

India

Thinking skills in Mobile Crèches

This feature outlines the place of thinking skills in the work of the Foundation-supported Mobile Crèches Projects. It is assembled from an email interview with Mridula Bajaj, Executive Director of Mobile Crèches, amplified by material from the video Mobile Crèches child-to-child made by Indu Balagopal/Tata Institute of Social Sciences for the Aga Khan Foundation; and from the Mobile Crèches publications: Activities for preschool children; Training for Empowerment; and On the seedbed of childhood: stories in development and change.

Mobile Crèches is a non-governmental organisation that has been reaching out to the young children of construction site workers and their families since 1969. As its name suggests, the organisation reaches them through crèches which can follow the families from one site to another. Given that it often does not know how long it will be in contact with each child and family, Mobile Crèches tries to impart thinking skills in children to try to have a maximum impact in a short space of time. It sets out to stimulate the children to think for themselves and undertake action based on rationalising what they have learned and how to apply it. These thinking skills will hopefully stand the children in good stead for the rest of their lives. Mobile Crèches works in New Delhi, Bombay and Pune.

In situations of social deprivation, great responsibility is placed on the shoulders of young children. They often take on adult roles in caring for siblings or older family members, performing domestic duties, and generating income. To be able to do this, children need to have the capacity to rationalise situations and make decisions. Mobile Crèches tries to let the children develop this capacity, in the belief that it will equip them with

skills that they and their families will benefit from for the rest of their lives.

Mobile Crèches works with children aged 0-12 years old. It stimulates thinking through a natural, gentle approach in which the children themselves are encouraged to take part in question and answer sessions, express their feelings, make choices and set priorities. It tries to expose the children, whose lives are often bound by the borders of the construction sites, to a wider set of experiences through visits to places of cultural and social interest, or interaction with groups of children from other backgrounds. These enriching experiences give the children a wider set of references, and thus a basis for comparison, thereby fostering their thinking skills.

Mobile Crèches erects a crèche on each site for the duration of the building work, where possible enlisting the help of the contractors. In the unsafe environment of the construction site, the crèche is a safe place for the children, and after a short while they know that they are welcome there and do not have to be afraid. It is a place where they feel free, as there are not many restrictions or rules. Mobile Crèches avoids telling children what to do, but lets them learn through play and by choosing their own activities. This is often a new approach for the children, but they generally respond well. In an atmosphere of openness, Mobile Crèches' workers talk to the children about what they are doing with them and why. Creative activities such as drama, story-telling, art and clay modelling are an important part of the work with the children. They bring out the children's emotions; the crèches are often the only places where they can express themselves safely and be taken seriously. Encouraging the children to express their emotions and analyse them is a catalyst in helping them



Mobile Crèches activities create a basis for critical thinking during the early years

Mobile Crèches, India
Photo: Courtesy Mobile Crèches

develop analytical thinking skills and place themselves in the world around them.

Some of the children have difficult home situations – the extreme poverty in which their families live brings multiple problems. By getting them used to thinking and making decisions about simple things, such as choosing a toy, they start thinking about more important choices. Mobile Crèches tries to facilitate an analytical and thinking process, so that the children arrive at their own decisions or choices after having thought about them, weighing up the options and anticipating the outcomes. The younger the children are, the more this process is facilitated. It is difficult to associate critical thinking with very young children, as they do not yet have the capacity for it. But getting them used to observing their environment and thinking about it from an early age – for example, through such simple

things as identifying colours and shapes and seeing relationships between objects – and learning to make choices about basic things will get them into the habit of thinking. As they get older this will gradually turn into critical thinking and analytical skills.

Mobile Crèches' activities create a basis for critical thinking during the early years. The project makes a conscious effort to stimulate children's cognitive abilities, sensory motor abilities, pre-reading and writing skills. These in turn help develop their ability to rationalise and analyse. The children learn through play, using materials specially designed for this purpose, which the crèche workers learn to make themselves.

Without the crèche workers, Mobile Crèches could not do its work and it is very particular in selecting them. The right attitude and a love of children are

the most important criteria, more so than being literate or having qualifications. When Mobile Crèches was established in 1969, all that was asked of the workers was an ability to nurture and some basic home running skills. Since then much has changed, and the current training programme is the product of a dialogue between academic principles and sound practice demonstrated by the field workers. While the workers must be able to create an environment that is supportive, loving and enabling, their focus must always be on developing children's critical thinking skills. The curriculum, too, has been planned on the basis of methods born of years of experience of effective early childhood care and education. The crèche workers undergo rigorous training, which lasts between 6 and 12 months. It is on-the-job and is reinforced by a continuous programme, which brings field experience and theory together. The trainees learn to care for and stimulate the children, and in particular, learn how to conduct activities that foster cognitive development. These are based on five major principles: experiential learning; working from simple to complex; working from concrete to abstract, familiar to unfamiliar; and learning through play.

