

Mitra — the Adolescent Friendly Centre: Outreaching the Open School Learners for Developing Potential through Life Skills Education

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Abstract

Life skills help adolescents to transit successfully from childhood to adulthood by healthy development of social and emotional skills which in turn help adolescents to form their own identity. Practicing life skills leads to qualities such as self-esteem, sociability, tolerance and capabilities to decide what to do and what to be. It helps the learners to know how to adjust well with others and to learn from them what is right and what is not acceptable. So it is absolutely essential to create a conducive environment for the learners to learn academic courses along with life skill education which is very rare in Open and Distance Learning system particularly at school level. An initiative in this regard has been taken by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), India in collaboration with Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt of India and The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in its Regional Centre and the present paper is the case study of 'Mitra' (Friend) the Adolescent Friendly Centre, NIOS, Regional Centre, Bhubaneswar. Besides academic issues, it provides various opportunities to the learners to acquire life skills, understanding adolescence and growing up, creating awareness against sexual abuse, career counseling etc. More than 5000 learners of NIOS have so far benefited out of this programme since the starting of the project 'Mitra' at NIOS Regional Centre, Bhubaneswar.

Introduction

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), India under its MHRD-UNFPA supported Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) had taken up an initiative to create an adolescent friendly environment within its regional centre. The aim was to address the issues and concerns of adolescent learners with an objective of developing their potential through various strategies of Life Skills Education.

Life Skills

The World Health Organization (1997) has defined life skills as the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. These Psycho-social abilities develop over the years continuously and in a dynamic manner. The ten core life skills identified by WHO are: critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationship, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress.

These are essentially those abilities that help to promote mental well-being and competence in young people as they face the realities of life. The NIOS was convinced that life skills education would greatly enhance the competencies of the distant learners. Life skills are valuable set of abilities that are used every moment of our lives. These facilitate individuals in making wise choices in choosing

friends, selecting career, developing or breaking habits, making and breaking relationships, following discipline, understanding one's needs, solving problems, interacting with others etc. Things as simple as personal hygiene and how to talk to people without being offensive to complex ones like the ability to negotiate out of an abusive relationship that may lead to serious health related consequences are some of the life skills that everyone may need to become a productive member of the society.

Adolescence Period – A Challenge

As per the enrolment data 2013–14 seventy seven percent learners fall in the age group of 14–25 which can be categorized as adolescence and early youth. It is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood and is characterized by rapid physiological maturation and psychosocial transformation. These transitional years involve a shift of an individual from dependence to independence and sexually dormant to sexually active phase. This is a crucial period when not only do they have to learn to cope up with these changes but they

also need to successfully negotiate with the parental, social and peer pressure. It is the period to take decisions on crucial issues that will impact their future in terms of career and family life. Characterized by risk taking behaviour, strong emotions and mood swings, adolescence is a turning point in one's life but it is a period of increased potential too. In the best of circumstances, making the transition from childhood to adulthood is a challenging task and young people without adequate support may flounder, sometimes with lifelong consequences.

Mitra – The Adolescent Friendly Centre

The 'Mitra' was launched on December 2, 2010 at Bhubaneswar Regional Centre of NIOS as a pilot intervention. The response has been very positive and encouraging. Till the end of 2015 more than 5000 learners have got an opportunity to participate in various activities thus empowering their life skills to handle critical adolescence related issues and concerns. The centre was christened 'Mitra' or 'friend' due to the importance of peers during this period. It also had a positive association with learner's everyday life experiences. The 'Mitra' reached out to this group as a centre for direct contact. It organized life skill building workshops for learners to empower them to effectively address their psycho-social, emotional, adolescence and vocation related concerns. It also reduced learner isolation by providing a platform to learners and tutors to network and collaborate. It installed buddy programme and organized effective personal contact programmes on selected topics. Apart from counseling on adolescent issues the centre assisted the learners to deal with stress effectively and guided them on setting future goals along with facilitating the admission process and subject choices.

'Mitra' Bhubaneswar: Changing lives

Eighteen year old 'Avani Das', walked into the NIOS Bhubaneswar Regional Centre hiding behind his mother. Spirit broken by repeated failures and rejection, he had lost confidence and was too shy to interact. After attending few workshops at 'Mitra', Avani began to come out of the shell. Not only did he attend more programmes but also actively participated in group events. Now if he has to visit the Regional Centre, he comes alone. Avani shared that the confidence gained from the workshops has been life altering; he believes that his approach toward life has changed for good.



