Widening Access, Widening Participation, Widening Success: An Indian Case Study

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Abstract

Multiple deprivations are widespread in rural India. Literacy levels remain stubbornly low albeit gradually improving. Caste, class, religion, gender, age and disability all impact on access to education, participation and successful completion.

The education of girls remains problematic given the higher value attached to sons, especially in rural communities; their frequent confinement to the home on reaching puberty; the cost of dowries (despite being outlawed); trafficking of adolescent girls and/ or early marriage.

The education of tribal communities and other scheduled castes in rural communities, despite principles of free education and equality of access, are inhibited by poor facilities and availability of provision; by economic circumstances and past family experiences and histories.

Against a cultural and familial history of poverty, illiteracy, child labour, early marriage, increased abandonment of the elderly and extensive and entrenched patterns of discrimination one NGO has developed a holistic and integrated approach to supporting some of the most disadvantaged groups in a poor rural area in West Bengal. This approach appears to fundamentally change, for the better, the life chances, educational outcomes and economic prospects of the target communities. While there can be no direct transfer of strategies between the two countries this paper will explore possible explanations for such success and what lessons, if any, might be learnt by educationalists working towards widening successful participation in education in England.

Ghandi: intolerance is a form of violence

Introduction

This article describes an Indian case study that is focussed on inclusion, tolerance and diversity. Although my primary concern is with the widening participation agenda in higher education in England I do believe that an understanding of alternative approaches to widening participation can shed light upon our own local concerns. For some years we have targeted recruitment at under-represented groups, seeking to create a more representative student body and to enable equality of access and opportunity. Although the proportions of, for example, working class students entering higher education remain more or less the same, actual numbers have increased dramatically over the past twenty years. In some ways at least, access and participation can indeed been seen as having been 'widened'. Ours is no longer an elitist higher education system, it is a mass higher education system, with some persistent elitist enclaves that are generally identifiable by the high status of the institutions concerned.

While more work needs to be done on increasing the proportions of non-traditional students in higher education, there is now a real need to ensure that those who do embark on this ultimately very costly enterprise (in personal and monetary terms) actually succeed in their educational endeavours, and leave with something of real value to them. This might be a new love of education (social capital) or an economic benefit (human capital) in terms of work or career advancement. However, there is a real danger that non-traditional students entering higher education will experience alienation, disempowerment, leave early, fail, or leave with a lower degree classification and/ or qualification, probably from a lower status institution. David (2004) argues that the governments widening participation agenda assumes financial benefits for those participating when in reality and increasingly there are many financial disincentives, particularly for non-completers or low status completers. In their study of mature students Reay et al (2002) argue that the widening participation debate must move beyond rhetoric to practices that actually enable non-traditional students to achieve. These issues must be addressed for we do our non-traditional students a great disservice if we get them in but fail to ensure that they have a realistic chance of success and of achieving something of value to themselves.

Underlying the widening participation agenda are two distinct propositions which are not readily compatible with each other. The first is *inclusivity* (Bunyan and Jordan, 2005). The second is *excellence* (Broadhurst et al, 2005). Inclusivity focuses on human rights, individual needs and the accessibility of education to everyone so that they can actively participate in wider culture and democracy. Inclusivity is about community and individual empowerment, about fairness, justice and building social capital. Excellence refers to increasing numbers, i.e. more people than traditionally catered for in elitist higher education systems actually reaching their full potential, which will benefit the country by contributing to economic development and our competing successfully in the global market place. It may be about re-educating currently non-participating 'problem' populations (Gorden, 2001) rather than

incorporating their experiences, perspectives and needs. Excellence is primarily about Human rather than Social Capital.

Related to these two propositions is the manner in which education is delivered and its ultimate purpose(s). It could be a traditional model imposed on non-traditional students, explicitly requiring them to adapt and change in order to 'fit in', or it could be a flexible model adaptive to the needs of non-traditional students, thus enabling a better fit between educational provision and its target students. This notion of 'fit' is derived from the work of Vincent Tinto (1993).

