

Effective participation of parents and close community linkage is viewed as essential for harmonious development of children and for mutual enrichment of learning experiences provided at school and home.



Development Partners

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
The Marshall Foundation
The Sir Dorabji Tata Trust

The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) is a private, non-denominational, development agency, established by His Highness the Aga Khan in Switzerland in 1967. The Foundation seeks sustainable solutions to long-term problems of poverty through an integrated, community-based, participatory approach that reinforces civil society and respects local culture. In India, AKF works essentially in three thematic areas: Health, Education and Rural Development. It also works to strengthen civil society institutions.

The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme [(AKRSP(I))] is a non-denominational, non-government, development organisation. AKRSP(I) works in the states of Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh for the betterment of rural communities by promoting activities and developing models for sustainable natural resource use and building human capacities.

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The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. Its agencies work in over 30 countries for the common good of all citizens, regardless of their gender, origin or religion. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

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Learning Support Centres (LSCs)

Bihar, by most key indicators, is one of the poorest states in India. Literacy rates, especially for women, are the lowest in the country. The state is ranked last in the Education Development Index (EDI) developed by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA). Dropping out, repetition of grades and low learning ability stops or severely impedes children's successful transition from one level of schooling to another. The low quality of classroom processes is reflected in low learning levels at the primary level where percent of Grade 5 children cannot read Grade 2 texts (Annual Status of Education Report, 2010).

The need for quality education for children emerged as a key demand during consultations between the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) in India

and communities in Bihar. Community members expressed a strong desire to educate their children and improve the quality of their existing lives. It is in this context that Learning Support Centres (LSCs) were jointly conceived and initiated by the Aga Khan Foundation and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) [AKRSP(I)]. Implemented in the Muzaffarpur and Samastipur Districts of Bihar by AKRSP(I), Learning Support Centres cater to the educational needs of rural children from marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

The Approach

LSCs support primary grade children, in the 6-12 age group, by addressing their learning gaps and enabling them to become independent learners. These centres function during after

school hours and provide academic support, which complements children's learning in school and demonstrates a model of quality education to communities. There is an emphasis on viewing communities, schools and LSCs as interconnected sites of learning to realise the goal of quality education. Each LSC has an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre linked to it that caters to the 3-6 age group and involves the community, especially mothers, in realising and providing quality education to their children.

Child-Centred Pedagogy

LSCs follow a child-centred teaching and learning process in which children are grouped according to different learning levels rather than grades. An innovative pedagogy focuses on



Teachers are trained to build concepts amongst students through the use of teaching learning material, learning by questioning, reflective analysis, group activities and demonstrations.

Bihar LSC Facts at a Glance	
Coverage	42 <i>tolas</i> 2 districts 3 blocks 7 <i>panchayats</i>
No. of children enrolled	3,500
No. of community teachers	130 (55 women and 75 men)
No. of Village Shiksha Samitis (VSS)	42

“At the learning centre, I draw and paint quite often. I enjoy singing, reciting poems and talking with my teacher and friends. My teacher is very patient and explains complicated sums very well.”

Neekhat, 11 years old, student at Chaksen *tola* LSC

Cover photo : A student studying at a Learning Support Centre in Samastipur District in Bihar. The curriculum encourages learning through the use of a variety of educational methods and tools in a stimulating and encouraging environment.

developing children’s language, literacy and numeracy skills and facilitates holistic child development. Rather than learning by rote, the LSC approach emphasises respect for the individuality and potential of each child to allow space and freedom for independent expression.

Child-centred activities such as *Balgeet* performances (children’s rhymes and songs), *Chitrakala* (art), craft, storytelling, clay modelling, dramatisations, games and physical activities provide a variety of interactive settings to enable children to learn. The activity-based curriculum enhances children’s cognitive abilities, confidence and social skills. There is an emphasis on keeping children’s motivation high, valuing their efforts in the classroom and harnessing their desire to learn. The curriculum capitalises on the natural desire of children to learn and absorb information and promotes integrated learning in a stimulating environment.

Professional Development of Teachers

The engagement of community men and women as LSC teachers is a key intervention in community participation. LSC teachers are central to facilitating the learning experience and act as the interface between the LSC and the community. Teachers meet with parents at LSCs and conduct

home visits to discuss their children’s progress. In addition, teachers form a key component of community meetings to discuss academic and management aspects of LSCs.

