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Incentives in elementary education - do they make a difference[1]?

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The issue of incentives and subsidies has been part of the debate on ensuring educational access in almost all the countries. In India we continue to grapple with the issue in a context where vulnerable poor children in rural and urban areas do not have access to a regularly functioning and a child-friendly school, which means that they remain outside, drop out or are pushed out of the school system. In such a scenario then where do incentives come in?

Right up to the mid-1990s a welfarist approach dominated the development and educational arena. It was believed that the situation can be turned around through providing monetary and other benefits to poor children and their families or through targeted incentives in the form of uniforms, school supplies and mid-day meals. The assumption was that the problem lies in the abject poverty of families and that providing relief or support could enable them to pull themselves or their children out of a difficult situation. There was also an unspoken belief that the problem is with the 'people' and not the system.

In the Indian context, the caste based reservation that were part of affirmative action policies also influenced the manner in which support to poor children's education was addressed. The burden of non-participation shifted to the poor, turning the gaze away from the systemic challenges of creating a level playing field for all in a newly independent country. Repeated demands by educationists for a common school system and ensuring that every single school is endowed with basic facilities and infrastructure fell on deaf ears.

The decade of the 1990s saw renewed interest to improve access to primary and upper primary schools in India through the mobilisation of national and international resources. Though by 2003, 86.96 per cent of habitations had a school within 1 km and 78.11 per cent had an upper primary school within a 3 km radius, significant inter-state differences persist (Table 1). While expansion of schooling led to

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tremendous increase in enrolment across the country, it did not address the needs of *all* children of the school going age.

Table 1: Percentage of rural habitations having primary and upper primary schooling facilities (1993 and 2002)

		Primary				Upper Primary			
		Within them		Up to 1 km		Within them		Up to 3 km	
No.	State/UT	1993	2002	1993	2002	1993	2002	1993	2002
1	Andhra Pradesh	69.73	78.49	88.57	93.91	13.82	24.49	65.40	74.73
2	Karnataka	60.36	67.44	83.75	88.41	24.71	30.66	85.32	88.26
3	Maharashtra	64.70	67.64	84.22	91.17	25.37	28.95	78.42	78.18
4	Orissa	48.96	51.54	82.42	82.93	13.41	19.77	77.24	73.55
5	Rajasthan	51.11	53.41	74.58	79.84	14.59	21.07	64.43	78.26
INDIA		49.79	53.04	83.36	86.96	13.87	18.45	76.15	78.11

Source: 6th and 7th Educational Survey. (2005). NCERT, Government of India, New Delhi

Even though the total number of girls and SC children who enrolled in schools rose substantially, several girls and children from deprived communities (working children, those in urban slums, residents of far flung habitations, SCs/STs and nomadic groups) never enrolled. Severe social barriers to meaningful participation of children from some communities continue to exist.

With the UN sponsored Child Rights Convention (CRC) formulated in 1989 and India signing on to it in 1991, we saw the introduction of a rights-based framework to educational access and children's participation in education. From the mid-1990s many International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) who raised resources through child sponsorship turned their attention to the school and adopted a holistic approach with a focus on improvement in infrastructure, facilities, teachers and supplies coupled with individual incentives like uniforms and books to children – addressing both supply side (school) as well as demand side (children) issues. Subsequently school health and sanitation and other family/community focused inputs were added on. Yet, notwithstanding these new/fresh approaches, there was a realisation that a significant section of the population continued to live in abject poverty and struggled to feed, clothe and educate their children.

The turn of the century witnessed a critical shift in the approach of donors from child-centred to community development programmes with sponsored communities. They realised that well administered individual incentives worked up to a point, but had little impact on the overall environment of children. There was also a realisation that in the absence of livelihood security and a caring/supportive environment, the gains of individual sponsorship remains limited. Nevertheless experience with an integrated approach threw up new concerns in that often the focus on the child got diluted, and in many instances the poorest continued to be left out of the beneficiary frame. Once again there was a return to the child centred approach to ensure a child's right to education.

The sites of the study

This study tried to bring together the experiences of different approaches to incentives followed by six NGOs in the states of Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. These NGO are partners with an international child sponsorship based charity and have been working in the field for over 25 years. All the NGO partners started off with individual child sponsorship programmes – providing a range of incentives (cash and kind) to identified children. There was a growing realisation in the 2000 that individual sponsorship did not yield the desired impact on the overall health and well being of children. As a result the NGO partners were encouraged to move from an individual approach to group incentives or school based incentives. It is indeed interesting that NGOs in educationally relatively forward states readily adopted a more holistic approach and started working with mainstream government schools. However this was not the case in Rajasthan and Orissa. The NGOs in these states either continued with individual scholarship / sponsorship programmes or continued to run parallel educational programmes and did not engage with the formal school system.