Mitra Centre

Workshops on AEP

The 'Mitra' so far has organised 30 workshops on various issues and these workshops provide learners a safe space for practicing life skills for enhancing qualities such as self-esteem, sociability, tolerance and capabilities to decide what to do and who to be. It also helped the learners to know how to adjust well with others. It helped them to learn from each other, what is right and what is not acceptable. In other words, the more they know about life-work, play and social responsibilities, the better they will adjust and learn. Workshops on effective communication and developing and maintaining relationships facilitates the development of skills to weigh pros and cons of the situation, hence, act as a mediator to appropriate behaviour. This is also corroborated by the studies carried out by Elias, M. J., Gara, M. A., Schuyler, T. F., Branden- Muller, L. R., & Sayette, M. A. (1991). The promotion of social competence: Longitudinal study of a preventative school-based program (Elias et al. 1991, pp. 409–417).

Different workshops on core AEP issues such as understanding adolescence, growing up, body image, nutrition etc. are often organized. Gender remains a very critical concern in a patriarchal society. Understanding stereotypes and challenging discriminations form an important part of the dialogue both for boys and

girls. Research has found that adolescents who affiliate with delinquent peers are at increased risks of involvement in criminal activities (Level & Chamberlain, 2005), substance use (Claes et al., 2005), and mental health problems (Fergusson et al., 2003).



AEP Workshop at Baripada

Before anyone ever smokes a decision is made. It may or may not be healthy decision. Often making these choices may be difficult because of stress, anger or peer pressure. Sometimes the consequences may not be very clear. 'Mitra' believes that learning the facts about drugs and alcohol can help young people make informed decisions. Hence, workshops on peer pressure, understanding substance or drug use, misuse and abuse are regularly organized where the learners were sensitized about the challenges they or their friends may face.

Enrolled for the Secondary Course, 'Nishan' observed that programmes like time management and stress management at 'Mitra' helped him to manage studies and daily life more efficiently. Apart from the information and knowledge gained from the workshop, he believes that the experiences he got from 'MITRA' bolstered up his confidence as he made many friends and got an opportunity to participate in events.

Workshops on Understanding and Coping with Stress, HIV/AIDS, RTIs and STIs etc. were

organized to empower learners to make the right choices. A Blood Donation Camp which was conducted in collaboration with Red Cross Society of India. 26 precious units of blood were collected in this first ever venture of NIOS.

Quiz, Debate and Creative Writing

Apart from the life skills workshops on adolescent issues competitions like quiz, debate and creative writing were organised. These skills lend a hand in the development of social competence and problem solving skills, which in turn help adolescents to form their own identity. These activities proved to be beneficial for the learners. Quotes from the essay of Ankita were published in the UNFPA desk calendar 2012. Prize winners participated in a comic and creative writing clinic at NCERT. Comic workshop on environmental issues was later conducted by the same learners for their peers in 'Mitra'. Their comics were selected for the UNFPA desk calendar 2015. Selected comics of NIOS learners were displayed at NCERT Youth Festival 2014 and also at 7th Asia Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health Rights (APCRSHR) on January 21-24, 2014 at the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC), Manila, Philippines. Such an exposure would never have been possible for the learners of open and distance education.



As a special initiative services of a sign language expert were made available which was able to bring the hearing impaired learners within the ambit of discussions. Ananya's feedback is backed by various researches carried out on inclusive programmes. Research has found that special education students who were educated in any kind of mainstreaming practice learned social skills that they may not have been exposed to, had a better understanding of the world around them, and felt as if they were a part of the regular community (Wolfberg 1999). Further numerous studies have quoted that disabled students who were included in the regular classroom settings proved to be more confident and have displayed qualities of raised self efficacy. Studies have found that there was also a benefit in regular education students who were exposed to the mainstreaming process. Many educators believed that educating non-disabled students with disabled students created an understanding and tolerance within the non-disabled student that better prepared them to function in the world outside of the school setting.

'Anaya', a differently-able young girl was overwhelmed to win three prizes in a quiz organised on occasion of completion of one successful year of 'MITRA'. She said " 'MITRA' is a hope for those children who are deprived of normal schooling for certain reason, it works as a friend, philosopher and guide to them". She also shared that it has helped in building communication skills and self-confidence. She had participated in an inclusive programme organized by 'Mitra'.

Research was also conducted where it was found that the student with special needs is able to develop relationships with peers that are non-disabled and the general education student also benefits from understanding people with disabilities. Such mutually beneficial elements were observed during the inclusive programmes. Therefore, this Inclusivity

certainly helped in more peer interactions between these two groups. It was also observed that the positive self-perceptions of all learners were enhanced through the introduction of this feature.