Much academic research on student retention in the past 25 years has focused on Tinto's model of student retention, developed in the mid 1970s. Tinto theorised that a major influence on student decisions to persist or drop out of college is their ability to integrate into both the social and academic worlds in which they find themselves. Each institution has its own prevailing ethos and values at its centre, a dominant sub-culture, which defines the standards of judgement for all its members.
> *'The periphery, in turn, comprises other communities or subcultures whose particular values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour may differ substantially from those of the centre.'* (Tinto, 1993:60).

The Tinto model suggests that members of educational communities who are centrally located, who are in tune with the dominant sub-culture, are more likely to see themselves as 'fitting in', are more committed and less likely to withdraw or leave. We might view these students as 'traditional' students, fitting easily into a higher education institution that is modelled on their own values and experiences. In Tinto's terms, the success of higher education students may, 'hinge upon their centrality to institutional life' (Tinto, 1993:62). A number of variables, for example race, secondary school achievement, parental encouragement and gender, interact to form students' initial commitment to the college campus and to educational attainment goals. These initial commitments are modified over time, as a result of students' integration into the campus community. Tinto theorises that successful integration yields satisfaction that enhances these commitments and positively influences students' intentions to persist. Unsuccessful integration yields disaffection and higher drop out rates.

Centrality, commitment and integration are important concepts in relation to non-traditional students who often find it difficult to successfully integrate into institutions with a traditional ethos and culture, designed and built around students who traditionally went to university before the massification of higher education. Non-traditional students are unlikely to occupy this central position, and are more likely to be de-centred, on the periphery in terms of subculture, integration and most importantly, power. When such positioning occurs it may well exacerbate other factors identified as being associated with absence from higher education e.g. lack of supportive peer networks.

When non-traditional students enter higher education much of what is familiar may be removed and replaced with something that is probably unfamiliar and uncertain. Like other minorities, '…they are likely to experience a sense of isolation and / or incongruence' (Tinto, 1993: 74). They may feel alienated (Case, 2005). The concepts

of centrality and social integration can be useful in helping us better understand the position of non-traditional students in higher education.

Zepke and Leach (2005:50) use Tinto's theory of integration to explore a number of studies related to student retention and marginalised groups. They found in a large number of studies that student outcomes were improved if
- ❖ personal contact outside classrooms was promoted
- ❖ a commitment was made to students' total well-being, for example by facilitating social networks
- ❖ students were 'involved in some kind of academic learning community…(for example), homogenous groups based on a shared ethnic, gender or religious ethos.'
- ❖ social isolation, feelings of alienation and difficulty making friends was addressed.

In other words, those on the periphery, who ever they are, need to be re-centred, re-integrated and supported. They must be helped to fit in either through their own adaptations or through those of the institution admitting them.

Citing Tierney (2000:219), Zepke and Leach argue that integration can be achieved through forms of institutional adaptation.

"Rather than a model that assumes that students must fit into what is often an alien culture and that they leave their own cultures, I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways in which an individual's identity is affirmed, honoured and incorporated into the organisation's culture." (Zepke and Leach p.52)

This is a familiar argument in terms of integrating minority and underrepresented groups into higher education. Rather than making the students better fit the institution, the challenge is to change the organisation and its values to better fit an increasingly diverse student population. The opportunity to '…provide a greater array of niches into which a wider range of persons may find their place', (Tinto, 1993:124) is no doubt something that needs to be developed.

The Indian case study explored below better fits the inclusivity and centrality propositions outlined above, although it also combines the development of Human and Social Capital within its educational programmes. The study represents an attempt to learn from another country in terms of widening access, widening participation and widening success. Amid extensive and entrenched patterns of discrimination one NGO has developed a holistic and integrated approach to supporting some of the most disadvantaged groups in a poor rural area in West Bengal. This approach appears to fundamentally change, for the better, the life chances, educational outcomes and economic prospects of the target communities. While there can be no direct transfer of strategies between the two countries this article explores possible explanations for such success and what lessons, if any, might be learnt by educationalists working towards widening successful participation in education in England.

Background to the case study
For some years I have placed student teachers in comparative educational environments to further their understanding of our own education system and alternatives to it. Comparative placements 'at home' include Steiner schools,

progressive schools such as Summerhill and Faith schools. Students travelling overseas have visited First Nation schools in the USA, International schools across Europe and Farm schools in South Africa. They have also visited the Indian Jhilmil schools which form part of this study.