Perhaps the reasons for the difference in approach between NGOs in the two sets of states could be attributed to certain characteristics. Rajasthan and Orissa are poor where the overall situation with respect to education is quite bleak. Notwithstanding over 15 years of intensive educational programmes like DPEP and now the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (*Lok Jumbish* and Shiksha Karmi in Rajasthan) rural villages and hamlets do not have a well functioning school system. Despite provision of schools and teachers, there is no guarantee of learning, nor are all children enrolled. In such a situation, the NGOs experimented with other mechanisms/channels to enable children to access education. They consciously created alternative channels for the education of sponsored children like *balika shikshan shivirs (BSS)*, NFE centres (full time and half-time), hostels, admitting children to private schools taking care of all the expenses, running residential schools and so on.

Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh present a different picture. The NGOs here have gradually withdrawn individual incentives and worked (at different levels of intensity) with the formal school system and the community and have organised children's groups/community groups, created a community fund, provide remedial education/coaching classes, run bridge courses, have organised camps for children during holidays and so on. This was (perhaps) made possible because the formal school system has improved a great deal in these states over the last 15 years.

The strategies adopted by the NGOs in these diverse regional environs are to a large extent determined by the larger social and political environment and the importance given to meaningful access to education. We are actually dealing with different generations of issues in different states and also different districts/locations within a state – even though the macro-educational indicators are not dramatically different (as evident in Table 3).

Table 3: Dropout rates among SC and ST boys and girls

	AP	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Orissa	Rajasthan
Dropout SC boys I-V	44.09	6.12	17.02	44.99	53.07
Dropout SC girls I-V	46.12	14.03	18.21	42.36	36.29
Dropout SC boys VI-VIII	63.41	27.19	30.03	63.73	69.65
Dropout SC girls VI-VIII	68.87	51.61	38.22	67.17	80.07
Dropout ST boys I-V	63.29	4.88	34.42	59.58	52.19
Dropout ST girls I-V	68.47	4.96	42.82	63.19	38.31
Dropout ST boys VI-VIII	76.80	53.81	59.12	76.49	70.42
Dropout ST girls VI-VIII	82.49	56.80	65.14	76.56	79.63

Source: Select Education Statistics. (2006) Government of India, New Delhi.

Table 4: Key indicators from NFHS III (2005)

	AP	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Orissa	Rajasthan
% Women aged 20-25 married before the age of 18	61.4	49.4	48.9	38.7	65.7
% Women whose Body Mass Index is below normal	37.5	38.2	43.0	43.7	36.5
% Children aged 6-35 months who are anaemic	72.0	79.4	76.8	75.8	80.1

Source: Fact Sheet, NFHS III. (2006). Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi

There are many things that are common to all the five states. The poorest of the poor – be it the last 10 per cent or the last 25 per cent of the population – continue to struggle for survival and most of the adult women are illiterate and many of the fathers have never been to school beyond the primary level. Dropout rates among SCs and STs remain very high and evidence from the field suggests that this is also the case with Muslim (girls and boys) and some very deprived OBC communities. Age of marriage in the very poor SC and Muslim communities in all the states is around 13 to 15 years for girls. Malnutrition and anaemia among the poorest quartile remains higher than the general population and many more children are malnourished (Vimala Ramachandran and ERU Research Team 2004). The different approaches adopted by established NGOs could perhaps be attributed to the overall administrative culture and also the awareness level among the population.

Insights from the study

This study is not an evaluation or an assessment of NGO programmes studied. We have tried to explore issues dealing with incentives and the hidden cost of education with a view to gaining some insights and exploring some possible ways forward in such a diverse and challenging situation.

