THINK LABOR

To keep up with everything skilling and employment

Pratham

Where to Next?

The Transition from Middle School to Employment in Rural Chhattisgarh

In a classroom with the benches stacked up to the walls, with open space in the middle for students to congregate, there are buntings that run from one end of the room to the other. The buntings are made of children's books that are displayed on strings, in a rather colourful room. The walls are filled with artwork made by students, and there are art supplies, more books, and board games on the shelves at the end of the classroom. But the star of the show today is a new gadget - one that could potentially serve as a vision board of the future for this middle school in the Kapalphodi village of Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh - a Raspberry Pi computer.

I am of course referring to Pratham's Creativity Club Program. The program is designed to engage middle school students between the ages of 10 and 14 across diverse domains such as STEM, visual and performing arts, environment, and sports. The program fosters essential 21st century skills such as creativity, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration, supported by digital and social infrastructure.

In honour of the new computer, the Creativity Club was inaugurated by the Sarpanch of the village. With the youth volunteer in tow, we entered the classroom and were given a tour of the place. I was especially impressed by the artwork done by the students - no two were alike, and none followed the usual norms of "art class" in school - leaves were red and mountains were blue. The club ran for a few hours on most days after school. The youth volunteer was responsible for conducting activities, monitoring the students' performance, and identifying the ones who have the potential to advance in their interests and give them specialized opportunities for growth.

I also had the opportunity to engage with the students, most of whom were girls. A few volunteered to introduce themselves and did so with confidence and clarity, particularly when speaking about what they hoped to pursue in the future. Many expressed an interest in becoming teachers, while some mentioned working with computers. Their responses reflected the career paths most visible in their immediate environment, highlighting how aspirations are shaped by exposure at an early age.

The school visit gave me insights into the Pratham's innovation with Creativity Clubs and the fitness program and its motivation to go beyond the curriculum to inculcate critical thinking. However, as someone interested in livelihood pathways, labour market economics, and career progressions, I wanted to understand where these middle school kids go next.

ASER (2023)[1] shows that enrollment in schools for both boys and girls drop between the ages of 14 and 18, as they transition into high school. I was curious about this transition rate, given that the high school is often in another location requiring more travel and time commitment on the students' side. I brought this up in the conversation with the teachers and headmaster and found that the transition data is not being captured, and there isn't an incentive to do so at the middle school level.

While transition data in these schools remains untracked, students are also left to navigate their career trajectories on their own. This can be elucidated by a conversation we had with a Pratham Skilling alumni who completed his training in the Multifunctional Office Associate course and took up placement in Raipur. A high school graduate, he mentioned that before he was unaware about the potential careers options that were available to him before joining Pratham. This is a symptom of a larger issue, where, in Chhattisgarh, government jobs and agriculture are two livelihood pathways that are perceived as most viable, acceptable, and achievable. From my visit to the Beauty Training Centre in Dhamtari, it was evident that the mentors, trainers, and placement coordinators are working very hard to highlight the necessity of alternate career paths to communities in the catchment areas. Government jobs are no longer aspirational, or even available. Similarly, although agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for many, it offers limited income growth opportunities and is largely seasonal. However, it is difficult to break long-held belief systems spanning generations, specifically regarding livelihoods, family stability, and prestige.

---

[1] https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER-2023-Report-1.pdf

If we are to look at the lifecycle of a student from education to employment, there are several roadblocks that might result in unemployment. This could be due to lack of skill, lack of opportunity, or a combination of both. In the case of Chhattisgarh, it is evident that opportunities are limited and aspirations are frozen in a time that does not exist anymore. In such a context, it is even more crucial to intervene early and nurture curiosity. The Creativity Club program like the one in Dhamtari is a readymade avenue to introduce career exploration activities at the middle school level. Through pre-existing activities led by youth mentors, and access to Pratham Skilling's network of industry experts, it would be a holistic approach towards creating a new cadre of high school students who are aware of diverse livelihood pathways in and outside of the state. If the students' artwork is any evidence of their imagination and creativity, I am certain they will respond positively to these activities. Perhaps the newly inaugurated Raspberry Pi could be a gateway tool to exploring ideas and visualizing a (different) future.

Author: Shreya Agarwal, Program Development Team