The student's reports of Jhilmil schools and the communities they served were always impressive. They witnessed and participated in a holistic programme designed to 'uplift the poor', primarily through education, and their reports suggested that the NGO concerned was achieving a substantial degree of success. With funding from a National Teaching Fellowship I was able to visit and undertake a study of the NGOs programme. My aim was to explore the range of provision and the impact this had on educational achievement in communities where children rarely completed primary education and often did not attend school at all.

Methodology
This is a case study. No attempt is made to compare the NGO programme with others that are similar and there was insufficient time to immerse myself in alternative provision, such as municipal (state) schools. The case study is informed by background knowledge of education in India based on previous educationally related visits over the past ten years; by relevant literature and readings of local media outputs; by discussions with two local journalists; by interviews with college principals and teacher educators in Mumbai and visits to a university campus.

The case study itself is based on deep immersion in the field for two weeks, living in a hostel within school grounds, located between a tribal and a community village. As such it is essentially a qualitative, interpretive study using some elements of ethnography. I engaged with daily events as they occurred, from meals in the communal dinning room, to school lessons, group meetings and religious celebrations. I also visited crèches and nutrition centres and spoke with children (translated) and adults. My focus was on the people working with the NGO, as either recipients or organisers of programmes, and their perceptions of the educational developments taking place, based within their own community contexts. Background information and documentation was provided by NGO staff. They also translated conversations for me where necessary. Formal interviews with NGO staff were tape recorded, as were group meetings with community participants that were held on site. Extensive field notes were kept and reflected upon.

Jhilmil schools are bilingual, in Bengali and English, so it was relatively easy to have conversations with local NGO staff, teachers and social workers. Student reports of previous visits, conversations with participants and external checks with local people independent of the NGO, were used to check the accuracy of my understandings (triangulation, Yin, 1994) of the community issues discussed and events participated in.

India and the Rural Development Society (RDS): a case study

The extremes of social and economic disadvantage in India are probably greater than in the west. Thus it is a country where these extremes, and possible mechanisms for addressing them through education (at all levels), may be more clearly seen.

India is a 'divided society' (Gallagher, 2005). In addition to the recognised (western) divisions along class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, disability and age lines (some of which in themselves may be more exaggerated in India) can be added the potential (and actuality) of language, caste, tribe and rural/urban divisions. Within this context, education can play a vital integrative role in bringing together fragmented groups.

In Indian society girls are less likely than boys to enter education and more likely to leave early if they do. The rural poor, lower caste and disabled are less likely to enter education and more likely to leave early if they do. To be a rural female from a lower caste and poor represents multiple disadvantages. Children, but especially girls, are deprived of education because parents cannot 'afford' to do without their work in the home (cooking, minding siblings, cleaning), or the fields (fetching water, animal husbandry). Early marriage brings economic benefits: for sons it brings in an extra pair of (female) hands to the family, for daughters it removes the financial burden of up keep when they 'join' their husbands' family. However, educating daughters is a double burden for rural families because they cost rather than attract a dowry, and any future economic contribution will benefit their husbands' family rather than their family of origin. Boys are still valued more than girls especially in poor, rural families, and dowry continues, despite its illegality.

Despite some examples of inter-communal violence, India is a largely non-violent and tolerant society that culturally and politically seems able to tolerate extreme poverty as simply a reality of life, just the way things are. This may be related to the Hindu belief in reincarnation and future better lives if one does good and copes well with the current one; it may be related to a political focus on expanding the economic power of the metro cities rather than addressing rural poverty; it may be related to poor bureaucratic control in remote hard to reach areas; it may be related to corruption. Whatever the reason(s) the cultural and political climate has a negative impact on education for the rural poor.

The major cities are developing rapidly in terms of infrastructure, wealth and education yet literacy rates, especially in the rural areas remain low (60-70% men, 40-50% women), and educational drop-out from municipal schools (if attended) is very high, especially for girls. In India, while the poor live in rural villages the wealthy live primarily in towns (although many poor rural Indians move to towns to find work).