Most of the children who received individual incentives in the past and also in the present in the five states come from families where one or both parents are illiterate. We also came across field workers/*anganwadi* workers who were themselves sponsored children and are now working in the NGO or in government programmes. We met first generation sponsored children who were now leaders in their communities and we also came across sponsored children whose lives remain unchanged. Also evident in the five states was that despite incentives at school level

by both government and NGO/INGO, parents had to bear some costs of their children's education. Parents were willing to pay for exam fees, bags, footwear, stationary, uniforms etc. Not all children in a family were fortunate to receive incentives. Parents spent not only for the sponsored child (on hostel fees, exam fees, schooling peripherals, health etc) but also for the non-sponsored siblings when they wanted them to attend school. At the primary level, parents reported spending a minimum of Rs 500 -1000 per annum for a child. The majority of parents said that they should be relieved of the burden of purchasing textbooks (in some cases all textbooks are never available to all children), stationery and uniforms. Many parents with four or five school going children found it difficult to spend equally for the schooling needs of all the children, so the variations of choices emerged, namely educate one child, withdraw the girl child, push the better performing child to another level or let the girls continue in the government school and move the boys to the hostel. These extra costs are one of the factors that deter the poorest from accessing schools even if they are in the village.

But the bottom line is that the poor are eager to get their children educated. The question is whether the providers of education, the government – the NGO or the donor – are able to meet their demand for quality education.

Incentives not sufficient to enhance access to quality education

The first and perhaps the most important insight is that incentives – be they individual or to the school – may be necessary and useful in some situations (especially for first generation learners) but are not sufficient in themselves to enhance children's access to quality education. In particular, individual incentives may change the life of a few sponsored children – but in the absence of a functioning school as also a larger literate environment, do not go a long way.

In Rajasthan the alternative NFE centres and *Balika Shikshan Shivirs (BSS)* have given children access to education for a few hours a day or few months a year. However in the absence of a functioning primary, upper primary and high school severely inhibits access beyond a point – as these non-formal streams at best prepare children up to the primary level. It is worrying that in Rajasthan out of a total of 2,843 children in the 5 sample villages (1,310 girls) 583 children (267 girls or 49 per cent) in the 6-14 years age group in the five sample villages are not attending any school. The short BSS camp was the only educational experience of the girls as participation in the formal school was not possible for those from very poor families. Also, and more importantly, parents were willing to send their daughters to a short-term camp condensing five years of education into seven or eight months but were not ready to send them to an upper primary school. Persistence of co-educational schools and lack of women teachers were cited as reasons.

In Orissa 90 per cent of the primary schools in tribal hamlets are single teacher schools with all the attendant problems of poor teacher motivation, absenteeism, lack of knowledge of the tribal language and so on. A baseline survey conducted by the NGO in 1999 showed that only 23 per cent children (17 per cent girls) were attending

school. A more recent (2005) survey revealed that the percentage has now gone up to 85 per cent (71 per cent girls). The local NGO runs bridge courses as also provides hostel facilities for some children to pursue their education in the block or district headquarters or gives children scholarships to study in residential schools. Sponsored children and some of their siblings have been able to study beyond the primary level and even complete high school. However, the children who are left behind in the village continue to struggle with a dysfunctional school system with hardly any teaching and no mid-day meals.

In one village we came across two families that did not send any of their children to school – they said they were too poor. One family said they did not have any link or relationship with the local NGO, though 58 children from this village received scholarships to study in a hostel or a residential school. In sharp contrast was another sample village where the VEC was active, the government primary school functioned regularly and almost all the children were enrolled. The contrast between villages with a functioning school and an active VEC and those with a dysfunctional school and inactive VEC is marked.

Often one assumes that the provision of TLM will energise the teaching learning process. In both Orissa and Andhra Pradesh in several schools the teaching material and school equipment supplied by the NGO or the government were lying unutilised with little visible impact on either the school or ICDS centre. The question before was whether there was any way to remedy this situation? One possibility was to make the CBOs, the community, VECs and the children themselves more aware of what is being provided and work through them to ensure better utilisation of these in the classroom.

Field experiences from Maharashtra and Karnataka reveal that creating a conducive environment for children's education through active VEC/PTA or MTA, children's clubs, Bal Panchayats and other village level forums for collective action gives teeth to the right to education of every child and promotes child participation. As a result we found that almost all the children up to the age of 14 years were enrolled and attending school, the mid day meals were regular, the teachers were more responsive and perhaps more regular because of a strong community group. The incentive here was in the form of remedial teaching/tuition classes. Equally, field workers and teachers reported (there was no hard evidence to back this) that pre-school education (in Andhra Pradesh) exerts a positive influence on school participation.

