et al, 2004).

In the Indian context, though, such attempts have been limited. In the few instances in India where the community's knowledge heritage and lived experience has been tapped, with involvement of families as 'partners' rather than 'beneficiaries', the result has been empowering for the communities, and has led to deeper engagement and learning for children (Gokhale, 2005; Gupta, 2005; Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan, 2017). Close association with the community has also been part of research and intervention in language-education initiatives to support home languages as a medium of instruction in school and using them as a resource to enhance children's participation and learning outcomes in the early years (Jayaram, 2017; Jhingran, 2009; Menon et al., 2017).

It was with this theoretical and methodological background that the current project developed a process to collaborate with under-served indigenous communities-in Odisha (a state in eastern India) to prepare a relevant and culturally responsive curriculum for ECCE. This paper focuses on the steps taken to privilege the knowledge epistemologies and cultural heritage of the indigenous communities, and working with them as knowledge

partners. In addition, observations of community life and children in context were carried out so that the intended curriculum and materials built on their experiences. I was involved as the Child Development resource person in the intensive process undertaken by a group of professionals working on improving of quality of education for the disadvantaged.

The Context

The project reported here was carried out in Odisha, one of the federal states in India with a significant tribal population. Nearly 25% of the total state population comprises tribal groups, with over 60 tribes (Census, 2011) within the state, each with its own language and culture. Around 77% children from these groups, whose population is a little over 9.5 million in the state (Census, 2011), access ECCE through centres run by the national scheme for ‘Integrated Child Development Services’ (ICDS). It is the world’s largest national comprehensive early childhood programme focusing on health, nutrition and education of children (birth–6 years) from the underprivileged sections.

While guidelines and frameworks for such country-wide programmes are nationally issued, within India’s federal structure each state may develop its own specifics, especially in terms of curriculum. In order to contextualise the ICDS to the substantial presence of the indigenous communities within Odisha, the state government had begun the process of revising the existing curriculum in 2012-2014 by contextualising it and also including tribal languages in early childhood centres. However, as later evaluations have shown, this proved to be inadequate as the medium of instruction in state run ECCE centres and school continued to be the state language – a major barrier for children from tribal groups (Jha et al., (2018). In addition, the tribal content included was mainly translated from Odia, the state language, and did not reflect the culture of the groups for whom it was meant. While this was under way, the present project was initiated with the support of the government and a donor to develop a culturally grounded ECCE curriculum for four tribal communities. The larger project involved relating with and understanding the communities, partnering with them in the process of curriculum development, incorporating their cultural resources in the learning materials, and piloting the implementation of this curriculum by training

teachers and ground level organisations in a number of ECCE centres. This paper focuses on the initial phase of the project, of collaborating with the community and seeking their participation in the curriculum development process.

Objectives

The objective was to:

1. Collaborate with indigenous communities and work with them as knowledge partners in the development of an ECCE curriculum for the children of the region.
2. Conduct a context study to understand lives of children, families and community to align the curriculum development to community's heritage and a contextualized understanding of child development.

Method

To meet the objectives of the project, the key requirement was to connect with the community and establish an equal partnership rather than a nominal one. This would involve listening to the community and building on that to discuss a range of issues with them. Ultimately, this process went through the following stages:

1. Establishing common ground in preliminary meetings.
2. Carrying out a context study to understand the lives of children, families and community, and build relationships.

The project team were practitioners who worked to improve quality of education, the present work being based on action and reflection that had led to insights on how to proceed further. Though the project was not a research study, the work with communities was built on naturalistic inquiry and grounded in insights and experiences of earlier quality improvement and implementation projects with communities in different parts of India. The team also drew on the past experiences of educational improvement practitioners in the country who have worked with marginalised sections of society with underpinnings of

collaborative participatory action research (Gramin Shiksha Kendra, 2019; Gupta, 2005; Participatory Research in Asia, 2020) that includes joint development of questions, data gathering and analyses (Barnett, 2016; Kemmis et al., 2015).

Establishing common ground in preliminary meetings

Before intensive interaction with the communities, the project team deliberated on the different aspects involved. An important concern was to create conditions where the communities would express themselves freely, since centuries of discriminatory treatment and oppression experienced by them had led to them adopting a deferential position and subservient role, as observed in the initial interactions. How could a discussion be made possible with the community without imposing the team's external framework? What means could be adopted to have a common conceptual language that included the community's views, values, aspirations and hopes for children's development and education? The project was also taking place within a context where those coming from outside to 'help' these communities tended to adopt a 'charity' approach (somewhat condescending) or an exhortatory one, urging them to 'fight' for their rights. Given this environment, taking the role of a 'service provider' seeking to do 'good' or a 'favour' was unlikely to help establish a clear sense of common ground.

