

Research Article

Futures under Construction: Workforce Development and Retention for Educating Children of Migrant Construction Workers in India

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ABSTRACT

Planning a comprehensive education curriculum is difficult enough, but how does an educator prepare for class when the children change every day? At Mumbai Mobile Creches (MMC), which sets up day-care centers on construction sites in Mumbai for migrant labourers' children aged birth to fourteen, educators must grapple with the challenges of frequent turnover of children, multilingual classrooms, multiple age groups, varying levels of abilities and formal schooling, and frequent relocations of centers. MMC has developed a training programmer which equips educators to effectively educate migrant children. Educators, most of them women, are recruited from the migrant construction community or from other marginalized areas, so they are uniquely positioned to understand the needs of the children. The training prepares educators to efficiently deliver a standardized programmer which allows MMC to operate under unstable conditions. It features a curriculum using a thematic approach, rather than one which is strictly age based, and relies heavily on art as a tool to overcome linguistic hurdles. Educators are also trained to meet rigorous health, safety, and hygiene standards to handle any emergencies. To maintain the morale of its educators in the unstable work environment, MMC provides support for continuing education and collaborative learning among professionals. Best practices from MMC's rigorous pre-service and in-service training programmer which equips its educators to educate migrant children under unstable circumstances and to empower themselves in the process can be adopted by education organizations in diverse vulnerable settings.

Keywords: *Organizational Effectiveness, Migrant Children, Education, Vulnerable Settings*

Childhood represents a great opportunity wherein stimulating experiences lay the foundation for lifelong development and learning. Several research studies have shown early experiences are

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Received: March 24, 2017; Revision Received: May 19, 2017; Accepted: June 5, 2017

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most crucial in determining life outcomes for children. Quality child care at an early age has proved to have a lasting impact on the linguistic, mathematic, and social skills of children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). Along with parents, child caregivers constitute the first people who provide a variety of experiences to children which will shape their life. In addition, children who experience a close bond with a teacher/educator in a preschool setting also demonstrate enhanced thinking skills during their school years (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009; Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 2000). Evidence also indicates that the quality of care especially matters for the children who are first-generation learners and children who are at risk (Currie, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 2000). The population census of India (2011) recorded over 364 million children in the age range of birth to fourteen years; this number exceeds the general populations of every nation across the globe, with China being the notable exception. India's child population is incredibly diverse, so educational curriculums in the country have to take into account the multitude of languages, rural and urban environments, and socioeconomic status. A range of public, private and voluntary educational initiatives address the needs of India's children across varied socio-economic groups. The programmes themselves differ in their structure, content and resources.

Despite a growing emphasis on education and care for all children, a large majority of children in India do not have access to quality care and learning environments, and the children of migrant construction workers fall under that category. Uncertainties about earning a livelihood have displaced millions of people from rural India (Rajan, 2013) and many are absorbed in the urban construction industry, which has an estimated workforce of 40 million (Ministry of Labor and Employment - India, 2013). Construction workers with young children often migrate with family and live in makeshift temporary housing at the construction sites, and the children living on these construction sites are among the most vulnerable among the urban poor and hard-to-reach. Migration poses risks to the lives of these children, characterised by poverty, instability, and environmental hazards. The children grow up playing in the rubble of the construction work and are in constant danger from falling debris, deep pits, drains, trucks, and bulldozers. The children frequently suffer from accidents, malnutrition and numerous other health problems as they have limited access to health care. The urban migrant child living on construction sites remains largely excluded from any public social security or safety net, with no political power to sway local governments. The future of these children is uncertain indeed. Mumbai Mobile Creches (MMC) is a non-profit organisation which has been offering a harbour to these socially invisible children for the past four decades, providing a holistic childcare and education programme at day care centres on construction sites throughout the metropolis. The hurdles of setting up day care centres on construction sites are high, as MMC must first get the approval of often-reluctant construction companies and lobby them to provide financial and logistical support. But the success of MMC's comprehensive child care and education programme greatly relies on the specially trained educators.

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Despite the surging need for trained childhood care educators and an increasing awareness about the importance of early years for children in India, there are limited teacher training institutes especially for early childhood care and education (ECCE), and access to quality pre-service ECCE training is inequitable (Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development - India, 2013). Early on, MMC recognised this lacuna, which was the impetus to the inception of the organisation's pre-service BalPalika training in 1982, which now has over 1,000 graduates equipped to provide care and education for children up to 14 years of age. In 2007 the members of the construction worker community began participating in the course. MMC's affiliation with a renowned university in India allows trainees to take the university examination in Hindi, the language of instruction in the BalPalika course, to obtain a diploma in Nursery/Crèche Teacher's Training. MMC also continues to support the need based capacity building of educators from other organisations in India.