These five major principles are worked through in three different steps. The first step is to provide the children with opportunities for expression, in which they will be listened to without judgement. In the second step, the emphasis is on exposure and building experience. This is when the children are taken on outings, they hear and tell stories, they read books, they eat different foods. In the third step a topic is selected and discussed for a month. Initially that topic is examined in a way that the children can relate it to their everyday lives. They discuss it in terms of how it affects themselves, their families and communities, and what its implications are in terms of their gender and their roles in their families and society. They then look at the topic in a wider context. For example, its role vis-à-vis environmental factors such as plant life, ecological linkages, environmental threats and possible solutions. In the Mobile Crèches curriculum, the crèche workers consistently build on the last stage that the children have reached, before moving to a new stage.

Mobile Crèches invests in the children in the hope that once they develop the ability to think critically, they will be able to carry it through in the rest of their lives and will benefit from it. While it is hard with such a transient population to know what happens to the children after they leave Mobile Crèches, there are regular reports from surrounding schools that the children from Mobile Crèches show a special ability for leadership and creativity. In the longer term, some of the children have successfully struggled against the odds to enter a wide variety of professions. One is a policewoman, another an artist with an advertising agency, and others have become computer operators or garage mechanics. These people are living examples of how critical thinking developed in early childhood, together with other factors, leads to success in the long run. Even for children born into dire poverty.

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Mozambique

Critical thinking skills and HIV/AIDS

Criança, Família e Desenvolvimento (CFD) means children, family and development. CFD is an NGO in Mozambique that focuses on early childhood development rooted in community action. Over the last two or three years, much of its work has turned to working with children and families in an HIV/AIDS context. Many of the communities that CFD works with are located in the rural areas along the 'Maputo Corridor', which, with an estimated prevalence of over 20%, has become the country's HIV/AIDS hot spot. This feature is drawn from a telephone interview with Agostinho Mamade, Director of CFD; and from Integrating HIV/AIDS Education into Early Childhood Development. A Curriculum of Living Well: for children, families and educators (2002), Associação Criança, Família e Desenvolvimento, Maputo, Mozambique; and the CD-ROM on the HIV/AIDS work of the Associação Criança, Família e Desenvolvimento, produced by Louise Vaz, Hine Fellow, Centre for Documentary Studies, Duke University, USA.

As in many other places, most HIV/AIDS work in Mozambique concentrated on youths and adults, while younger children were completely left out. CFD saw not only that young children are aware of HIV/AIDS in their communities, but also that they start becoming involved in risky behaviour themselves at a younger age than many adults think. Given the limited resources available, CFD believes that one of the most effective and long-term ways of dealing with the pandemic is to make young children aware of preventive behaviour, thus reducing the risk of contracting the disease later in life. It therefore increasingly emphasises the development of critical thinking skills in children and communities. CFD feels strongly that education can help reduce children's vulnerability, by providing them with the knowledge to make positive decisions about

themselves and to develop empathy for those who are infected or affected. As thinking individuals who are capable of expressing themselves, children too must have a say on matters and decisions which affect their lives and the communities which they are part of.

CFD is certainly not the only institution that believes that young children cannot be ignored in discussions about HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention. The debate, however, is often about the appropriate age to begin teaching children about the virus and the syndrome. CFD's experiences in Mozambique indicate that most communities believe that HIV/AIDS education should begin at pre-adolescence, about 9 to 10 years of age. With this age group, much of the discussion focuses on sex and intravenous drug use. CFD, however, believes that it should also look at what has gone awry with society, communities, families and personal relationships. It therefore concentrates on developing the attitudes, behaviours and values that can help reduce the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS later in life, and believes that they can be learned by children as young as three years of age. In this way, social changes will be set in motion that will help overcome the disease in the long term.

Drawing on their experience in working with children in other areas, CFD and its partner educators in the rural communities found that the best way to address HIV/AIDS in the *escolinha* (preschool) setting is not to focus on the 'problems' associated with it, such as unprotected sex, drug abuse, rape, discrimination and so on, which weigh heavy on young minds. Rather, the focus should be on the root of these problems: raising the children's self-esteem and teaching them to respect others, to take care of those who are ill, to share, be tolerant