The poverty line in rural areas is around 1,000 (£12.50) Rupees an month. Rickshaw drivers in Malda (West Bengal) earn approx. 1,200 (£15) Rupees a month. Domestic airline pilots earn 60,000 (£ 750) Rupees a month and live mainly in the metro-cities. International pilots earn double. Pilots are considered well off in India.

Municipal (state) schools are thought not to be meeting the needs of the poorer children who usually attend them. Teachers in these schools are often described as lazy and lacking in commitment to the communities they serve (Times of India, 2005, confirmed by NGO and external contacts). Many regard it as a fairly secure 9 to 5 type job that does not necessarily involve a vocation, work ethic or extended commitment. This perception is not new and there have been some substantial government initiatives aimed at delegation of control of municipal schools to local communities (Govinda & Diwan, 2003). Nevertheless, progress in improving municipal schools in India appears slow and decidedly patchy.

Nor are municipal schools are known for their ability to promote cross-communal bonds, or respect for equality and difference. The classic tale is of Dalit (Untouchable) children being made to sit outside the classroom door for fear of 'contaminating' children from higher castes; or of parents boycotting a school where a Dalit was engaged to prepare 'Tiffin'. It is not therefore surprising that many families 'vote with their feet' and depart the municipal schools long before primary education is completed. When parents can pay they seek out private schools. For the rural poor the peripheral costs (uniform, books, stationary etc) of municipal schooling are already too high and if the provision is poor then there is little value in staying when children can contribute in some ways to family income.

The RDS, a local NGO that has worked in diverse rural communities in West Bengal for more than twenty years, seeks to build vital social and human capital by framing an holistic context in which common citizenship and core values of equality, respect, empowerment and economic growth can develop.

West Bengal has historically been, and remains, a Marxist governed State and this is offered by NGO officials as a possible explanation for the lack of social / economic development in the region. They suggest that its development has fallen behind other Indian States and metro cities due to a powerful oligarchy that looks after itself and not the people. It is suggested that people in rural areas are brought into the state capital Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) to vote for the ruling party and then abandoned.

Malda is a large district in West Bengal, nine hours to the north by train. Pre-British rule Malda was the capital of West Bengal, while Kolkata its current capital was originally the capital of all India before Britain moved the capital to New Delhi. Bangladesh, pre-partition was known as East Bengal and there are some considerable links maintained between the two areas. These include the employment of some NGO staff who originated from Bangladesh rather than being born in West Bengal, and a mixing people of Hindu, Muslim and Naturist (Tribal) religions in these border communities.

RDS fundamental principle is 'upliftment of the poor', first through education of the children, then their families, youth, mothers, the elderly and eventually whole communities. RDS also operates on the principle that if you educate a boy you educate one person: if you educate a girl (or woman) you educate a whole family (and a community).There is no discrimination on the basis of tribe, caste, class, creed, race, gender etc within their educative projects but there is some indication of positive discrimination in terms of economic loans which are only available to women (in order to raise their status and increase their 'value' to men), and families with daughters are not allowed to send sons to Jhilmil schools unless daughters go too.

Illustrations
All *RDS schools* are called Jhilmil. These schools, like a brand name, and within the Indian scheme of things, are know as 'informal' schools, that is they are not municipal schools (like English state schools) or fee paying private schools. The teachers are trained by RDS and wherever possible come from the community itself. In Malda I met an ex-sponsored child who had completed her BA and nurse training and was now contributing to the RDS health education programmes. I met another who had

completed her education and become a Jhilmil teacher herself. To work in Jhilmil schools staff must be committed to equality of all and actively promote inter-group understanding and inter-cultural values. Jhilmil Schools teach from nursery age to standard V with RDS providing ongoing support post class V. There is virtually no drop-out from Jhilmil schools (a very serious problem throughout Indian Education) and no discrimination between staff or pupils on the basis of tribe, caste, class, creed, race, gender etc.

RDS runs *one-off training sessions* in its centres e.g. a two day course for bamboo crafts people. Bamboo is plentiful in Malda, a tough natural material, traditionally used for building structures, fencing and for making pots and storage baskets. The skills of working with bamboo, like many in India, are often caste specific and are handed down through generations of families. Integrating education with economic development of available skills and resources, RDS hired an expert to retrain these skilled workers in the art of making bamboo artefacts that would be popular purchases in more urban environments, such as stationary holders, trays, lampshades etc.

