

Project Report
New Era Development Institute (NEDI), India
--vocational training institution—
and
Telemark University College (HiT), Norway
A collaborative NORAD-project in India;

1997 - 2001

Introduction

Telemark University College (HiT) and New Era Development Institute (NEDI) have between 1997 and 2001 collaborated on a project to develop material for peace education and environmental education in Indian schools. HiT was contacted through the Bahàis in Norway and invited to cooperate with NEDI, a vocational institution in Panchgani, Maharashtra, in India, where Dr. Tim Rost, NEDI teacher trainer, had initiated this curriculum development. Because the material was to be tested in Indian schools, the main focus of cooperation was to continue development of this material at NEDI. In the course of the project we identified the specific needs and defined opportunities to develop material for the teacher training programme at NEDI. Moreover, during our stay an outdoor playground of natural materials was constructed by Norwegian staff and students together with the staff and students from NEDI.

HiT Academic Faculty have travelled to Panchgani during this four-year period:

Drama: Jan Ragnar Seetsaas: 5 trips

Biology, natural science and out door teaching: Gisle Grimeland: 5 trips

Outdoor play: Ingunn Fjoertoft: 3 trips

Pedagogics: Aase Joergensen: 2 trips

Pedagogics: Hein Lindquist: 2 trips

Pedagogics and coordination: Ragnhild Elster: 7 trips

HiT Administrative Officers, Anne Hoeva Glenna, coordinator of pre-primary studies;

Administrative Director of the Faculty of Teacher Training, Knut P. Hanevik and Academic Dean, Knut Duesund, have also visited NEDI.

Meeting a new culture

Encountering India is an experience that overwhelms one with immediate and lasting impressions. It is a land of contrasts where modern technology develops in the midst of ancient Indian traditions. Pollution and filth co-exist along side beautiful nature. There are beggars and beautiful women in colourful silks, devastating poverty and amazing wealth. Our encounter offered a lifetime of experiences in the course of a short stay.

Indian school systems and school cultures are vastly different from those in Norway. Indian schools can be characterized by strict discipline and occasional corporeal punishment, on the one hand, and mutual respect between children and teachers on the other. The classes are large, some up to 60 children, yet the children are polite and generally quiet and do what they

are told. Learning methodology in ordinary classes emphasizes rote memory with little time for reflection; the children are good at quoting sources of knowledge. Students in the teacher training programme were courteous and well-disciplined, we discovered, however, they reflected little on their work in the schools. When we asked about why they acted as they did, they often responded with a quotation.

We also observed a tradition of “indoor” classrooms. In spite of the unique learning potential available in Panchgani, a town situated in a beautiful natural landscape, all teaching of biology and environmental subjects occurred inside the classroom.

Two school traditions in cooperation

In addition to learning by rote memory NEDI also emphasised the importance of lesson plans. These were structured in detail with great concern for content, and the timing was to be accurately planned. Norwegian educational traditions lesson plans, in contrast, are based on an analysis of the current circumstances surrounding the class situation. The content, the conditions in the school, the children and the cultural context influence the plan. Norwegian teacher’s education reflects the concept: “learning as understanding”.

The project was initiated with an open attitude and flexibility to new ideas. To be able to gain adequate insight into Indian educational traditions it was necessary to spend a great deal of time observing teaching in dialogue with teachers and students at NEDI and surrounding schools. Initially we all attempted to convince the others of the pre-eminence of our own traditions. In the course of three years of observation and challenge at NEDI we came to a deeper understanding of our own teaching material together with the staff and the students and most importantly we reached a mutual understanding with the educators at NEDI.

The Norwegian educators grew to understand the necessity of having clearly defined lesson plans and strict teaching methods in the Indian school system. Developing detailed materials for Indian schools in the NEDI tradition provides concrete plans for teachers of varying competence levels in different school situations. Together with the NEDI staff we came to a consensus of the value of teaching self reflection to the NEDI students, and further that teaching could occur outside the classroom. The reflective students and teachers we met, successfully managed, in time, to use the detailed material in creative and independent ways.

The work

Peace education and environmental education learning material

The main goal at the outset of the project was to collaborate in developing material on peace education and environmental education. Dr. Tim Rost had already developed many lessons and we began by observing these lessons in practice. Each observation was followed by discussions where we normally agreed on the content for the peace education lessons. At first we were concerned that rigid lesson planning would limit the freedom of a teacher to promote the curiosity of the children. Later we saw that reflective teachers were able to use the material creatively. The importance of this material was clear; in interviews teachers confirmed that the children developed more positive attitudes towards each other after being exposed to these lessons. The children showed more concern for each other and their families and also demonstrated a competence in conflict resolution, which the other children did not have.

In the environmental education programme many discussions focused on two diverging content approaches for environmental awareness: to emphasize a scientific approach or an ethical approach. The importance and the need for this material is obvious. India faces serious environmental problems which do not seem to greatly concern the general population, nor are the issues visible in the school curriculum.

The NEDI material for peace education and environmental education was collected from a variety of sources, and all the materials were adapted to the Indian way of life, Indian nature and Indian culture. The entire collaborative period was spent developing this material which NEDI is currently in the process of publishing.

The playground

We observed that the children's school at NEDI, NEITT, lacked a low-cost playground. NEDI's spacious grounds at Kanga Hill provided an ideal location for a building project. With HiTs playground-building competence using material from the nature, the Norwegian faculty members and students together with staff and students from NEDI completed the low-cost playground. Through the four-year period both sides learned much about play culture and implementing materials from each culture. Today, several subjects are connected to the playground and have become an integral part of the curriculum at the teacher training programme at NEDI: the construction of a nature playground, the maintenance of the playground, the implementation of the playground and the educational benefits for the children playing.

The lesson plans

In the interaction between the two school cultures, Indian and Norwegian, numerous educational questions arose. It was agreed that several of the Norwegian educational ideas be tested with the NEDI students, and through this work new ideas be adapted into the lesson plan system used at NEDI. Since the studies at NEDI are shorter and different from the Norwegian teacher studies, the materials also needed to be extensively simplified. The principles promoted in this material include: outdoor teaching, using nature as a classroom, using nature as a playground, drama as a method and also as a science in itself, and the reflective practitioner: the thinking teacher. All lessons are integrated in the main subjects: environmental education and peace education. This material will be implemented in the NEDI teacher training course and it will also be adapted to the material which NEDI will publish. The material contains introductions, lesson plans and handouts for each subject.

Reflections

When two diverse cultures meet with the intention of being creative, one important requirement for success is sufficient time together. Through the process we all experienced initial curiosity and engagement, developing frustration and finally mutual understanding. The long process was necessary, and it took time. We conclude that the collaboration has resulted in fruitful, concrete changes for NEDI where Norwegian input will be visible in their curriculum.

It will be insightful to return to evaluate the project. Relevant questions in the assessment process will be: Have the lesson plans developed together with HiT been implemented? Have these plans been further developed? If so, in which ways? Is there evidence of an increase in environmental and peace education in the schools of Panchgani since 1997? How do the teachers characterise the children's attitudes after additional years of this kind of education?

HiT academic faculty have profited considerably from the collaborative experience in that we have achieved enhanced cultural competence and hands-on knowledge of the Indian school system and curriculum. We also have gained respect for the Indian system of education which promotes: politeness among the children and the students, mutual respect for learning, positive learning attitudes and educational achievements. We have grown to understand the importance for the individual of getting an education in India and just how conscious Indian children are of this necessity. These goals and attitudes are reflected their classroom behaviour.

Notodden, Norway, 1 February 2002

Ragnhild Elster, Project Coordinator