Learning Skills and Career Development: Addressing the needs of boys in a Juvenile Home

Excerpts from Action Plan for the Juvenile Home for Boys, Bangalore.

Presented at a meeting on 8th June at the Department of Women and Child Development. The PAL-WAY methodology was used for assessments and recommendations given in the Action Plan report.

Introduction :

A dynamic school system responds to the changing needs of the children and young persons who use the system. Literacy and Vocational programs for children who come from extremely difficult backgrounds need to be especially responsive and flexible.

The Promise Foundation conducted assessments at the Juvenile Home over the months of April and May, 2000. Assessments were conducted individually with every child and in small groups. On an average the examiners spent approximately 4 hours with each child. The areas that were assessed and how the data has been used for this Action Plan report are given in the table below :

Area of Assessment	**Data used for Planning**
Academic Skills	Literacy Action Plan
Study Skills	Literacy Action Plan
Potential Profile	Vocational Action Plan
Career Beliefs	Vocational Action Plan

Under *Academic Skills*, the areas of reading of single words and sentences, writing of single words and running text and finally numeric skills were assessed.

Under *Study Skills*, attention and concentration skills, note-making skills, memory management, comprehension strategies for different subjects and scheduling skills were assessed.

As part of the *vocational counselling* programme the Potential Profile, given to boys above class eight evaluated skills in the areas of language, mathematics and logic, design, physical and mechanical activities and inter-personal skills.

The Careers Beliefs Scale evaluated the attitudes of the boys to different career paths and possible cognitions that would be a hindrance to a successful transition from school to work.

The Literacy Action Plan

Base Line Information:

The baseline information for planning the literacy action plan is based on assessments of the basic skills of reading, writing and numbers. In what way is such skills testing different from the tests that are conducted routinely in schools? These tests are not based on knowledge but on skills. They are necessary for the study of all subjects that are a part of school curriculum. Thus an assessment of reading skills gives us information of how well the child can read and comprehend text books in history, civics, biology or chemistry. Similarly the writing skills assessment gives information of how well the child will be able to write effectively in any concept area.

Why is skills testing relevant for this project? Skills testing allow us to establish the level of reading, writing and number skills of each child. The skills testing program also allows us to identify who are the children who are at the same skill level, irrespective of the class they are currently in. Thus we may be able to offer special programs for children who may be in different classes but who have identical educational needs. Skill testing also gives information of teaching programs that need to be priority areas within a particular school system. Where implemented, repeat testing after a 6 to 12 month period can give us information about how the interim teaching program has helped the child to improve skills. Such repeat testing also allows us to improve teacher accountability to pre-stated teaching targets for an academic term.

What are the standards against which the children are being compared? The NCERT had introduced a standard level of expectations for primary school years called MLL (Minimal Levels of Learning) in the year 1992. This scheme of learning levels had been accepted by the state departments of education and teachers state wide have been sensitised to MLL targets. The children at the In House school have been evaluated and graded according to the MLL expected at each class level. The tests are graded and scores on the tests allow us to interpret at which class level the child is currently for that particular skill.

The main findings from the In House School are as follows:

Std. 1 and 2 have boys with a very wide range of skills. Approximately 40% of the skills are much higher than the class level on the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy. Of the remaining 60% in these classes, only half the children are at the class level for all skills. That means that they may be at Std. 1 and 2 level for reading and writing skills but are in Std. 3 or 4 level for numeracy skills.

Std. 3, 4, 5 and 6 children are a fairly homogeneous groups, i.e. most of the children in these classes are almost at the same level in reading and number skills. In writing skills the groups are at least one year behind class levels. There are however a small percentage of children who are more than two years below the class level and need urgent help with a lower class curriculum.

Std. 7 is a homogeneous group. More than 90% of the children have a reading level that is one year below class level. Their reading comprehension skills need urgent attention. They are particularly poor at answering inferential questions. Their reading is slow and they have poor fluency.

When we compare the reading, writing and number skills of the children we find that most have a profile of skills that is not uniformly at the same level. Thus we have children with reading skills at Std. 2, writing skills at Std. 1 and number skills at Std. 4. The Promise Foundation suggests that there is a need for a program that responds to such a varied profile in children's skills level. An alternative system is necessary which does not assume that all children are at the same level for all subjects.