Women's self help groups (some widows/ abandoned) manage RDS saving groups and economic 'start up' loans, fostering functional projects to lift them (and where appropriate their families/ husbands) off the poverty / bread line. All manage to repay their loans and some had managed to begin a process that made them (relatively) 'rich' within their communities. One woman who invested in developing her grocers shop, now earns 3,200 (£40) Rupees a month, pays rental for shop space at 275 (£3.43) per month instead of street vending, and is able to pay for her children's education costs in municipal schools (uniform, materials and books, travel, lunch).

Examples of SHG economic investments include
   ❖ purchase of mulch cow's for selling milk
   ❖ goats kids for fattening and later sale as meat
   ❖ tea selling stall / bulk purchase of tea and sugar, expansion to other provisions
   ❖ fast food (puffed rice, dhal, fried rice)
   ❖ repayment of mortgage on land at high interest to RDS loan
   ❖ carpentry tools / wood supply
   ❖ vegetables from district market to be resold locally

Such projects enhance the 'value' of women to their husbands and within the family unit as men cannot access these loans. The status of women is raised and their voice within the family empowered because they must agree the economic strategy proposed and argue for it within the SHG. It sets the scene and creates the context within which men and women, in a patriarchal society, can begin to operate on more equal terms.

The *'adopt a granny'* programme supports men and women who have been abandoned by their families (or widowed/ no children), for economic or social reasons. RDS provides them with the basic means of survival, such as soap, clothes, rice, pocket money and does some very basic repairs to their homes. The only condition is that any who have sunk to begging will give it up. An unpredicted benefit is that these aged people have become 'attractive' again to many of their families as they are no longer a financial burden and at times are the source of addition economic contributions to their families in money or kind. For example, a paralysed aged man

once abandoned by his wife is now cared for by her as the RDS provision supports her as well. Another participant was looking after her grandchildren for parents who have sought work on the cities.

Health checks and *Nutrition feeding centre*s are provided for children with RDS sponsorship who attend the Jhimil schools. Children come with their bowls and bottles of water, wash their hands at the pump, with soap provided, remove their shoes and sit crossed legged on mats under a veranda to partake of their 'extra' meal for the day. Weight and height are recorded at regular intervals and there are annual medical and dental checks.

Y*outh groups and mothers groups* are formed to work within the community on adolescent sexual health, early marriage, dowry and trafficking all of which are fairly common in remote rural districts.

Crèches have been opened, to start involving children in education as young as possible. These also enable mothers of young children to work (e.g. in the fields) while their children are being cared for and educated, and provide employment for widows/ abandoned women as crèche mothers. It also prevents older children being withdrawn from school in order to care for younger siblings.

RDS projects appear to motivate and support the rural poor in highly effective, relevant and practical ways e.g. the provision of 'informal' schools (Jhilmil Schools to standard V plus ongoing support post standard V), educational necessities (books, bags, materials, uniform, Tiffin, motivated teachers), child sponsorship, nutrition, health, sex education, sanitation, home improvement, crèche and crèche mothers (employment for widows), cultural and religious celebrations, youth groups, women's self help groups (SHGs) and economic loans/ capital investment, support for 'grannies' (older men and women who have been abandoned by their families) and vocational skills training. To the outsider RDS communities appear to be somewhat akin to large extended families, mutually supportive, expanding and self-perpetuating.

The RDS community works at many levels to address as many factors as possible which effectively 'hold down' the poor people of rural India. It promotes empowerment, especially for women and youth, and provides all round integrated support. Rural communities are placed 'in the driving seat' by RDS. In line with British overseas development policy, RDS is committed to democratic involvement in decision making,
> "*… communities must have input to decisions about services in order to promote sustainability for the long term.*" Blears (2005)

Importantly RDS is not about dependency. Rather, it is about creating the necessary conditions for economic independence and self-determination.

The model below illustrates the interconnectedness of RDS projects which, in combination, facilitate the educational and economic advancement of disadvantaged groups.