Individual incentives accentuate disparities

One of the most disturbing findings of this study was that individual incentives could increase disparities. We came across girls in two states whose sponsorship did not prevent early withdrawal from school and child marriage. We met one child who was not only married but had given birth to a child before she turned 17. We met siblings of children who were studying in hostels or residential schools who were struggling to cope in the village school. We met one family that persuaded the NGO to shift the sponsorship from their daughter to their son. Sponsorship in the form of scholarships

or an opportunity to study in a residential camp definitely benefits the concerned child but it also increases the distance between the child and his/her siblings in some cases and definitely between the sponsored family and other poor households in the village and creates a divide in the community.

The most deprived and marginalised were left out

A related issue in almost all the areas has to do with the selection of beneficiaries. While a public community based selection process is certainly desirable, we noted that extremely poor/marginalised households in most of the villages visited were invariably left out. People/families with a voice, with clout or those who hold leadership positions within the community based organisations (CBO) seem to have greater representation among the sponsored children.

There needs to be a more conscious intervention in the selection of beneficiaries. For example the selection in both the districts of Andhra Pradesh is done through CBOs. Discussions with community leaders revealed that many more inputs are required for CBOs to go out of their way and select the most deprived in the village. This was also the case in other states as well. Given the limited resources, prioritisation is crucial.

Parallel educational programmes deflect attention from mainstream schools

In December 2006 a group of 30 NGOs came together in Hyderabad for a workshop on quality education. Many of them ran supplementary education centres/tuition classes, short-term accelerated learning programmes/camps or provide additional teachers to local primary schools. Though NGOs had been working in their areas for 10 to 20 years they admitted that despite sponsorships the children they sponsor rarely go beyond the primary stage. Several NGOs found it difficult to work with mainstream schools and were content with running parallel centres. Funds from international donor agencies were utilised to create parallel systems.

We found that while such programmes benefit a number of children, they do not reach all the children. Equally, most village based interventions – be they in the form of a non-formal centres or camp based accelerated learning programmes –rarely go beyond Class IV or V. Opportunities to access upper primary or high school facilities are done through scholarships for children to enrol in private/mission schools or to live in a hostel and study in a nearby town/block headquarters.

This raised a serious concern. Bypassing the system is an attractive option, especially for NGOs that have alternative sources of funding. Yet, evidence from across the country demonstrates that there is really no alternative to working with the mainstream schools, as these cater to the poor.

The key is to turn the system around and make the school vibrant and responsive

Since 2002, the NGOs in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh gradually withdrew individual incentives and turned their focus on school based and community level activities, teacher support and training, providing additional teachers, activating

and motivating the statutory school committees and on remedial education. They also work closely with the local education department officials and school teachers to ensure the proper functioning of the school and regular provision of the mid day meal. In addition, they support children's learning through remedial education classes, school/village library, pre-school education and children's clubs/Bal Panchayats. They focus on all the children in the village at the elementary level. Some of them also provide scholarships to enable children to go beyond the elementary stage. The NGOs supplement the inputs provided by the government and do not duplicate them. However, it is also important to note that while the schools were functioning – not all of them were using the TLM provided by the government or the libraries supported by the NGOs. The impact of their work is visible though, the schools were well kept and clean and most importantly they were functioning regularly.

Mobilisation essential for a rights based approach

A clear message coming through discussions in the sample villages, with NGO partners and through the extensive literature survey is that incentives – individual or school based – are only as effective as the level of awareness about them.

We came across a popular saying that if we throw money only the strongest will pick it up! In this context, a careful analysis of the families that have availed of individual incentives and those who are excluded is instructive. While such an exercise was not carried out as a part of this study, in some of the sample states we came across extremely poor families in the sample villages who were not aware of individual or school level incentives; they rarely participated in village level meetings and had almost no contact with the Panchayat. Conversely, we also met poor families (not the poorest but several step removed from abject poverty) that had benefited enormously – young girls/boys were part of *kishori sanghas* or youth clubs, their mothers or grandmothers were members of SHGs and the children were in school, in clubs, in Bal Panchayats and so on.

Andhra Pradesh presented an interesting contrast where the local NGO had made an effort to reach out to the most deprived – out of the 50 households/children we interviewed in one district, 36 of the fathers and 45 of the mothers were illiterate. In another district, 19 fathers and 27 mothers were illiterate. However, we also came across a few extremely poor families who had not received any benefits. Conscious selection of the most deprived can send a message that individual or collective incentives are meant for the most deprived.