The Action Plan:

Currently the children are in a school system which has been already adapted in several ways to the unique needs of the children. Outstanding among these adaptations are the following :

a) Boys are placed in a class based on a screening program. Thus class membership is based on screening test performance and not age. A boy who is 12 year old, may thus be studying in Std. 2 because his literacy level is much lower than his age mates in regular schools

b) Teaching of specific skill areas (e.g., alphabet learning (kagunitha), multiplication tables (maggi), handwriting (baravanige)) have been made into a separate period in the timetable. This is an innovative step and clearly indicates an attempt at reaching the skills requirements of the children .

There are several areas in which further changes are needed. The assumptions of the education programs right now need to be closely questioned. These assumptions are central to a regular schooling system. However at the Juvenile Home we are dealing with children with unique educational needs. The following points highlight the assumptions and the challenges to these assumptions :

1) A student needs one complete academic year (10 teaching months) to reach the class targets. Thus once a child starts an academic year in a particular class then he will need to stay in the class for the whole of that year. From our experience in the field and from the experience of NFE centers across the country, it is fairly clear that we do not need a 10 month period to complete skill teaching of a particular class. Thus a 14 year old with reading skills at class 2 level may be able to finish the class 2 curriculum in barely 4 months. Keeping the child in the class two level curriculum for the rest of the academic year is unnecessary. The main negative outcome is boredom and drop in motivation for further reading activities.

2) A second assumption is that a child has an uniform level of skill across different literacy and numeracy areas. Thus once a child is placed in a certain class the curriculum of that class across all subjects is applied to the student. If a child is ahead of the class in one skill (e.g., numeracy) the child does not have the opportunity to push ahead in that

particular area. Thus typically the child may be at Std. 2 level for reading, Std. 1 level for spelling and Std. 4 level for numeracy.

The Promise Foundation suggests two alternate Literacy models that may be adopted at the In House school:

a) A Flexible Model

According to the Flexible model children received ***instructions that are tailored to the skills profile of each child***. The model targets children who are either behind or ahead of their current class levels. The model is especially attractive with the boys in the In House School, whose age is more than 8 years and who have a high potential to loose motivation in an educational system that is poorly matched to their unique needs.

- Children attend classes according to the level at which they are in each subject. Thus a child may attend Std. 4 class for Maths and Std. 1 class for Reading and Writing Skills.

- Teachers can continue to teach the same text books and follow the same curriculum for each subject. The only difference is that instead of attending all classes at only one class level, the boy can now attend classes that fit his skills level.

- All exams and end of term tests can continue as per the text books used. Again the only difference is that a given child will for example take the Math exam at Std. 4 level and the Kannada test at Std. 3 level.

The current time table for Std. 1 to 4 at the In House school is already sensitive to the low levels of basic skills among the students. This is seen in the provision made in the time table for teaching of the Kagunithas (alphabet practice), Maggi (multiplication tables) and Baravanige (Copy writing). The changes that are need are a flexibility to draw children who may be in any class to attend these specialized inputs. So, the current practice of offering Kagunitha to only those who are in Std. 1 needs to be replaced with a system where a child who is in Std. 4 for math can receive the Kagiunitha classes because his Kannada level is only at Std. 1 level.

How will the time table work in such a system?

The daily timetable can be very similar to the timetable already in use. Teachers also can continue to follow the same teaching targets and textbooks. The change is that students will move from class to class depending on the level at which they are for a particular subject. Thus for the first period a child might attend a Std. 1 class in Kannada, for second period a Std. 4 Math class and so on.

It is suggested that these flexible methods are first introduced for students and teachers in Std. 1 to 4. At the end of the academic year all children who will move into Std. 5 should have reached Std. 4 skill levels across all subjects. ***The flexible model is thus a bridge programme*** that brings a child up to a certain target level. The Promise Foundation

suggests the target level may be set as Std. 4 level literacy and numeracy skill. Once this level is reached the regular schooling programs may continue.

The Promise Foundation proposes that the flexible system is introduced for classes 1 to 4 initially. The aim would be to bring all children upto Std. 4 level of fluency in reading, writing and number work. Then they are clearly ready for the greater textual and conceptual demand of Std. 5.

b) The Support Model:

A second model that is being suggested is the use of special classes for children who are below their class level. A set of special classes are held either during or after the school time. The Promise Foundation has introduced the support model in government and corporation schools for underachievers through PAL -Programmes for Assisted Learning. The targets of the PAL classes developed as a support model, are as follows:

a) teaching of reading, spelling and basic number operations
b) use of ability grouping
c) children with higher levels of skills teach their peers
d) children do not use class text books, instead they work with flashcards, worksheets and learning aids
e) continuous assessment informs teacher of when the child is ready to stop using the PAL support program.

THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

Baseline Information :

The baseline information for planning the vocational education action plan is based on assessments of the potentials of the boys in language, mathematical-logical skills, design skills, physical and mechanical skills and people skills. In what way is such skills testing different from the tests that are conducted routinely in schools? These tests go beyond the curriculum of a school. Vocational courses and final careers courses draw from one or more of these skills. An early understanding of child's potential profile helps to plan courses that will enhance these talents further. For example, an assessment of the Physical and Mechanical potential gives us information of how inclined and talented a child for courses like turning, fitting, radio and TV repair, hardware maintenance or auto mechanics. Similarly an assessment of People skills give us information of the child's potential for careers like office boy, clinic assistants, shop assistants, sales and marketing and teaching.

How is potential testing relevant for this project? Potential testing allows us to guide a boy to courses after school that are best suited to his talents. For those who may fail in the school leaving exams or those who have dropped out of school, potential testing helps to identify skill courses in areas that are linked to his talent. The potential testing program also allows us to identify boys who are with similar potential profile, irrespective of the

class they are currently in. Thus we may be able to offer special programs for boy who may be in different classes but who have similar (e.g., mechanical skills or logical skills). Potential testing also gives information of skill literacy programs that need to be introduced within a particular school system.

Students' career beliefs

Career beliefs reflect attitudes people have toward certain careers. It is commonly believed for example that the sciences are for the intelligent, while 'weaker' study the arts, the diploma courses are of a lower prestige than university courses and so. Our research has indicated that young people from disadvantaged homes have beliefs that cause them place a low value on acquiring skills and qualifications before they attempt to find a job. Most often the low SES groups are so driven by the need to earn that they enter the world of work as unskilled labourers and this places them on a trajectory toward underemployment and unemployment in their later lives.

The boys at the Juvenile home were assessed for their career beliefs and our findings were as follows:

S.No	**Career Beliefs**	**Students' scores before the interventions**
1	*Immediate gratification of career development needs*: These items assess the student's beliefs about immediate entry into the world of work as an unskilled labourer, against postponing entry until after a higher skill level is obtained.	Student's obtained high scores indicating that they were likely to foreclose education and take any job they could find, at the earliest.
2	*Persistence:* These vignettes tap the respondent's beliefs about the value he places on persisting toward a career goal, inspite of difficulties and failures.	Student's obtained high scores indicating that they were likely to place a low value on facing career development barriers and overcoming them.
3	*Blue Collar Jobs*: These items in the scale obtain information regarding the respondent's beliefs about blue collar jobs.	Students scores indicated that they did not have negative attitudes toward blue collar jobs.
4	*Attitudes toward education*: These items examine the respondent's beliefs about the value of persisting on the academic pathway after school and obtaining qualifications, before entering the world of work.	Students place a very low value on school and obtaining adequate education.

5.	*Attitudes toward examinations*: These vignettes elicit the respondent's attitudes toward studying for and passing important examinations.	Students place a low value on examinations and exhibit high levels of exam fear and anxiety

Activities to enhance skill literacy

Skill literacy is the person's fluency with work skills both at a general and specific level. The ability to handle tools, is an example of skill literacy at a general level. Knowing the skills of plumbing is skill literacy at the specific level. It is strongly recommended that activities to enhance skill literacy, are included in the over all education plan for the boys at the Juvenile Home. Given below are a few ideas:

1. Allocation of students to the different vocation courses should be based on their aptitude and interest profiles rather than random allocation.

2. Vocational courses such as carpentry, plumbing, tool and die making, turning and fitting, have much better employment prospects and are more suited for boys.

3. Introducing new courses need not be linked to setting up cost intensive infrastructure within the Juvenile Homes. It is possible that interactions with existing polytechnics and industrial training institutes could be held to develop informal skills development courses for the Juvenile Home.

4. Internship programmes and work shadowing experiences could also be organised for the older students in factories and companies that are sensitive to their needs.

5. It is vital that all students above the age of 12 go through prevocational training. This could include activities such understanding the world of work, dealing with career beliefs, becoming aware of work ethics and general skills development (e.g. handling tools, skills for measurement, developing sensitivity to dimensions, waste management and so on)