Apart from being informed by a perspective of equity, the 'experts' were aware of their own limitations and how little they knew of the situation from the community's point of view. They were also deeply conscious of the unjust situation faced by the children and the power relations that could lead to a design likely to generate failure for them. With community and children being the rights-holders and the 'experts' the duty-bearers, the team saw the process as one where their professional responsibility was to develop a curriculum that brought success – defined in terms agreed upon with stakeholders – to children, parents and community. While parents' concern was for their children's future prospects in the unequal social and economic situation they face, the sense of identity with their culture was also a crucial factor. In that sense those participating – the external 'experts' and the local stakeholders – were all united in a common purpose. It was this awareness of being together that enabled the process ahead to unfold. (This may be

contrasted to an oppositional positioning, commonly seen otherwise, that leads to the 'othering' of those for whom the early education programme / system is meant). The team also refrained from starting with the assumption of there being a 'right' way of parenting and learning, or a defined notion of what is worth learning (often of Euro-centric origin and extending the middle-class colonizing of marginalized groups). In the very first meetings, it was acknowledged that there is no 'right' way, as each culture and environment has evolved over centuries to develop its own 'appropriate' ways of rearing children.

Carrying out a context study to understand lives of children, families and community and build relationships

Forming four groups of three members each, the project team travelled to various remote villages and habitations, ensuring that all four tribes and their representative areas were covered. Building on contacts that NGO partners had on the ground, each group spent a few weeks with the respective communities. This helped identify and recognize community heritage and existing knowledge resources or strengths in 'funds of knowledge' that would contribute to the curriculum through the various conversations and observations (Moll, et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005).

The intention was to connect with parents and children, understand the context, and build the kind of relationship that led to community members taking part in the process and consenting to their children being observed. The interactions often began with conversations with elders and families and also with ECCE teachers. The principles identified by the team earlier in its preliminary meetings guided the extensive 'listening' sessions with communities in the villages while conducting the context study. In these interactions, a major objective was to listen to the community members regarding their hopes and aspirations for their children and to understand their views on education as well as challenges faced. This would act as a foundation to build upon.

Apart from acting as respondents many community members also helped detail and refine the context study and supported the team in gathering information relevant to the development of a curriculum in early childhood. At the ECCE centres team members studied the educational context, observed the educational and other processes taking place

(e.g. nutrition support activities) and interacted with the stakeholders. This also provided the grounds to begin developing a close-up view of children's lives in the ECE context as well as outside – to know their routines, interests, places where they ventured, play/activities they took part in, interactions and relationships, and the strengths they brought with them. All this would serve as a resource to the curriculum.

The community representatives also acted as sources or links to sources for cultural material from their tribes (such as folklore) that could be used as materials in the programme for children. This would contribute to the development of a culturally-appropriate, context-specific and mother-tongue based curriculum and materials.

During the context study, members of the community also played an important role as translators as well as interpreters for the resource team for appropriate understanding of cultural concepts and content and also translated simultaneously as four tribal groups with distinct languages were represented in the various meetings. The interpreters also communicated the intent of the resource team, which in turn enabled respondents to engage with the process and offer their insights. The entire process was transparent and carried out in a respectful consultative mode with participation of the community and its members.

Analysis

Each of the 12 project team members completed their documentation. Around 30 members from the four tribal communities representing a cross-section were present during the data analyses and provided feedback. This interaction and feedback was used as a validation technique to see how well the emergent themes resonated with the experiences and understanding of the community (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Core aspects emerging from the context study were presented through pictures and videos, rather than graphs or text-based presentations. This created a visual representation which community members could interpret for the curriculum developer. Rather than present its own interpretation, the team preferred to show actual pictures and videos taken from the field, with the community giving its own views, along with details that the researchers may not have been able to gather or even perceive. The process did not follow a fixed, 'logical' template but was

spread over a series of conversations each involving the project team presenting their data, community members responding to it (in terms of its representativeness of their context), followed by discussions on what it meant for the ECE curriculum.