An important learning from Karnataka is that building a strong people's organisation/women's organisation, ensuring participation of the poorest of the poor in the village and disseminating information to all social groups is essential for the effective utilisation of either individual or group incentives. While women SHGs did not always include the poorest of the poor, the children's cooperative was open to all children as savings was not a pre-condition for participation.

The Maharashtra model is also very interesting. *Bal jatra* (children-led day long programme) educated the parents on what the children should learn in different classes, the inter-linkages between health, nutrition and education, the roles and responsibilities of the VEC and the rights of children. Focusing on the learning outcomes of children made parents aware of what and how much they were learning in school. The *bal jatras* are followed with remedial classes run by volunteers (older boys and girls) to help children with their studies.

Children-led campaigns against child labour/employing children as bonded labour have made a big difference in Andhra Pradesh. Active community education on issues of child rights has been able to create an environment where children and those who are working for children can assert and demand their participation in schooling.

Create structures for participation and active engagement

Another important insight is that mobilisation alone is not enough. Community mobilisation or children's mobilisation has to be followed up with institutional structures that facilitate effective participation; here too there are some thorny issues that need to be addressed.

While people's organisation or CBOs are seen as a crucial institutional structure for sustaining the processes, there seems to be little understanding of what the relationship between the CBO, the VEC, the Panchayat and other groups in the village should be. Possibly each NGO needs to ask if there is a need for a separate structure and whether competing structures in the same village could be counterproductive and dilute focus on children's educational needs. Even if one were to continue with the CBO/people's organisation it is fairly evident that a lot more inputs are necessary in order to address critical social issues such as child labour, early marriage and child abuse. This was quite obvious in Rajasthan where child marriages continue in the villages covered by the NGO even after two decades of work. There is a silence on these issues.

In Maharashtra the NGO has created local level associations / children's groups and resource agencies (academic support to teachers). Creating sustainable community based organisations ensures that the interventions initiated by the NGO are sustained beyond the project phase. In Karnataka, a children's cooperative has been formed where all the stationery required by all the children is purchased in bulk at wholesale rates and sold in the school. Very poor/needy children are given free books out of the small profit made.

The CBO in Rajasthan plays an important role in all the activities initiated by the NGO in the State. It decides who will receive the benefits (like fee for coaching classes for Navodaya Vidyalayas and the National Open School), who will be sent to BSS, setting up a grain bank for food security and so on. CBO leaders play an active role in supervising NFE classes. However, it is noteworthy that the CBO is not as active in the formal school system. We also met families that had received no support or benefit because they were not members of CBO and others who had accessed a

range of benefits because of their prominence in the CBO. Most importantly, the *CBO* is not actively working towards ensuring the rights of children – especially the right of every child to eight years of elementary education and the right not to be forced into marriage before they turn 18.

In Andhra Pradesh the interventions with the children in the form of children's clubs seem the most promising, enabling what most of us see as the overall development of children. We noted that the children were active and alert to their surroundings and as a result gained a better understanding of their lives and the barriers to their education and development. They demand better schooling and services such as MDM. Therefore, strengthening children's clubs and enabling children's forums across villages could perhaps be one of the ways to build solidarity across villages.

The virtuous triangle

The NGOs studied in the five states present interesting variations of the three sides of a child rights triangle namely *the community* (parents/Panchayat), *the children* (as a group) and the *government school*. The key to the effectiveness of the Maharashtra and Karnataka models is that there is a close link through formal institutional structures for participation and interaction between the children, the community and the local school. In Andhra Pradesh the NGO works closely with the school and with the community and children but direct community-school linkages were not strong and are mediated by the NGO. In Rajasthan the community is linked to the NGO and the parallel educational programmes run by them and not the government school system. In Orissa there is no such community structure that is actively engaged in education in four of the five sample villages. Sponsored families/children primarily have a direct link only with the NGO.

A structured relationship between the three – community, school and children - could enable the community to both access government services/incentives (textbooks, uniforms for SC and ST children, girls; scholarships/stipends, monitor quality (of the mid day meal) and the functioning of the school with the children playing a key role in their education and empowerment. In the absence of a three-way channel the community may not be in a position to assert its rights nor can the children articulate their needs or make their voices heard. Again, ensuring that the children get their textbooks, uniforms and mid day meals and making sure that statutory bodies like VEC/MTA or PTA (as the case may be) are not just paper committees has to become a priority with NGOs, especially in the educationally backward regions of the country.

