



Report of the Expert Group Consultation on the Cultural Relevance of Adolescence Education

17 July 2009, New Delhi



The organizers of this consultation offer a special thanks to the students from Hansraj Model School, Punjabi Bagh, Delhi for their well-thought out and brilliantly staged street theater that clearly articulated adolescents' concerns and helped to focus the deliberations during the consultation.

“Why does the adult world treat us as a problem?”

“Why do parents not listen to us?”

“Why do teachers and principals not respond to our queries other than those related to academics and discipline?”

“Who will answer our many questions and help us to understand and manage our concerns related to growing up?”



Students of Hansraj Model School, Punjabi Bagh, enact a theatre performance.

These questions were put forward by adolescent students from Hansraj Model School, New Delhi in the concluding moments of a thought-provoking skit on the challenges of adolescence. In this manner, they aptly set the context for the ensuing deliberations of the Expert Group Consultation on the Cultural Relevance of the Adolescence Education Programme held on 17 July 2009 in Delhi. The overarching objective of this consultation, organized by UNFPA, UNESCO and UNICEF, was to provide a forum for experts, practitioners and other stakeholders to share their views on various aspects of the Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) in the Indian cultural setting and to develop a consensus that may reinforce confidence in its efficacy.

Adolescence Education Programme

The Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) was launched in 2005 as a response to the needs of adolescents by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), in collaboration with the National AIDS Control Organization, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, to be implemented in all the state government schools in the country. Concurrently, a separate programme supported by MHRD and UNFPA is also being implemented by key national agencies of school education. The coordination of the implementation of this programme is the responsibility of the National Council of Educational Research and Training. Furthermore, the National Curriculum Framework 2005 explicitly refers to AEP as an integral component of the school curriculum.

The Adolescence Education Programme is being implemented across the country for students of class IX and XI. The aim of AEP is to provide scientific knowledge, and to inculcate positive attitudes and life skills among adolescents, in order to help them to cope with the challenges of growing up and to minimize risky behaviour.

Expert Group Consultation

However, recently some concerns regarding the cultural appropriateness of this programme have been raised. It is in this context that the expert group consultation was organised. The United Nations has been addressing the challenges and concerns of adolescents for many years, with adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH) being a crucial area of intervention. The UN Agencies assist the government in enabling young people to cope with the realities of life and to make responsible decisions based on complete, accurate, age-appropriate and culturally sensitive knowledge.

The consultation was attended by a select group of experts, educationists, teachers, adolescents, peer educators, media persons, practitioners including the representatives of state governments,

teacher education institutions, teachers' unions, medical doctors, representatives of UN agencies and civil society, from various parts of the country.¹

Setting the Context

The deliberations began with the welcome address of Mr. Nesim Tumkaya, the Representative of UNFPA, who stated that society, and particularly the United Nations, has a responsibility to provide an enabling environment to adolescents, so that they can deal with the transition from childhood to adulthood in a way that is of benefit to both themselves and society. Referring to the recent debate on the cultural appropriateness of the adolescence education programme, he hinted at the difficulties in finding a common denominator in a multicultural society such as India. In view of the above, Mr. Tumkaya requested the valuable inputs of the esteemed participants.



Mr. Nesim Tumkaya, UNFPA, addresses the gathering.

Mr. Subhash C. Khuntia, Joint Secretary, Bureau of School Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, observed that there was no denying the fact that adolescence education (AE) was required. He also referred to the National Curriculum Framework 2005 which incorporates all the elements of AEP. But what he considered of concern was the content of adolescence education and the methods of its implementation. In the light of the cultural variations in a country as large and varied as India, Mr. Khuntia stressed that every state should develop its own teaching-learning materials. Furthermore, he emphasised that although content is important, what is more important is the methodology of transaction.

Dr. Warren Mellor, Director a.i. and Representative of UNESCO, highlighted that increasingly schools are being demanded to do more and more. He questioned how much a school can do on its own, and stressed the importance of family and community support for attaining the objectives of AEP.

Panel Discussions

The first session was followed by panel presentations, divided into four sections: Panel I presented 'Educationists' Perspectives'; Panel II focused on the 'Learning from AEP Implementation through the Government School System'; Panel III discussed 'Practitioners' Experiences'; while Panel IV conveyed 'Voices from Civil Society'. In each of the panels, the presentations by panellists were followed by animated discussion.

A recurrent theme in the proceedings was the key role played by teachers in the implementation of AEP. The participants stressed that teachers should be equipped with adequate resources,

¹ For a full list of participants please see Appendix I.

training and support so that they can fulfil their roles effectively. Specifically, it is necessary to improve the quality of teacher preparation. Teachers must be sensitized to deal with the contents of AEP as well as be adequately equipped with skills and pedagogical abilities. Also teachers need to learn how to deliver AE in tune with the cultural sensitivities of the community. Repeatedly, participants stressed that proper pedagogical strategies ought to be adopted for the effective transaction of AE, as it is not AE itself that is problematic, but rather the way in which it is taught and handled. Either teachers must have the capacity to act as counselors, or accessible psycho-social support services must be made available. School nurses are a resource which could be further utilized to support the teachers in this respect.

Many participants discussed whether one teacher or all teachers should impart adolescence education. While some participants believed that not all teachers could impart AE, others argued that the responsibility for this education must be given to all teachers, as AE cannot be treated in isolation. As one participant noted, “it cannot be seen as a watertight area as life is not a series of watertight compartments”. In fact, any teacher who can relate to adolescents should teach AE. The most important factor is that the teacher acts as a “friend, philosopher and guide”.