In this collaborative manner, data were analysed, themes common across the tribes identified as well as aspects that were unique to each group. The implications of children's lives and their abilities, as well as those of the hopes and aspirations of the community, were drawn. The available cultural resources in the form of stories and songs that could be adapted for the curriculum were collated. Aspects that required further work to develop or areas that needed greater attention during curriculum development were also identified.

Some of the key decisions regarding the curriculum too emerged from this process and are described in the section ahead.

Results

The results present the implications for the ECE curriculum that emerged from deliberations during data analyses sessions with the community over the findings of the context study. These included the themes related to children's lives, their activities and their participation in the ECE centres.

Observations at the early childhood centres during the field study revealed that they did have many interesting and positive elements. The relationship between the community and the centre was found to be mutually supported, and children attended the centres regularly. The relationship of children was especially warm with teachers and they seemed to be happy to be at the centres. This augured well as it implied that communities' on-going engagement with the implementation of the emerging curriculum was feasible and likely.

Table 1 presents a sample of aspects of children's worlds and the emergent implications for curriculum based on their context and preferences. These were developed from the discussions that were held with the community representatives. Table 1 also highlights the rich material culture of the villages which is relatively unaffected by standardized industrial products and children's engagement in using and playing with traditional craft objects or materials. This provided much scope for integration into the curriculum. The inclusion of

craft traditions would also foreground the local and home culture in children's lives, keep alive creative self-expressions at the ECCE centres, and further deepen the connection with the communities (Purnell, 2011).

On the basis of the context study and ensuing interactions with the community members certain decisions were taken for inclusion in the curriculum. Since children's physical and social development seemed sufficiently supported by their environment (refer to Table 1), it was decided that a greater proportion of curricular time would be devoted to language and cognitive development. It was also agreed that the home language would be emphasized in the early years with oral exposure to state language Odia taking place only in the final year of ECE, with a view to enabling school readiness. The multi-lingual context where more than one tribal language was present would be seen as an advantage rather than disadvantage – with many activities being created where children would naturally communicate to each other in their multiple mother tongues. Reading readiness and number readiness would be worked upon, along with other requirements for school readiness. Higher order learning aspects appropriate for the age group (such as creativity, problem solving) would also be woven in.

While children's home language and culture were foregrounded, there was also scope for localization as well as the incorporation of community's knowledge heritage. The strengths that children brought with them as being part of indigenous communities emerged as a significant consideration in developing the curriculum frame. Such strengths are often ignored (Ng'asike, & Swadener, 2019), thus missing out on opportunities for engaging children by using meaningful aspects of their lives. During discussions with the community, these strengths were analysed towards implications for the emerging curriculum in keeping with children's context as well as parents' perceptions and the needs of children's development from what may be called an 'external' perspective.

Generating pride in their own culture and staying connected with it was considered important; communities also felt the need to be able to function in the larger, more 'mainstream' culture, as their future prospects depended on this. As children grow up in multiple contexts (their home, school, and the wider world beyond), their education also needed to prepare them to be a part of each of those. This is reflected in the sample of implications for the curriculum (refer Table 1) drawn from an analysis of children's daily

lives.

Conclusion

The framework thus developed led to an initial template for working on and developing the curricula for children of the four tribal communities involved. Cultural diversity was respected, with children's home language and culture being foregrounded. Scope for localization as well as the inclusion of community's knowledge heritage was ensured in different ways – from the incorporation of community's cultural resources to the involvement of community members as knowledge partners in the centres.

The context study highlighted the areas where the cultural strengths of the community and ecology could be embedded in the curriculum and their 'funds of knowledge' form the basis for children's learning and development in the early years (Moll et al., 1992). The study also demonstrated that during interaction and feedback sessions on data analyses with the community, different modes of communication can be established to share data meaningfully (such as through photos and videos captured during the context study). Hence it was possible to establish common ground for a discussion and inclusive decision-making with the community members.

Overall, the process produced a unique experience for all who were involved in it and yielded a few critical insights that can inform future processes. The team learnt that it is possible to implement a collaborative process involving communities as knowledge partners in a respectful environment that can lead to a coming together of different cultures and languages without privileging the dominant groups or their 'norms'.

Note:

The initial pilot work carried out under this project was presented at a conference in 2012. The research work has not been published in any form. Reference below:

Joshi, P. (2012, November). *Constructing an early childhood education curriculum: Collaboration with tribal communities in Odisha, India*. Paper presented at Belgrade International Conference on Education, 2012, Belgrade, Serbia.

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