Model of RDS Activities

Tin Roof, Concrete Floors	← ↑		Community Projects ←↕→		Culture, Music	
↕ ←	**Nutrition Centres**		Sexual Health, trafficking, AIDS, later marriage			
Educational Materials	← ↕→	Culture, Music	←↕→		Youth Camp	
Health Monitoring	← ↕	←	**Youth Groups**	→	Skills Training	
↕ ←	**Sponsored Children**		←↕→	**Women's Self Help Groups**	→ ↕→	Education
Post Class V support	↕	↔	**EMPOWERMENT INDEPENDENCE STATUS**	←↕→	Economic Loans	
↓←	**Crèche, Nurseries**		←↕→	**Teacher Training**	← ↕	
Creche Mothers (widows)			**Jhilmil Schools to Class V** ↕		**Social Work Training**	
Adopt a Granny	←Disabled	←	**Communities**	→	Sanitation, Water →	Pond Dredging

Taken together, these separate projects do appear to
1. offset the financial and practical costs of schooling;
2. offset the economic need for child labour;
3. diminish the impact of poor sanitation, health and nutrition on children's learning;
4. educate parents, youth and seniors on social issues such as HIV-AIDs, general health, dowry, early marriage and child trafficking, and the value of education;
5. support economic development and sustain rural living through savings groups, economic loans, skills training, employment opportunities and help for the elderly;
6. develop and train community members to staff these projects (such as crèche mothers, nutrition centre leaders, social workers and teachers).

This goes some way towards the localized achievement of the Millennium Goals which include the eradication extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women; a reduction in child mortality; improvements in maternal health and the combating of HIV and Aids. It may well be contextualised small-scale model from which governments which are working towards these goals might learn.

Learning about Widening Participation from RDS
What appears to work for them is integrated provision. All the RDS programmes include 'peer education' based largely on cascade learning and training. All are founded on education (of children, youth, seniors, women and their husbands) and involve getting children into schools, keeping them there through real practical support, and meeting as many 'other' needs as possible that can be identified, which for many determines whether or not education is continued and whether or not it is successful. RDS apparent success is based on maintaining continued community support and participation through economic and educative development which ultimately involves all family members and the wider village community as a whole.

It bears some comparison to the proposed 'Extended School' programme in England, which intends to work closely with targeted communities and meet childcare, parenting, employment and many other family learning needs (Orchard, 2005). What both provide are a full-service in one place, meeting as far as possible the basic needs of children and their families, and basing it on community participation.

In more generic terms, arising from this case study, it would seem that RDS success at widening access, participation and success has been built around
1. *a non-alienating environment*, where disadvantaged and non-traditional students actually 'fit in' and whose life experiences and motivations are understood and valued by their teachers;
2. *teachers and facilitators who come from the community,* who can relate to their students and their students' goals;
3. *valuing and extending skills and abilities that the targeted community already have*, thus empowering rather than disempowering its students;
4. *the validation and valuing of diverse identities and experiences,* which raises the status of disadvantaged and non-traditional students and their chances of achieving success within education.

Rather than being decentred (Tinto 1993) these students are re-centred at the heart of educational provision. The provision fits their needs, directly and comprehensively.

The focus is on inclusivity more than it is on excellence but always with empowerment through economic development in mind (Human and Social Capital).

Widening participation is clearly much more than just making educational opportunities available. Bowl (2003) has amply demonstrated that aspiration is not the key issue: successful outcomes are. Successful participation requires encouragement, support and facilitation to get in, plus support strategies and change in educational structures and processes to facilitate survival, integration and successful completion, in order to meet realistic motivational/ aspirational goals. These will most likely involve, at least initially, access to better jobs and life chances i.e. extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals. Intrinsic value may come later but the financial and self-esteem risks involved in investment in HE for the most disadvantaged groups necessitates clear pragmatic and economic benefits. In line with Maslow's triangle we are unlikely to achieve intrinsic valuing of education before other more basic needs are met. Individualistic self-fulfilment is not yet an option in poor rural villages in India. It may not be an option for the non-traditional students we seek to enrol in Higher Education in England either.

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