The child care educators delivering programmes for the children at MMC centres and to the migrant labourer community are trained extensively, and many of them have graduated from MMC's yearlong BalPalika Training course. The course is especially adapted to suit the diverse educational backgrounds of the trainees. Most of MMC's trainees have attained limited formal schooling and the course therefore heavily relies on practicum experiences for the trainees with a 35:65 ratio of theoretical to practical instruction. The programme is designed to ensure that trainees are equipped to appreciate the many cultural, linguistic, and traditional influences on the young children and their families, who have migrated from over 18 different states of India. As 80 percent of the children at MMC centres migrate within six months, trainees are trained to maximise the little time they have with the children by using a thematic approach, rather than a strictly age-based approach, to provide children with concrete skills and knowledge that they can take with them even if their time at the centre is very limited. The yearlong pre-service teacher training also creates a cadre of qualified child care educators equipped to facilitate comprehensive child care and education program in especially difficult settings, not just at MMC's day care centres. The transient nature of construction work also highlights the unstable conditions under which MMC has to operate its day care centres, challenges which our educators must learn to overcome. MMC is constantly opening and closing day care centres based on the number of children living on construction sites at any particular time, and the availability of resources can vary over the life of a construction project. The process of opening and closing a centre is a complex one, and our educators are trained to adapt to these unstable conditions at the construction sites.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING FOR THE EDUCATORS AT MUMBAI MOBILE CRECHES

Hansen and Gable (2007) state specialised training for child care workers is crucial to ensure the provision of a quality environment for children. While pre-service training for the educators ensures the preparation of a trained workforce, in-service training can significantly enhance the

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quality of any child care and education programme. India's increasing focus on ensuring safe, secure, and nurturing environments for its young is reflected in the quality standards set for child care and education programmes specified in the National ECCE Policy launched in 2013. However, the policy remains largely silent on the standards of training for ECCE educators. In the absence of clear national guidelines for the training of child care educator workforce, MMC has set high internal standards against a resource poor setting for the continuous skill development of its cadre. The MMC child care centres are multilingual, multi-grade, and multi-level with children speaking many different regional languages at varying levels of schooling and abilities. In such a diverse and resource poor setting, the importance of in-service training for educators cannot be overstated.

The number of children at the centres fluctuates each month and following the movement of labourer camps, the centres adapt as well to the changing needs of each location. The overall number of MMC centres is constantly changing, depending on the construction projects which are completed and the new construction sites to which we gain access. The only stability MMC can attain is the standardisation of its programmes. The continuous in-service training brings consistency in programme delivery across all our centres. At MMC, the in-service training also adapts to the changing times and the macro social environment. The in-service training for child care educators at MMC can be broadly categorised into four domains: child safety, curriculum and teaching, collaborative learning, and continuing education.

Child Protection and Safety

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies protection as a fundamental right for children, which includes the right to be protected from neglect and abuse. The training is especially crucial for our educators who care for the young children in the harsh environment of active construction projects and in a truly multilingual and marginalised migrant community. In order to ensure the safety of the children under MMC's care, educators are trained in a broad range of child protection measures within 30 days of joining the organisation. Every year, refresher training is organised for all the educators.

Child Protection

Mumbai Mobile Creches is committed to protecting children by creating day care centre environments which encourage the free and open expression of views, promote meaningful interaction among children without feelings of discrimination or fear, and ensure children's protection from all forms of abuse. The child protection training emphasises core values that every child attending a day care centre must be absolutely protected from abuse, maltreatment, and exploitation, and that there shall be no discrimination among the children of any kind on the basis of skin colour, culture, gender, community/race, religion or language spoken. The training encourages educators to promote open communication and to treat them with respect and dignity,

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without using physical disciplinary measures. Educators are also trained to realise and recognise that children need special understanding and tolerance while they are adjusting to the routine at the day care centre. All are encouraged to acknowledge that children attending the day care centres come from a migrant population and have diverse backgrounds, cultures, and religious beliefs. MMC educators are also exposed to relevant training wherein external experts keep them updated about child protection laws in India.

Food Safety and Hygiene

The children at MMC centres receive regular nutritious meals during the centres' hours of operation so MMC's 'food safety and hygiene policy' is emphasised. Educators receive training in food preparation by nutrition departments of certain universities, and visits to highly professional and large kitchens of catering businesses are organised to demonstrate to educators the professional levels of food safety and hygiene standards.

First Aid and Fire Safety Training

Construction sites are typically prone to accidents from falling debris, scrap materials, mobile heavy machinery, open shafts and fire. These sites are often located on the outskirts of the city, and timely access to emergency care facilities is difficult. The challenging setting in which MMC operates requires educators to be constantly aware of the dangers and to be equipped to handle various emergencies.

All educators undergo certified training periodically in administering first aid and in fire safety procedures. This equips educators to handle, to the best of their ability, various accidents and emergencies like electrocution and fire and snake bites as construction sites are infested with rodents and reptiles. When children are involved in an accident, educators know how to inform parents, construction site officials and MMC administrative office staff efficiently. List of procedures to be followed in the event of possible emergencies at the day care centres and during any MMC-sponsored activity with children are clearly specified.