AV Library

'Mitra' AV library was helpful in conducting PCP sessions using NIOS films as a teaching learning tool. The library was able to bridge the digital divide and bring the benefit of technology to learners who were unable to access these facilities. Activities to equip them with appropriate information, knowledge and life skills were organized. The Mitra 2014 also started with the introduction of new Digital Display System at NIOS Regional Centre, Bhubaneswar which provides updated information to the learners, parents and other visitors all the time.

Sports and Games

During the Year 2011, on popular demand games like Carrom and Chess were introduced and competition were organised, with an objective to ease stress among learners and to direct their energies to healthy pursuits.

Career and Job Fair

Many of the Open Schooling learners may terminate their education after schooling. Hence, with a view to address their career concerns 'Mitra' Career Mela (Fair) was organized from 11-12, September, 2012. Inclusive in nature, many of the learners, including girls, were disabled. Experts from different fields guided the learners. A bus load of learners were taken to a five star hotel for information regarding careers in hospitality industry. They were then taken to a University in Cuttack to showcase different field of education. Critical skills of accessing information, seeking vocation and preparing for interviews and group discussion were an

integral part of this exercise. A job fair was also organized on 28 May 2016 exclusively for NIOS learners. A total no. of 112 learners from different districts of Odisha participated in this fair. Five renowned companies participated in this Job Fair as recruiters.



Learners Engagement Activity

Learner Engagement Activity was introduced in the year 2014 and 'Mitra' played an important role in facilitating LEA-2014 and 2015. It encouraged the adolescents to articulate their ideas of being physically, mentally and ethically healthy. They got an opportunity to think, recall their experiences and freely express their views and opinions through: Role Play, Survey, Creative Writing and Poster Making.

Another Learner 'Buddheswar Dehuri' is working as a salesman. Buddheswar managed to find time to attend programmes at 'MITRA'. He said "The prize and certificate means a lot to me. In my school days when I failed to win, I used to cry and my father would buy me a cup (memento) to console and pacify me. But this one is mine, I won it on my own". Buddheswar also shared that he had never been so punctual in life, now that he has been rewarded for his punctuality, discipline and participation, he would strive to maintain that in all walks of life. Buddheswar aspires to complete his studies under NIOS and become a successful businessman in future.

During the Year 2015, 'MITRA' facilitated conduct of Poster Making Competition highlighting the roles and functions of Community Radio Stations. 'MITRA' is also facilitating conduct of Model PCP Sessions at the Regional Centre on different topics, which benefit the learner with proper guidance and peer interactions.

During the year 2012, the ambit of 'Mitra' was enlarged to take the services to other Study Centres with an objective of including greater number of learners. Induction Programme and Workshop on "Growing Up" and "Substance Abuse" was organised at various Study Centres of NIOS. Apart from making Study centres accessible to NIOS learners and giving information about NIOS, these workshops equipped learners with necessary skills to understand the physical, mental and psychosocial changes during different stages of human development, gender roles and stereotypes.

Feedback from other Learners about 'Mitra'

- *"It gives opportunity in making of a student"*
- *"Provides knowledge on adolescent friendly centre"*
- *"It teaches us good values"*
- *"MITRA is a very good friend, it helps disabled and normal students"*
- *"MITRA is a hope for learners who are deprived of normal schooling for certain reasons. It works as a friend, philosopher and guide."*
- *"MITRA teaches about NIOS in a very good way"*
- *"Through MITRA learners can develop their own quality"*
- *"MITRA helps learners to achieve their aims and ambitions"*
- *"MITRA gave me ideas, happiness and friends"*
- *"It makes us feel Hum Kisise Kam Nahin (We are not less than Anyone)"*
- *"The movies have been helpful"*

- *"It inspired me from my very first programme"*
- *"It helps in personality development and getting new ideas"*
- *"Helps in improving communication and self-confidence"*
- *"It helped in increasing creativity"*
- *"Enabled us to participate in programmes"*



Conclusion

Keeping in view, Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) had set up as a pilot intervention in the year 2010 at NIOS Regional Centre in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, 'Mitra' addressing the issues and concerns of adolescents with an objective of developing learners' potential through various strategies of Life Skills Education. 'Mitra' reached out to the regional learner population as a direct contact centre for learner interaction. Apart from

counselling on adolescent issues, the centre assisted the learners to deal with stress effectively and guided them on setting future goals along with facilitating the admission process and subject choices. Since the year 2010, the AFC Bhubaneswar has organized myriad activities to felicitate learners' growth. The activities have been extremely successful in achieving the desired output of creating an adolescent friendly environment. The AFC Bhubaneswar received an overwhelmingly positive response from learners and administrators.

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