Access existing government services and incentives

All the five states visited had programmes with a range of incentives targeting at the very poor, specific communities like SCs, STs, children with disabilities, nomadic communities and so on. In addition, the states are committed to providing free textbooks to all children, all girls or specific groups. Scholarships and stipends were also available for children to study in residential schools run by the Tribal Welfare or Dalit Welfare Boards. Millions of rupees have been invested since 1991 to ensure universal elementary education. The Rajasthan government has created special

schools known as Rajeev Gandhi Pathashalas and declared that any village/habitation with 25 or more children without a school would be eligible for a RGP school. However, a recent study of the education system in Rajasthan reveals that the location of these schools has been problematic and the most deserving habitations are not able to access them (Rashmi Sharma and Vimala Ramachandran, December 2005)**.** Equally, in larger multi-caste villages, Dalit or tribal children are often told to stop coming to the regular government school when a RGP is opened in their village. Ensuring the regular functioning of these schools has not attracted the attention of local NGOs as many of them dismiss these schools as being beyond redemption.

A part of the reason for this indifference may lie in the perceived capacity and outreach of the NGOs. It is somewhat easier to run separate/parallel programmes that can be monitored internally. Indian NGOs come under a strict FCRA regime where their registration is likely to be revoked if they confront the official machinery. This sense of insecurity compels many of them to look for easier options like running a few parallel centres or sending sponsored children to private schools or hostels. Not only can NGOs not substitute the formal system, all children cannot have access to quality education through parallel streams. The solution lies in promoting the a rights based approach in empowering communities to access their entitlements and enable the poor to access resources meant for them – especially nutrition, healthcare and schooling.

Responsibility of donors

Donors/funding partners also need to share some of the responsibilities. For instance, child-sponsorship programmes continue to be monitored on the basis of individual report cards on sponsored children. Thus even as many donors have moved from an individual child sponsorship approach to a community empowerment approach, the monitoring mechanism has remained unchanged over several decades. Donors expect NGOs to file progress reports by the name of the child and also provide letters and other necessary documentation to the sponsors.

Long-term and sustainable change is possible only when both the NGO and the donors realise that working with mainstream institutions may require alternative monitoring systems and also more time to facilitate change in the community for long-term impact. They also need to recognise that such a strategy may entail direct confrontation with local vested interests that do not have a stake in the education of the poor and the most deprived.

Insights have raised more questions!

Quality has always been an elusive and daunting goal and ensuring good quality education for all children is even more difficult. If measurement of learning outcomes is accepted as a key determinant of quality then efforts have to be made to go full circle and ensure that the measured results are shared with children and parents, the outcomes analysed by teachers with resource persons at the cluster and block levels and the entire experience fed into the planning process at the local level.

Short-term camp based programmes can at best provide a head-start – short-term bridge courses, camps or accelerated programmes to help children 'catch-up' can inject energy into the system and be a good starting point. Similarly, parallel non-formal education centres also do not add much value if children have nowhere else to go after they complete the primary cycle. While tuition classes have become a popular substitute for ineffective learning in schools, there are no short cuts and learning has to be a continuous and sustained process throughout the academic year and for at least eight years.

Public activities like science fairs, reading and writing competitions, mathematics puzzles, excursions, libraries and children's clubs could help create a positive/creative environment for education. Such activities would also help turn the spotlight on the value of education in the overall development of children. Coupled with sports and cultural activities, such periodic events could enable children to explore their creativity and also hone their managerial/organisational skills.

Accountability and transparency go together. Village and child wise date though collected has not been used creatively. If shared in the public domain like the Gram Sabha (general body of the community at the village level) there is some hope of forging closer linkages with the community of parents and other interested people in the immediate environment of the school and has the potential to turn around a difficult situation. For instance, having a display board outside the school with basic information about the school, the children, the teachers and availability of government incentives and mid day meals not only adds to transparency, it also help parents to ask questions to clear their doubts and problems.

What is required is a systemic approach and not to make do with piecemeal inputs. A virtuous process needs to be set in motion where an innovation, even if limited, demonstrates tangible outcomes and encourages the formal school system to adapt and change to meet the challenge of universal access to quality education. Discussions with people in the government and outside reveal that the factors that inhibit effective teaching and learning in schools have a lot to do with broader systemic and governance issues like an indifferent administration, low teacher morale, teacher availability, actual teaching time, assessment processes and overall monitoring mechanisms. Efforts of government, INGOs or NGOs need to adopt a multi pronged approach to address all these issues simultaneously if the provision of incentives to poor children is to have any effect at all.

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