While these may seem like routine standards for care and safety in the affluent schools, children in the vulnerable settings are usually deprived of such care.

Curriculum and Teaching

A range of training experiences is provided to educators in order to equip them to best meet the educational needs of the children.

Monthly Planning Meetings

As MMC caters to children migrating to Mumbai from over 18 states in India, children speak diverse languages. In such a diverse linguistic setting, it is not feasible to provide education in

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the mother tongue for every child. MMC educators are trained in planning and executing a specially designed curriculum which helps children grasp educational concepts despite the unfamiliar language. The curriculum reflects the transitory nature of construction work and capitalises on the time they have with the children using the thematic approach, in which each month's curriculum revolves around a certain theme, like "animals". A yearly thematic plan is outlined, and every month the educators from all the centres come together for planning monthly education activities. With the help of mentors, educators plan activities, games, and lessons relevant to the monthly theme so that children get ample opportunities for learning through concrete experiences. Under the supervision of mentors, educators create contextually relevant, innovative, low-cost educational materials often from recycled materials that leave a lasting impression on the children. Contextually relevant teaching materials are especially important because children construct new knowledge and understanding based on what they already know and believe – also known as 'constructivism'. Learning experiences for children should, therefore, move from familiar to abstract. Mentors give feedback to educators and hone their skills in efficiently using various teaching methods with children during these meetings. Educators also actively practise methods of story reading, such as doing a picture talk with children, and many other techniques on a regular basis.

Art, Crafts, and Music

Nearly 60 percent of the children MMC caters are below six years of age and arts, music and craft are the primary means not only to engage the children but to promote their development. MMC child care centres rely heavily on art as an educational tool because the children do not all speak the same language. Art is used as an equaliser for successful classroom management. For educators, art activities provide an excellent means to build rapport with the ever-changing children. Educators are trained in the efficient use of various art media with children, such as puppets.

Music and rhythm workshops are regularly organised for our educators wherein they learn how music and rhythm can be effectively incorporated in the day-to-day functioning of the centres. Educators learn exciting ways of engaging with children through music and corresponding body movements. They also learn to use music at the centre to enhance learning and help children focus and concentrate on various activities.

Concepts in Science and Math

Specialised training sessions are held through external resource persons wherein our educators revive their knowledge and learn to simplify abstract concepts of science and math to children.

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Library Educator's Course

A select group of educators underwent a six-month intensive training course to manage a library programme. The training focused on equipping educators to select appropriate books for children of varying ages and reading abilities, techniques in reading books to the children, activities to inculcate the love of reading among children, and the overall management of books. The programme also made educators aware of the process involved in writing, illustrating, and printing books for children. These educators trained in library programme also help in skill development of their colleagues at MMC.

Orientation to the Needs of Special Children

Two of the educators attended an extensive six-month training course on identifying children with special needs. The training equipped our educators in early identification and referral of children with disabilities.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Specialised Training

Experts in varying fields are invited as resource persons to train MMC educators in specific skills related to programme delivery. For example, training sessions in communication skills help educators to effectively connect with the migrant labourer community they serve and training sessions are also organised to build their capacities to accurately record anthropometric measurements of children so that health status of the children can be regularly tracked.

Exposure Visits

Educators visit other organisations relevant to the core areas of our work and learn from the experiences shared by them. These visits often expose MMC's educators to new ideas and inspire them to enrich the organisation's own programmes further in meaningful ways. Such experiential learning leaves a lasting impact on our educators by providing them opportunities that they otherwise may not have.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Formal Education

MMC recognises that an organisation's growth depends largely on its employees, and so it encourages all its educators in their personal educational pursuits. MMC supports those who are completing their formal education. In the last couple of years, many of the MMC educators cleared secondary and higher secondary examinations and some of them have also enrolled and completed graduate studies, often becoming the first woman in their family to do so.

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English Language Training

MMC provided intensive training to educators in the English language in the belief that that the ease of communicating in English will enhance their access to information and help educators continually update their knowledge and skills. The training also increased their access to World Wide Web and their experience with IT resources.

Computer Training

In the rapidly digitising India, access to information technology and ability to use it efficiently has become critical for professional development. There is a disparity in access to technological resources especially for the marginalised and women but this gap is gradually reducing. AllMMC educators were trained to gain basic skills in computers, enabling them to use IT resources with children and the community. The training proved especially beneficial in boosting the use of interactive media for information dissemination to the migrant labourer community and speedy communication across the organisation. Overall, training forms a significant component of MMC's success as it equips a cadre of loving and nurturing educators for the vulnerable children. Equal opportunities for skill development also contribute to employee satisfaction and low attrition rates. For a well-established organisation operating for over four decades, regular, high-quality training provides the only means to stay relevant in a fast-changing world.

Acknowledgments

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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How to cite this article: Pispati V, Naik A, Pinto F (2017), Futures under Construction: Workforce Development and Retention for Educating Children of Migrant Construction Workers in India, *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Vol. 4 (3), DIP:18.01.218/20170403