Developing and strengthening capacities of LSC teachers is a core strategy to enhance their professional competencies and enrich their learning processes. AKF regularly collaborates with education resource agencies, such as Bodh Shiksha Samiti in Rajasthan, to organise teacher training workshops in a wide range of topics such as theories of child psychology, activity-based learning, use of diverse teaching and learning material, personal reflection, personality development and participation in community activities. LSC teachers, especially women, have become more confident as a result of the training and earned considerable respect in their communities.

AKRSP(I) continues to build the capacity of teachers through refresher training and classroom simulation activities, where teachers are given feedback on their performance. LSC supervisors, selected and trained from amongst the teachers, manage academic tasks and support the teachers in making planning and management decisions. Exchanging experiences through monthly workshops facilitated by AKRSP(I) has motivated teachers to solve their common problems themselves.

Role of the Community

The LSC is a community-driven initiative where community participation is central to the approach. Community members have taken the lead in establishing LSCs in their *tolas* (hamlets) by contributing physical space for their construction, as well as time, material and labour. Parents contribute a token financial amount each month to cover partial running costs, which creates a strong sense of community ownership. Since the centres function within the *tola* itself, all processes are visible and transparent, which enhances community involvement and monitoring of the education process.

Each LSC is managed by a Village Education Committee, locally known as a *Village Shiksha Samiti* (VSS), consisting of 10-15 community members, of which 50 percent are women. The VSS meets once a month to discuss LSC management, including children’s learning, teacher performance, attendance and scope for LSC improvement. AKRSP(I) facilitates regular programmes and workshops to train VSS members and build their capacity in LSC planning and management. VSS members are now proactive participants in realising the goal of equitable quality education. The participatory methodology has enhanced women’s voices and

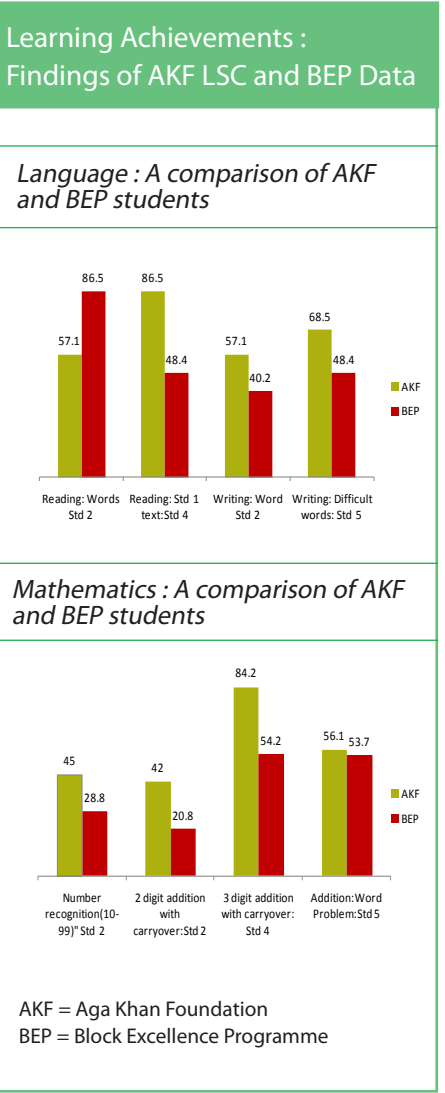
involvement in the decision-making process. It has also been significant in identifying and addressing issues pertinent to girl child education.

Communities are now more committed to the education of their children. Parents have gained a greater understanding of quality education including child-centred methodologies and the role of teachers. This awareness has resulted in high enrolment in the LSC and increased learning levels of children. Parents are cognisant that quality education can transform a child’s life and have learned to play a critical role in the education of their children.

Learning Achievements

Assessing the learning levels of students is paramount to identifying critical issues in education, encouraging improvements in education practices and influencing policy changes. Recently, AKF and AKRSP(I) jointly developed a child learning assessment system in collaboration with Pratham, to track the learning levels of children at regular intervals.

The results of the study revealed that children studying at LSCs have achieved higher learning levels both in language and mathematics as compared to children studying in



42 Village Shiksha Samitis (VSS) have been formed consisting of 208 women and 200 men from the community. AKRSP(I) works towards strengthening the capacities of VSS members to enhance their participation in decision-making at the community level.