It was emphasized that adolescence education was not just for adolescents, but also for parents, education administrators and community members. It is essential that all these constituencies of society be consulted and engaged regarding the curriculum in schools. One participant even argued that every parent and child should have the option of whether or not to attend a particular session on AEP being conducted in the school. It was recommended by some participants that a handbook on sex and sexuality be developed for parents, to ensure that they can handle the issues of adolescence. In general, it was suggested that there ought to be increased communication, between and among adolescents, teachers, parents, and the wider community. One of the youth representatives requested that the AEP enlighten parents, and influence them to reduce pressure on their children, particularly in relation to examinations.



Prof. Siddiqui (National Council for Teacher Education) addresses the gathering.



The participants listen to a presentation by CEDPA on AEP in Jharkhand.

Repeatedly, participants stressed that there is a reluctance to discuss sex and sexuality within Indian society, which leads adults to evade confronting this important aspect of human life. Using terms such as life skills instead of sexuality camouflages the core of what children are expected to learn. Further, sex education cannot be imparted in the form of a medical model. It has to be taught with feelings and respect, and should link to relationships, values and self-esteem, as opposed to being treated mechanically. Herein lies the difference between sex education and sexuality education. Sexuality is a part of every person’s life; it is something to be celebrated and adolescents must learn how to negotiate this aspect of life. Moreover, much anxiety during adolescence centres on the question ‘am I normal?’ It would create more problems by removing

illustrations of body parts from text books, as without an available reference, young people may think that they are abnormal as they do not have scientific knowledge about how body changes occur during adolescence. As one participant stated, the real needs of adolescents should not be bypassed in the name of culture.

The ideal age of imparting adolescence education was also deliberated. Participants laid great emphasis on the point that children are already learning about sexuality at an increasingly younger age, which the education system is not recognizing. Due to a lack of formal knowledge about sex and sexuality, these children are getting into difficulties with relationships and behaviour. As one participant asked, “are we closing the stable door when the horse has already bolted”? Evidence-based data from India should be available to ascertain the needs of adolescents at various ages. Additionally, it is necessary to be open and flexible to the different requirements of adolescents in diverse settings. For this reason, a recurrent theme during discussions was how to target those adolescents that are out-of-school. In this context, various participants stressed the importance of self-learning materials on sexuality, and the need for web-based self-learning facilities.

The form of adolescence education was also a matter of debate. Representatives from the youth stressed that AEP was treated as yet another subject to be studied for examinations, as opposed to being put to practical use in everyday life. Appealing for simpler language and a more direct method of transaction, the participant stressed that the confusing manner in which AEP was imparted meant that it was beyond the comprehension of many adolescents. This reinforced the participants’ repeated statement that adolescents must be involved at every stage of planning and implementation. Similarly, participants highlighted the need to impart the necessary life skills to translate knowledge into behaviour. Therefore, the education system should introduce many activities in schools that require adolescents to work together in teams. Methods could include theatre, role plays, drama, sports etc., aimed at inculcating respect for self and for others, respect for one’s body and respect for one’s team.



Ms. Bachi Karkaria addresses the gathering.



Participants attend to the deliberations.

The significance of “political will” came out strongly in the presentations from various states, namely Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. The state governments highlighted the importance of a) government ownership; b) conducting sensitization activities with community leaders, government officials and school principals, for example through multi-stakeholder advocacy workshops; c) regular monitoring and supportive supervision of the programmes; d) collaboration with the media; and e) acceptance among teachers, parents and students. In particular, regular and sustained engagement with the media was considered critical to strengthen the efficacy of AEP across the country.

Statements and Recommendations

At the end of the day, the participants put forth the following statements and recommendations to be conveyed to the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

We the educationists, practitioners, young people, members of civil society, professionals and concerned citizens on July 17, 2009 hereby state the following:

Every adolescent has the right to learn about the physical, psychological, and social changes that occur during adolescence. And all sections of society have an obligation to ensure that every adolescent is provided an opportunity to learn about these changes.

Many individuals are apprehensive of open discussion on issues related to sexuality. It is important to be respectful to the society's cultural ethos in order to address these sensitivities in a positive manner.

Evidence indicates that many young people approach adulthood faced with conflicting and inaccurate knowledge and inadequate skills, which exacerbates their vulnerability to abuse, exploitation, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Ongoing engagement with adolescents regarding the content and process of Adolescence Education Program is essential for it to be relevant to their needs and concerns.

The information provided should be factual, accurate, reliable, age-appropriate and presented in a culturally sensitive manner.

Scientific evidence rather than arbitrary decision-making should guide the decision regarding at which age AEP is initiated.

To fulfil their role of providing adolescence education, educational institutions need to be learner-friendly, safe, enabling and respectful to the individual.

As teachers have a pivotal role in imparting this adolescence education; it is critical to enhance their competencies to enable them to address adolescent concerns effectively. Teachers should be fully supported and resourced to implement the programme.

Adolescence education requires participatory and interactive learning processes which relate to the experiences of adolescents, promote acquisition of life skills and encourage responsible, positive and safe behaviour.

AEP should be complemented by targeted, confidential and friendly services to meet the physical and psycho-social health needs of adolescents.

Parents are critical to the implementation of AEP and their meaningful involvement should be ensured at all stages. All efforts must be made to incorporate their queries and concerns.

Interaction with the media and other civil society organizations will strengthen advocacy efforts and prevent the exploitation of the term "sex education".

It is essential to ensure effective and continuing interface with the media to further youth empowerment.

Continuous efforts should be made to seek and strengthen partnerships with all stakeholders in order to empower young people with the necessary life skills for responsible behaviour.

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Doodle by a workshop participant

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